

# Dwellingup's SCHOOL OF WOOD



Three years after sprouting in the regrowth jarrah forests of Dwellingup, the Forest Heritage Centre is bearing fruit.

by Penny Walsh

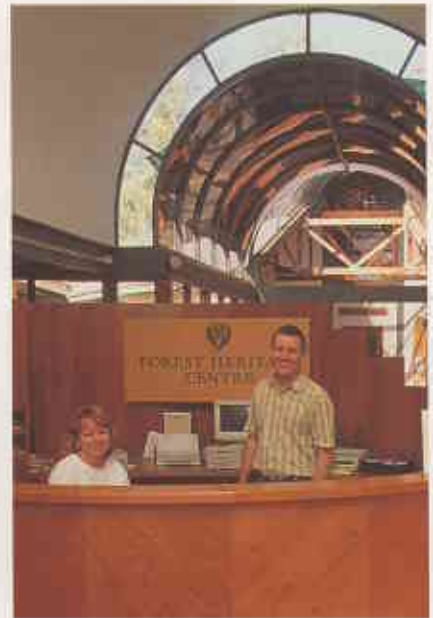
**S**ince its opening in 1995, the Forest Heritage Centre has consistently delivered a unique visitor experience, an opportunity to understand forests a little better, and a chance to view and purchase fine wood products crafted by local artisans. Now it is delivering another legacy—students skilled in the art of furniture design and production.

One of the most important functions of the Forest Heritage Centre, built in the shape of a giant jarrah bough to reflect its heritage and purpose, has been as a training base for Western Australia's burgeoning fine wood industry (see *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1995–96).

The three leaf-shaped, rammed earth buildings extending from a stem-like foyer are dominated by the School of Wood, a unique facility that has been nurturing talent for Western Australia's fine wood industry since September 1995. Establishment of the school was supported by industry and State and Commonwealth governments, and



reflects the changing face of timber usage in Western Australia. The emphasis is on value-adding and use of local hardwoods such as jarrah, karri and marri in the manufacture of crafted furniture and decorative artefacts (see 'A Seasoned Performance', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1996).



Three years down the track, the first fruits of that labour are ripe for picking. Students from around Australia have been trained to work with the rich colours and distinctive grains of wood that, until recent developments in kiln drying techniques, were not suitable for fine wood crafting.

#### SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Inaugural Director and local fine wood craftsman, Malcolm Harris, is delighted with the way the School has

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The School of Wood aims to offer students something different—something with soul.

**Below:** The School of Wood is surrounded by Dwellingup's regrowth forest.  
Photos – Chris Garnett/CALM

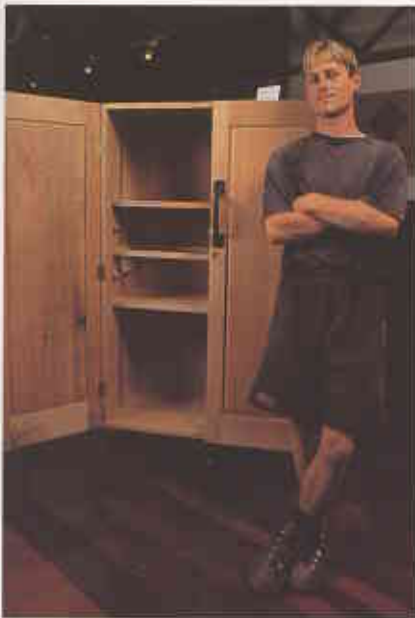
**Above:** An aerial view of the Forest Heritage Centre showing its unique design in the shape of a jarrah bough.  
Photo – Jiri Lochman

**Above right:** Assistant Manager, Jenni Rutherford, and Director of the School of Wood, Malcolm Harris, at the Forest Heritage Centre.  
Photo – Chris Garnett/CALM

**Below:** Second year student Warren East with a turned piece made from a carob bean.  
Photo – Chris Garnett/CALM







blossomed. 'We aim to offer something different,' he says. 'Something with soul, that equips students for life as professional fine wood practitioners. Classes are small, and the material we cover ranges from design and production of furniture to operation and maintenance of equipment, marketing, budgeting, and working within the arts community.'

Students of the School's two-year Diploma of Arts (Furniture Design) have come straight out of high school, as well as straight out of careers in fields as varied as geology, human resources, communications, interior design and farming. There have been experienced 'woodies' alongside novices who want to develop their love for wood and learn skills for a career in the fine wood industry.

The interaction between students with different backgrounds is an important part of the learning process. And in 1999 the school will launch a second stream of students so that first-years can learn from and mix with second-year students.

So far, more men than women have completed the course, but the School of Wood is keen to show that working with wood is no longer a man's domain. While the going is sometimes hot,

**Above:** Ashley Chopping, a second year student, with a cabinet he created using curly marri.

**Right:** Fine detail of a jarrah writing desk with ebony inlays on display in the Forest Heritage Centre Gallery.

Photos - Chris Garnett/CALM

## FINE WOOD SHOWCASE

One of the smaller 'leaves' of the Forest Heritage Centre houses a gallery for the exhibition and sale of fine wood products. Some of the pieces currently on display have special significance because they have been made by final year students of the School of Wood.

The mirrors, document boxes, carvings, tool cabinets, stools, vessels, bowls and cabinets are the fruit of two years of blood, sweat and tears. All were built on-site and demonstrate homegrown skill and creativity.

The pieces in Forest Reflections encompass fine furniture construction, wood carving, wood turning, drawing and design and they bring together an incredible range of media and influences.

The students have used jarrah, sheoak, eucalyptus burl, leather, North American white oak, brass, steel, bronze, American cherry, stained glass, curly marri, Tasmanian bluegum and oak, carob bean tree, curly jarrah, myrtle, blackbutt veneer, coloured epoxy, mallee, yew, convex glass, western red cedar, suede and ebony. Their influences include Chinese and English architecture, Japanese culture, Art Nouveau and Celtic bronzework.

Student pieces are on display at the Forest Heritage Centre throughout the year.



Photo - Chris Garnett/CALM





**Left:** Shady surrounds of the old Forest Cadet School that now provides accommodation for 'woodies', as well as conference facilities.

Photo – Marie Lochman

sweaty and physically demanding, it is by no means beyond the capabilities of female students.

'What we're looking for is men and women who want to be part of the fine wood industry. They need to have clear ideas about where they are headed and how the course will help them get there. It also helps if they have an understanding of the fine wood industry,' said Malcolm.

Prospective students don't need to have all the skills, but in this new age of qualified rather than self-taught woodies they do require plenty of passion, motivation and 'stickability'. In exchange, they get access to a custom-designed course with up-to-date machinery and experienced teachers, in a unique forest setting 90 minutes south of Perth. They also gain an insight into woodcraft as it is practised overseas and interstate via the Bunnings Forest Products artist-in-residence program, which imports fine wood practitioners to share their knowledge and experience.

Artists in residence so far have included David Colwell from Wales, a specialist in the art of steam-bending—a process usually associated with boat building. Another is Graham Peterkin from Canberra, a graduate of the prestigious Parnham College in Dorset, arguably the world's leading fine wood training facility.

According to Malcolm Harris, fresh input to the course is invaluable. So is deeper knowledge of timber—the sort of knowledge that comes from term trips to timber mills, plantations and the like. He says industry-related outings help deliver a holistic learning experience—from the harvesting and processing of wood to marketing the end product. The school plans to establish its own small timber mill and drying kiln this year, exposing students to yet another facet of the production process.

## TWO-WAY LEARNING

With its open layout, viewing panels and guided tours so that visitors can watch budding artisans at work, the

## GRADUATE MAKES GOOD

Mention wood or furniture design to Patrick Low and his eyes light up and plans for his fledgling fine furniture business come spilling out.

Patrick was one of the inaugural students to graduate from the School of Wood in 1997 with a Diploma of Arts (Furniture Design). He now has his own workshop at the Midland Enterprise Centre and is looking to expand and consolidate his business, specialising in veneering and steam-bending.

The road from student to self-employed furniture maker is not an easy one, however, and Patrick says he was lucky to be in a position to fund the transition. Like many who have found their way to the School of Wood, Patrick came from a job far removed from the fine wood industry. He spent 17 years in Human Resource management before taking the leap which now sees him fashioning chairs out of wine barrels made from 200 year-old French oak. It was quite a lifestyle change – heightened by the experience of living in a Nissen hut in Dwellingup for the best part of the two-year course.

"It was a lot of fun. The people of Dwellingup are lovely, and it was inspirational living in the forest and working every day with the wood it produces. The biggest strength was the business practice side of the course. As well as picking up skills in furniture design and manufacture, we learnt about operating a business and marketing products. Obviously a two-year course can't teach you everything you need to know, but it can introduce you to a whole lot of important areas, and equip you to be self-employed, or an employer, rather than an employee."

According to Patrick, what's missing is strong support after graduation – the time when new graduates need encouragement, guidance, and most importantly access to machinery and space in which to work.

"Things like the federal government's New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) can help a lot," he says. "It can mean the difference between success and failure for new woodies."



School of Wood graduate, Patrick Low at his workshop in Midland, working with the wood he loves.  
Photo – Chris Garnett/CALM





School of Wood offers a special two-way learning experience. It exposes people to the creative processes of fine wood craft production, letting them experience first-hand the sights, sounds and smells of wood being worked. It also breaks down the barriers between the artists and their markets. For much the same reason, the school encourages students to participate in wood shows, displays and exhibitions—all valuable networking opportunities for entrants to the fine wood industry.

Of course, there are many who love working with wood but don't plan to make a living from it. The School of Wood caters for them with its weekend workshops. Participants range from professional craftspeople to hobbyists, manual arts teachers, high school and TAFE students.

Most come from Perth and surrounds, eager to immerse themselves in residential workshops on topics like box making, veneering, bush furniture, wood turning, joinery basics, routing and shoji screens.

For \$15 a night, participants can stay at the old Forest Cadet School—a facility that produced about 400 forestry cadets between 1952 and 1991. The building has since been renovated and boasts a lecture theatre, kitchen and dining room, recreation room with

television and pot belly stove, and 16 rooms catering for up to 32 people. This accommodation is also available to industry, educational institutions, government departments, community groups and tourists.

The Forest Heritage Centre itself is a non-profit venture, relying on visitors to generate income. Fees to attend the School of Wood are based on the TAFE scale. The average cost for the two-year Diploma works out to between \$4000 and \$5000, which includes personal tools and materials. For similar courses interstate the costs are approximately double.

"The course offers great value for money, especially when you consider it includes access to \$100,000 worth of equipment and tools," said Malcolm. "Our chief problem is simply getting the word out that we're here. We'd have to be the best-kept secret in the West."

Of course, with a dozen graduates planning to make their mark in the local fine wood industry each year, it might not be too long before word gets around.

Work on an 'incubator', to ease the transition between student and practitioner and provide a relatively hassle-free environment while reputations are forged and track-records are established, will continue this year.

**Above left:** Dorothy Seeman creates a mirror frame out of silky oak at the School of Wood.

**Above:** Sawdust flies as second year student Bert Bell uses the docking saw. Photos – Chris Garnett/CALM

Success will rely on further support from organisations and individuals within the fine wood industry.

Demand for locally produced fine woodcraft is growing, as is competition within the market. To succeed, graduates from Dwellingup's School of Wood will need to demonstrate the same characteristics of durability and quality that make our native timbers stand out from the rest.

Penny Walsh is a Public Relations Officer with CALM and can be contacted on (08) 9389 8644 or email ([pennyw@calm.wa.gov.au](mailto:pennyw@calm.wa.gov.au)).

The School of Wood is part of the Forest Heritage Centre, which is off Acacia Road, Dwellingup. For more information contact Forest Heritage Centre General Manager Allen Trevaslis ph (08) 9538 1395, or email ([fhc@inet.net.au](mailto:fhc@inet.net.au)), or check out the website (<http://www.inet.net.au>).

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

# LANDSCOPE

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*Western Everlasting, see page 22, follows the same successful approach to protecting threatened plants as Western Shield did for mammals.*



*Beneath its black and burnt exterior, the common balga is giving up its secrets. See 'Believing the Balga' on page 10.*



*For 25 years, CALM's Wildlife Research Centre in Woodvale has been 'A Centre of Diversity'. See page 36.*



*The spectacular coastline of Torndirrup National Park has been years in the making. See page 28.*



*Read how locals, CALM and other agencies are working together to save the Lake Muir-Unicup wetlands. See page 49.*

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*Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky*

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**Design and production:** Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Sue Marais  
**Illustration:** Gooitzen van der Meer, Ian Dickinson  
**Marketing:** Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498  
**Subscription enquiries:** ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437  
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