

## **Report on talk given on Friday, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2017**

### **“Philip Clissett, a Victorian Chair-Maker”.**

Mike Abbott set the scene for his relaxed and informative talk dressed in khaki shorts and patched shirt. It seemed appropriate as he was introducing us to the ancient craft of chairmaking from unseasoned ash wood. He is following in the tradition of Philip Clissett, a Herefordshire craftsman who lived from 1817 to 1913. Mike has been running courses in green-wood chairmaking for over 30 years. In 1993, he and his wife bought a share in a woodland near Bosbury, adjacent to Clissett's former cottage. They set up the Clissett Wood Trust in order to preserve the techniques of making green-wood chairs.

He began his talk by showing a short film which demonstrated these techniques, from felling suitable trees, (the best ones are about 27 years old) to splitting with wedges, shaping with traditional tools, bending in specially made steam ovens, drilling holes and squeezing home the joints (ideally a round peg in a square hole!) and finally, making the seats from a wooden plank or from woven rushes. No glue or screws are used. A whole chair, light in weight but flexible and extremely tough, can be made in a day; a set of six takes a week. The classic style developed by Clissett was the ladder-backed arm chair, but he made other styles as requested. Many of his chairs survive in good order over a hundred years later.

Two of Mike's 'students' attended the talk together with their very comfortable chairs made only last week. Mike gave full credit to the great expert on Philip Clissett, Terry Rowell, from whom he gained much of his information. He mentioned the different craft tradition of the High Wycombe chairmakers, 'bodgers', who used beech wood from the surrounding Chiltern Hills. He also warned that 'ash die-back', a disease at present attacking ash trees throughout the whole country, would in time drastically reduce their numbers, although he thought that they would probably not be wiped out completely.

He told us of an exhibition which will be held at Tinsmith's Gallery, Ledbury, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> July, entitled "Working from Wood: Country Chairs Today", which will highlight several contemporary chairmakers, including himself. I have no doubt that his lively talk will have inspired many of his audience to visit the exhibition to learn more about this fine old craft.