

Man of the WOODS

Using timber from his own piece of Scottish woodland, designer Angus Ross transforms native trees into award-winning fine furniture

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For a furniture maker, you would think the chief advantage of owning your own piece of woodland would be taking your pick from the tallest, straightest trees – the ones that produce long, clean, unblemished planks of timber. Not so for Angus Ross – he uses the bent and gnarly ones.

“The downside of co-owning and managing a woodland with a forester is that, in order to let the best trees thrive, he always wants us to fell the weaker specimens,” says Angus, who uses the timber from this small piece of ancient woodland in Perthshire to create award-winning furniture. “I’m allowed the scrappy-looking trees, the ones growing

at an angle. Basically, the ones that are trickiest to work with!” But for Angus, finding ways to utilise this timber has resulted in a whole new set of skills – and the development of a design so innovative and beautiful, it has taken a prestigious spot in V&A Dundee, Scotland’s recently opened design museum.

It’s not the first time Angus has had to acquire a new skill set, however. He initially trained in industrial design at Edinburgh Napier University before working as a product designer for large companies, such as Mothercare, in London. But after years spent creating “potties and pushchairs” in injection-moulded plastic, Angus became disillusioned with mass production, ▶



THIS PAGE The seeds of the native bluebells on the woodland floor are harvested and sold to nurseries **OPPOSITE** Angus and Lorna had always intended to return to Scotland, where Angus now has a thriving workshop. He uses ancient steam-bending methods to create sculptural pieces, such as the Unstable Stool, an example of which is on display in V&A Dundee

and, in 1991, decided to retrain in furniture making at the renowned Rycotewood Furniture Centre in Oxfordshire. Shortly after, he set up a furniture workshop in the Chiltern Hills, which he ran successfully for ten years. "I found that lots of my customers were coming up from London and making a day of it; they talked to me about a commission and then had lunch in one of the nice restaurants nearby or went for a walk," says Angus, who, along with wife Lorna, had always planned to move back to Scotland. "It occurred to us that we could move the business anywhere with a similar set-up."

A recommendation from a friend who had just moved to Aberfeldy, Perthshire, brought the couple to look at properties in the area. "By chance, one of the houses we saw belonged to a joiner and he told us about his workshop, which was in town and overlooked the burn. It had been a joinery since 1876," Lorna says. "It was perfect."

They moved in 2002, and today the window of the workshop showcases Angus's furniture. With flowing lines and gentle curves forming sculptural shapes, the pieces may look simple but are the result of hundreds of work hours – and of traditional skills honed to perfection. Take the Unstable Stool, the first product Angus designed specifically to use the green (undried) wood from his woodland, and the piece that features in the Scottish Design Galleries, the exhibition that sits at the heart of V&A Dundee. Its asymmetric rockers, which mean you can lean forward while seated, are created by steam-bending two

lengths of timber. "Steam-bending wood is an ancient way of shaping it, but it's one of the least precise processes," Angus says. "It's about coaxing and working with the wood rather than cutting it."

Steam softens the 'glue' that holds together the fibres in certain species of tree – including a number of natives, such as oak – allowing them to move. "You only have a few minutes to bend the wood over forming jigs when it comes out of the steam box before it cools and sets in place, but you've also got to be careful not to bend too quickly or the wood will snap," Angus explains. The shaped pieces are then placed in drying jigs to hold them in place and left for three to four weeks. Making one bend (especially one that can be replicated) is tricky enough, but Angus's designs often include undulations, split bends and even spirals from a single length.

A COOPERATIVE VENTURE

In 2004, Angus was offered a share of Old Castle Wood, a 50-acre plot a few miles downstream of the workshop, by Dr Rick Worrell, a native woodland specialist looking to form a group of people interested in working with wood. In an area dominated by acres of Forestry Commission conifers, Old Castle Wood is part of an ancient broad-leaf woodland that follows the banks of the River Tay. Once used for coppicing oak trees for the leather-tanning industry, much of it has been left unmanaged for more than a hundred years.

Under Rick's direction, the group established a 'light-touch' management plan. This involves ▶



"If you combine businesses, you can make a small woodland self-supporting"





“One of the things this woodland has done is teach me to celebrate the imperfections of the trees”



ABOVE RIGHT Mike Storey trained at the workshop and was the first person in Scotland to get his qualification through an apprenticeship
THIS PICTURE Angus and his team make all the furniture by hand

selectively thinning out weaker trees but leaving some standing dead wood for wildlife – “An oak tree is one of the most biodiverse habitats” – and encouraging natural regeneration by placing tree guards around saplings that have self-seeded to prevent them from being eaten by deer. Angus points to a tree. “See how there are three growths from that root ball? Well, each of those ‘trunks’ is about 120 years old, but the root ball is more like 300 years old. That’s because the tree was coppiced – most of the oak trees here were. But they stopped coppicing in the late 1800s when the natural-tanning industry declined.”

Felling the ‘scrappier’ trees allows the stronger ones to thrive and encourages regeneration on the woodland floor. The smaller logs would be worthless for a commercial forester, but Angus is able to use pieces that would otherwise end up as firewood. “This tree might have a bend in it, but I know that I need a piece this length for a stool,” he says, pointing to the lower half of a trunk, “and another from this top section. So we can use a lot more timber for fine furniture than you would normally get from a woodland like this.”

For Angus, the irregularities of these ancient trees further adds to their charm. “When you get timber from a yard, it’s usually European oak, grown in vast forests, and it’s flawless. That’s what I was used to working with,” he explains. “But one of the things this woodland has done is teach me to celebrate the imperfections. Our oak is much ▶



“Our oak has knots and pips and different colours running through it... it’s beautiful”

darker in colour. It has knots and pips and different colours running through where the rich nutrients have come up from the forest floor. It’s beautiful.”

As well as maximising the timber, Angus and the co-owners utilise the woodland’s other natural assets. At this time of year, native bluebells carpet the floor, but once they have finished flowering in a few weeks, the team undertake the painstaking task of getting down on their hands and knees to collect the seed, for which they have a licence to sell to specialist plant nurseries. Similarly, come autumn, sheets are placed underneath some of the best oak trees and acorns are gathered. Some make their way to animal feed, but others are sent off to the Millennium Seed Bank at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. “We’re never going to be rich from

it, but we want to show that if you combine businesses, you can make a small woodland self-supporting,” Angus says.

The woods also have another value for Angus as a special place to spend time with his family: picnics among the bluebells and summer nights spent camping out. “One of the nicest things about being involved in a woodland is seeing it over a period of time. I have got to know this space intimately, from season to season and year to year,” he says. “As a furniture maker, it has taught me that the first process is not the planks of dry wood, but the living tree.”

ABOVE The Frame Rocker is a limited-edition piece made from 11 jointed pieces and a sculpted seat; steam-bent legs ready to be fitted

YOU CAN VISIT THE WOODLAND on special open days. Angus Ross’s studio is open at weekends and by appointment. See angusross.co.uk for details.