



Artists in wood: Nick Sneller

Fi Martynoga interviews the energetic and highly skilled worker in wood, Nick Sneller.

He is a dependable, smiling face at Reforesting Scotland's Annual Gatherings, but what does Nick Sneller get up to for the rest of the year? At the Comrie Croft Gathering, in October 2017, he had something new going on that he was burning to talk about.

Along with the assistance of his fiancée Colette, Nick has designed a versatile pod system that could be anything from a hut in the woods to a spare bedroom or office in the garden. The modular design can be adapted to almost any shape and size. "There are two models", he says, "a hexagonal form (the Hex-Pod) and an octagonal form (the Octo-Pod), mostly aimed at the glamping market. The pods come as a flat-pack of workshop-made, ready insulated panels that can be quickly erected". You can choose a variety of different panels to fit the main internal frame of round larch poles. The poles and the slightly Gothic-shaped windows stop these little buildings from being too rectilinear and flat-surfaced. The sub-circular shape, too, makes the interior seem organic, a safe place to be: rather like a wooden version of a yurt. Pods can be added together, as their shape, like cells in a honeycomb, means they can be

joined simply by removing a panel and connecting adjacent units. It is easy to imagine a small village of them, all lit by a state-of-the-art, low-voltage, solar-powered lighting system.

Playgrounds

Once Nick has his engineering certificates for these structures, he is ready to go with manufacturing and customising them to his clients' requirements. In the meantime, he continues to do some work for two companies which design and build children's playgrounds. This has been one of his occupations since he left the workshop of Tim Stead in 2001 (the year Tim died). Before that he had been a student of Furniture Design and Manufacture at Edinburgh

College of Art. Later, he squeezed in some experience in the Basque Country, making their traditional furniture before he moved to Bristol.

The playgrounds use round-pole wood, stone and water. Nick has invented a hexagonal stack of logs, bolted together to create a climbing frame with a den at its core. It has been used in many places to great effect. He tells me, "You can see them at Cuningar Loop Woodland Park at Dalmarnock. It's amazing how a derelict 15-hectare site can be transformed into a popular community greenspace. It was created as part of the Commonwealth Games legacy and now has won a Saltire Award for Excellence".



Above, clockwise from top left: Playground in France; Tree platform; Cabin.



Another of Nick's inventions is the hollowed-out tree. "You wouldn't know it, but I do it by machining the log, removing its core, and re-assembling the sides. Then I plane it down and sand it to make it smooth and tactile. Side branches can be hollowed to make forking passages, as it's fun to come out somewhere unexpected", he says, adding, "They are more exciting than standard playground issue".

Working with others

One such log was included in the Zoflora and Caudwell Children's Wild Garden, which won an RHS Gold Medal, the highly coveted RHS Best in Show and the popular RHS People's Choice Award at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show in 2017. Nick was Master Carpenter for the show garden, which was designed by Davies White Landscape Architects to highlight the therapeutic benefits of nature and wild spaces. "It incorporated playful and edible planting, wild grassy mounds, huge trees and tree-top nests, a huge spinning boulder, hidden woodland scent pots, a secret mushroom cave, a ground-level trampoline, as well as my giant hollow oak log. Then there were secluded spaces within the garden as safe havens for children with particular problems", Nick tells me.

In addition to all the gongs, this garden, and in particular Nick's tree swing, won the praise of Monty Don. "He really liked it," says Nick, "declared it was like no other show garden he had ever seen before and was beautifully designed and constructed".

Some of the playground projects are extensive. When working on a Forestry Commission job, Nick found himself diverting a stream and constructing a stone-lined paddling dish on a forested hillside in Wales. Kids are not confined to using the engineered dish but are encouraged to get out to the actual stream and to find out for themselves what you can do with flowing water. It is very much part of Nick's ethos to help

From top left: There is a cleverly designed sink on the deck outside the door of the cabin; A beautiful tree swing was part of the award-winning garden at Hampton Court; Sleeping area inside cabin. All photos: Nick Sneller.

children reconnect with nature. He is concerned about the increasing problem of Nature Deficit Disorder (see issue 56, page 17).

Fifteen years ago, Nick co-founded a 'design and build' company called Touch Wood Enterprises, based in Bristol; today called Touchwood Play. The company creates playful spaces using timber structures and natural landscaping for schools and public parks. Nick designed timber structures maximising on the natural form of larch poles utilising the wavy edge and wavy edge, perhaps an enduring legacy of Tim Stead.

A further alliance that Nick has enjoyed in past years living in Bristol is with Forest of Avon Products, a cooperative of woodworkers and woodland owners dedicated to utilising local timbers. A typical project that he completed with fellow members of the group is a reception desk with a difference. The brief was for, "Restful interior wood furniture for a medium secure unit to promote a natural therapeutic atmosphere". The prescribed material was an ash from the hospital grounds that had been felled for safety reasons. The result is a charmingly eclectic mix of planks and woven, wattle-like panels, without a straight edge or a hard corner to be seen. The walls behind it suggest formality and institutional life. The desk breaks through all that and would appear to fulfil the brief extremely well.

With all these contacts and collaborations in the southwest of England, will Nick Sneller come back to Scotland? He is clearly tempted, as he values the wilderness that we enjoy here, and still has something of a circle of friends, not least within Reforesting Scotland. So let's hope we get this energetic and highly skilled worker in wood back soon.

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