



Introduction

In September 2024, we held our fourth Summer School as part of the "**Woodworking and Gender**" programme, funded by the **National Lottery Heritage Fund** and others, which addresses gender inequality in the heritage woodwork and furniture-making sectors.

This year, we partnered with **Ercol** on a brief to design a timeless small craft item using underutilised home-grown timbers. Known for its beautifully crafted, solid wood furniture, Ercol typically work with ash and oak to create legacy pieces.

Together, the participants explored using **Grown in Britain** certified timber to design smaller items that would be unsuitable for production in the Ercol factory.



ercol



Foreword

As someone who has had the privilege to participate in a Sylva Summer school, I know firsthand just how valuable these training opportunities are. The supportive and inclusive atmosphere fostered during the Summer School truly inspired me to continue learning, subsequently joining the Professional Course offered at the Sylva Wood School. My time at Sylva empowered me to progress into the furniture making industry and begin to build a sustainable career.

In an industry that is very male-dominated, it was a very special and refreshing experience to join an accessible training opportunity for early-career creatives from marginalised gender identities. This year's Summer School was another success; welcoming eight participants into the industry-standard Wood School workshop and allowing each of them to fully immerse themselves in every aspect of Sylva's ethos. It was a brilliant week filled with wonderful woodland walks, energetic expression and constant conversation around responsible forestry and material selection.

Each participant produced beautiful objects that will be cherished, and left with a greater knowledge of our woodlands and understanding of how we can act as stewards of our forests.

As a furniture maker and recently appointed Sylva Trustee, championing a more inclusive industry and utilising homegrown timber are two great passions of mine. I am proud to have come full-circle, returning to teach at this year's Summer School, and I truly believe that such initiatives can help inspire marginalised genders to enter and thrive in this sector.

Phoebe Oldfield
Sylva Foundation Trustee





Materials

All wood used during the summer school was sourced with the help of our partner, forestry charity **Grown in Britain**. Participants were offered a range of homegrown air-dried timbers, including ash, beech, Douglas-fir and sycamore.

They were also given the unique opportunity to explore the potential of a new ply-board made from three layers of homegrown timber. We were delighted to contribute to the research and development of this innovative product and thank **Highland Heritage Woodworks** for their support.





Summer School Participants

Over the last three years, Summer School participants have had the chance to fully immerse themselves in the Sylva Wood Centre, gaining access to our well-equipped Wood School workshops, industry-standard machinery, and experienced mentors. They also become part of our vibrant, creative community.

This year, the Summer School officially became part of our *Woodworking and Gender* project, which aims to tackle gender inequality in the heritage woodworking and furniture-making sectors. We invited applications from individuals who identify as female or non-binary and have a passion for working with wood.

Eight early-career designers and makers were awarded free places to learn about our two core values: the improved stewardship of our forests, and the use of home-grown timber. Partnering with Ercol, participants worked on a design brief, developing their woodworking skills while deepening their understanding of the creative potential of home-grown timber.

Summer School Tutors

Joe Bray

Joe leads Sylva Foundation's Wood School as a designer, maker, and teacher. He is passionate about developing skilled craftspeople through education, industry partnerships, and live projects. A Churchill Fellow in 2018, Joe explored the future of furniture craft education in Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the USA.

Phil Gullam

Phil joined Sylva Foundation in 2022 and has more than 15 years of experience teaching and assessing wood qualifications. He has worked as a nationwide quality assurer for furniture qualifications and has managed workshops for high-profile furniture makers.

Dr Lynn Jones

Lynn, a former university Furniture Department Manager, continues to serve as an External Examiner and offers career guidance and workshops. With nearly 20 years of experience running an MA Furniture course, she enjoys supporting students whenever she can.

Cathrin Poppensieker

Cat leads our new Woodworking and Gender Project. With over 12 years of project management experience and a passion for social justice and well-being, Cat brings expertise in delivering impactful projects for underrepresented groups. A passionate woodworker herself, she combines her hands-on experience as a workshop technician, hardwood specialist, and carpenter with her commitment to addressing the gender imbalance in the heritage woodworking sector.

Phoebe Oldfield

Phoebe, a former Sylva Summer School participant now works as a furniture maker at Benchmark. She is passionate about promoting sustainable woodland management through the use of homegrown timber. She is a trustee of Sylva Foundation and the inaugural Grown in Britain Scholar.



Presenting the work of the 2024 Sylva Summer School





"An incredibly joyful and inspiring experience developing my woodworking ambitions within the pioneering and nurturing context of Sylva - thank you! In an object-focused profession, it's encouraging to see yourself within a wider network of regenerative makers, thinkers, mentors, friends (and forests!) making a difference within the UK's wood culture."

A nested trio of tiny stools which celebrate and elevate the offcuts generated from cutting out peculiar seat shapes - made from GiB Ash ply-board, Beech, and Sycamore coppice. Being naturally drawn to making furniture objects from scraps found in workshop bins, I initially was flummoxed by all the beautiful regularly shaped timber we had been given for our projects. Curious to try the GiB ply-board, I prototyped what possibilities might occur from cutting out a 'KAPOW!' kind of speech bubble as the tallest stool - along the way developing my skills in joinery, wood-turning and trying new things like carving and working with coppice.

Amy Teh

@amy_elizabeth_teh
amyteh.com

amy.teh.art.and.architecture@gmail.com

"It was a truly magical week getting to know people who are truly passionate about what they're doing to share their love in wood and people. It's just so encouraging to see that there are stars out there making the joy of woodworking accessible to as many people out there. Thank you so much for letting me witness and learn from you all!"

Sycamore trees often stir sweet memories of forest/jungle walks - the playfulness of the seeds twirling in the wind never fails to excite both young and old. Inspired by the generational gifts, in the story of Ercol and seeds, this propagation plate is made from sycamore wood and steam bend to encapsulate motion of falling and growing. The top can hold 3 everyday jars at home for propagating leaf cuttings, holes along the bent structure for drying flowers and pods whilst the 3 carved circles keep loose seeds in one place on the bottom plate. On a day of a party, this piece can be used as a party plate to hold dips and breadsticks to celebrate sycamore's antibacterial properties.



Choon Yuan Wang

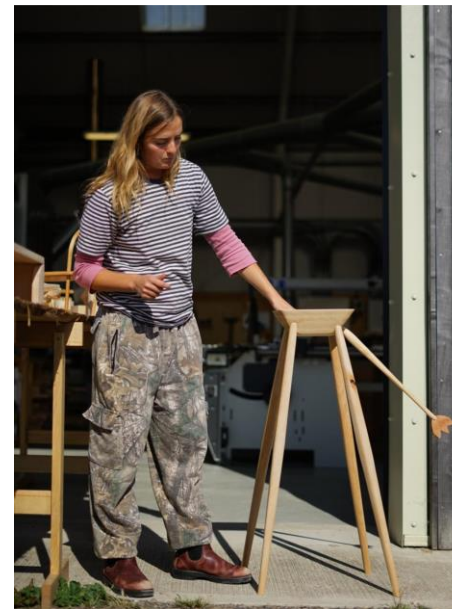
@choonyuan21

choonyuanw@gmail.com

choonyuanw.wixsite.com/choon-architecture

“The Sylva Summer School experience is a transformative journey where craftsmanship meets creativity, empowering women and non-binary individuals to shape not only wood but also their skills and confidence in a supportive environment. Over a short period, we learned a vast array of techniques and gained invaluable knowledge on forestry. I feel incredibly lucky to have been part of this wonderful project and profoundly recommend it to others!”

My bowl celebrates the rich history of Ercol, highlighting its traditional joinery and signature legs. With an organic shape and beautiful simplicity, it reinterprets the elegance of Ercol’s design in a modern way. The height of the bowl creates a strikingly distorted, futuristic appearance, adding an element of irony that invites curiosity. Additionally, the incorporation of the animal’s tail serves as a playful nod to the lion, which has long represented Ercol’s brand identity. This piece not only showcases a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation but also sparks engaging conversations about the evolution of design.



Franky Zadra

@frankyzadra
frankyzadra@gmail.com



"It was a wonderful experience, grounded in place and consideration of the wider ecosystem as well the personal. I couldn't recommend it more. All the staff who hosted us and guided us were incredibly knowledgeable and generous with their time and expertise. We were taken care of in every way and given space to learn, reflect and create. All the participants were inspiring and I'm so glad to have connected with them."



A sculptural candle holder inspired by the interconnectedness of tree species with one another and with the wider ecosystem. The idea was inspired by how light is used in forest management to guide the growth of trees, by planting species with different growth patterns near one another that either force other trees up to the canopy growing straight and tall or provide shelter for them to strengthen in the understory. The shapes are a reference to the triquetra or 'Celtic Knot' which is a symbol of interconnection. I used three native species, beech, sycamore and ash which would nestle into one another, with their sizes reflecting their abundance or scarcity, and the level of biodiversity they support as a species. I was able to fully develop the ash candle holder, which has a cavity to allow light to pass through it, as well as space to place a small candle atop it.

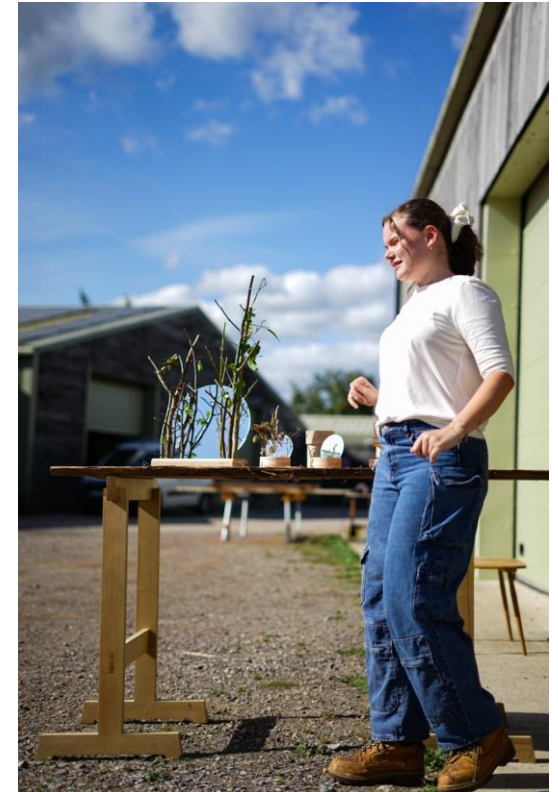


Gul Yasin

@GulYasinStudio
Info@gulyasinstudio.com

“My week at Sylva was totally inspiring! I cannot believe how much I was able to learn in just five days, from learning all about forestry management and home-grown timber, to learning about milling timber and furthering my workshop skills. The connections built, the support I received, and the confidence I gained to move forward in my career are invaluable and are all thanks to the amazing team at Sylva Wood School.”

During my time at Sylva Wood School, it was my goal to respond to the brief set by Ercol, whilst celebrating the use of the home-grown timber and the beautiful forestry and nature which surrounds the school. The outcome I produced was, a collection of mirrors which have a series of different sized holes drilled into the timber. The idea behind the holes is for the user to go outdoors, connect with nature by, collecting sticks, leaves, flowers, and dried plants, which can then be slotted into the holes. The mirror reflects the foliage which allows a forest like effect when looking into the mirror, giving the user a sense of nature in their own home. The idea is also discouraging the use of traditional cut flowers to bring natural beauty in the home but instead suggesting immersing yourself into nature and bringing some of that beauty home with you.



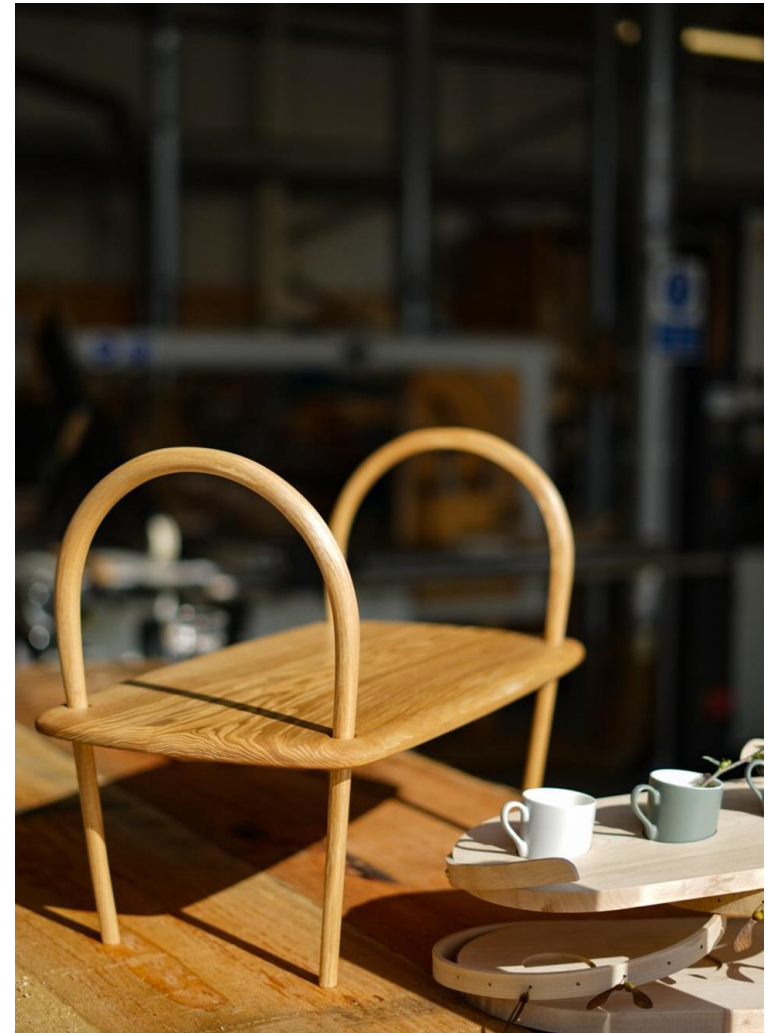
Izzy Kelly

@izzykellydesign



"The Summer School was incredibly well-organised, with a curriculum that was both packed and well-rounded. The kindness, encouragement, and passion of the teachers were evident throughout the week, making it an unforgettable experience."

For my project, I designed a lap tray inspired by Ercol's iconic steam-bent chair backs. The tray's design uses the natural tension of the wood bend to lock it into place, giving it the potential to be a glue-free, flat-pack product. My goal was for the tray to harmonise with other Ercol pieces, whether as a bedside table companion or a living room accent. To me, "use and live with" means creating something tactile, functional, and visually intriguing, which is why the looped handles are so exaggerated.



Jessie Hills

@jessiehills.design
jessiehills@hotmail.co.uk

"The summer school was such an inspiring and confidence-building experience. It was great to gain an insight into the entire lifespan of timber, and I left with a renewed appreciation of the significance of working with wood."

My object is a dual compartment box made from ash, with a textured sliding lid made from sycamore. After much reflection and conversations with Sylva staff and other Summer School students, I decided to create an object for a home office or desk that connected home workers to nature. I was inspired by the idea of fidget toys to create something that invited the user to play with the box, hence the tactile lid that slides across the box. In line with the Ercol's aesthetic, I chose a simple and modern style.



Kay Stephens

"It is fantastic to feel welcome in the wood workshop, especially as a female and have the great opportunity to meet same-minded people who love working with wood but also would like to understand how to sustainably approach the connection between forest and us."

These design concepts are connected by the new upcoming ply-board material which has a unique visual aesthetic demonstrating the contrast between the colours and the grain of different species of timber used in the ply-board. The Forest Stand is made of different shapes of columns from ply-board to symbolise different species of trees creating together the appearance of a forest which stands as the key support of the hexagon sycamore plate to function as a stable platform for pastries or as a base for flower plants. The Lucia design is influenced by the Ercol details and simple elegance with practical aspects. This product reveals and celebrates the different layers in the ply-board and cooperates with the multifunctionality of position to serve and adapt to the various needs of the user in different spaces. Overall, these designs exhibit the natural beauty of overlooked species of wood with the cooperation of functionality and clean style in contemporary form.



Tereza Kupčíková

@tk.design.world
tkupcikova.design@gmail.com





We would like to thank

Henry Tadros, chairman of Ercol, for setting the design brief.

Dougal Driver and Rachel Lawrence from Grown in Britain for their commitment to this project and ongoing support of our Summer Schools.

All of the contributors: Lynn Jones, Phoebe Oldfield, Cathrin Poppensieker and Rae Sellen (pictured).

The Sylva Foundation team: Joe Bray, Gabriel Hemery, Phillip Gullam and Paul Orsi.

“Our annual Summer School is the highlight of my year – it is an all-consuming week that leaves us both elated and exhausted!

We established the week-long creative extravaganza with a series of ambitious aims and now in its fourth iteration we can confidently say we are meeting them all. We offer an accessible creative experience for people of marginalised genders aspiring to work with wood. We provide an inclusive environment to learn, inspiring and building confidence in all the participants.

Connecting the whole journey from tree to object provides us with an opportunity to promote the importance of managing our woodlands and exploring the value of home-grown timbers.

We are grateful to everyone involved, our supporters, collaborators, volunteers and the participants - together creating a very special community of people who are the future of our sector.”

**Joe Bray,
Head of Sylva Wood School**

Sylva Foundation: nurturing a wood culture, growing a future



Sylva Foundation's vision is for a society that cares for nature while living in harmony with it.

We envisage a wood culture where people understand and promote the good stewardship of woodlands and are mindful of their utility, while being conscious of their fragility.

Sylva Foundation's Wood School was established to help one of our main aims, namely, to deliver the training and education necessary to support the transformation of society, focussing on the stewardship of our forests and the utility of home-grown timber.

The Woodworking and Gender project is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Conran Foundation, The Mila Charitable Trust, Benchmark Furniture Ltd, Vastern Timber Ltd. Thanks to these funding organisations and National Lottery players, we will ensure future generations of skilled and resilient women and non-binary woodworkers are able to support the woodworking heritage of this country for years to come.

