



# FLOWING WAVES OF WOOD

Wood carver Alison Crowther creates giant sculptures that reflect the magnificence of the oak trees she is working on

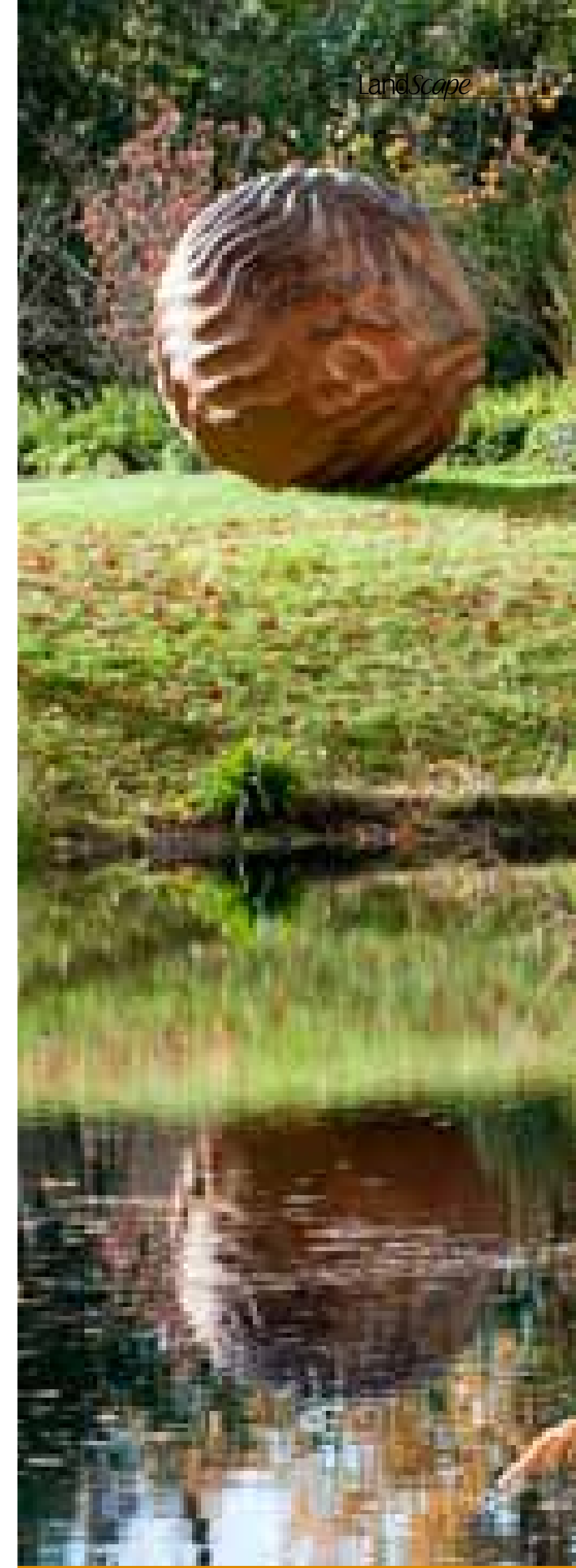
**A** GENTLE WOODY SMELL pervades a draughty barn at the foot of the South Downs. Inside wood is everywhere. Giant wooden beams support the old roof and the walls are clad with timber. On the floor, sitting on a carpet of wood shavings and saw dust, are a selection of oak sculptures. These include several massive carved spheres and a large pod-shaped sculpture. They are the work of carver Alison Crowther, whose skill lies in enhancing the intrinsic beauty of the wood by highlighting its natural patterns and subtle lines.

## A life-long passion

Alison has been working with wood since studying a degree in three-dimensional design at Buckinghamshire College of Higher Education in the 1980s. It was here that she developed a love for oak, spending time researching its history. "I was fascinated by the druids' use of it for altars, Henry VIII's tall ships, vernacular architecture," she says. Her love of making things started when she was a child. "I enjoyed doing, making and being hands-on," she says.

She started making furniture, learning practical skills about how to cut wood and use wood-working machinery. This was followed by six years teaching craft, design and technology at Bedales School in Hampshire. Her free time was spent experimenting with her own work. She was influenced by the work of artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash. Both are sculptors who work with wood and other materials, placed in the natural environment.

Finally, in 1996, Alison set up her own studio. Here she started creating her abstract sculptural spheres. Her work can





1  
Does this show the medullary rays, or cracks? Is this the oak from Cowdray? What is the red tinge on it? Is this the outside of your workshop?

now be at the National Trust's Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire and Winchester Cathedral.

**Working with oak**

The inspiration for all Alison's work is the wood itself. She prefers to use unseasoned or 'green' English oak, although she has worked with other indigenous hardwoods. Green wood is wood that hasn't been dried. It is the opposite of seasoned wood, which is either dried naturally over time or artificially dried in kilns. Green wood is easier to work as it is softer than seasoned timber.

All wood ultimately does dry out, though, and this causes cracking. Cracks normally form along the medullary rays. These are the small spoke-like lines that radiate out from the centre of a tree trunk crossing through the concentric growth circles called annular rings. When she finds them, Alison deliberately carves along these rays. This means that when the wood does eventually crack, the resulting fissures become part of the surface pattern.

Anxious to avoid too much cracking, Alison has learnt ways to minimise the movement of the wood as it dries. She also carefully marries particular parts of the tree to particular designs. "The speed it dries out determines the amount of cracking, so I want the wood to gently relax," she says.

The level of sap in the tree when it is felled also affects the amount of cracking in the wood. Timber felled in the winter

has less sap, so is much drier and less likely to crack. "If wood is cut when the sap is rising in the spring, a shower of moisture can burst out when it is cut," says Alison.

This sap will rust iron tools as the tannin in it is acidic. She sources her wood from people who fell trees in winter. Much of the wood Alison uses is offered to her by local foresters and tree surgeons. She knows the exact provenance of each trunk, as every piece comes with a Forestry Stewardship Council number on it. This guarantees that it comes from sustainably managed woods.

**Getting started**

Her latest commission is a pair of giant oak spheres. One will be displayed outside, the other indoors. The wood she is using comes from the nearby Cowdray Estate in West Sussex. She was contacted by the head forester, after a branch from an estate tree fell on to a road. The tree was considered dangerous so had to be felled. Alison bought the entire trunk. "I was very lucky to get such a good size as this is about the biggest trunk size I can get for a healthy tree," she says. Oaks can live up to 1,000 years, but these ancient trees are unusable as the centres are often entirely rotten. Alison estimates that the tree she acquired was about 320-350 years old, relatively young for an oak.

Such a big piece of wood was too large to transport in one piece. Instead it had to be chain-sawed into two giant chunks on site. The two cut pieces weighed approximately 78cwt (4

tonnes) each and measured 6½ft (2m) in diameter. Each piece was loaded by crane on to a tractor and brought to the workshop. They were left outside the barn where Alison and her team started to work on them. "They can stay outside for a couple of years as they are so big they won't dry out," says Alison.

**Drawing templates**

Before work starts, there is a very careful design stage. Each of Alison's sculptures starts life as a tiny sketch. These are then scaled up to full size to work out the proportions. "I need to see how they relate to the human scale and where the unsightly curves and bumps are," she explains.

These drawings are used to make a template, cut from a flat piece of plywood. The template for the spheres is roughly arch shaped. It spans the diameter of the trunk. It is used to define the shape of each piece, showing Alison where to remove excess wood. The template is extremely important, as it is vital not to cut away too much wood. "The template has to fit to the timber to ensure that we can get the largest amount of wood out of the butt as possible," she says. When finished, the two spheres will measure 5ft (1.5m) and 6ft (1.8m) in diameter.

Once the template is attached, Alison cuts away the wood with a chainsaw to create a curved surface which follows the line of the template. The template is gradually pivoted round the whole piece of wood so eventually the entire chunk of oak is cut into a sphere shape. She also uses an angle grinder to "chew through the wood". Once this process has finished, the wood is brought inside the barn, using a fork lift truck.

**Using hand tools**

The initial work leaves a blurred, fairly rough surface on the wood. This is now smoothed away by hand using traditional cabinet making tools such as a spokeshave. It is at this stage that Alison decides where to carve gentle indentations into the wood. These decisions are based on the shape of the wood. "I take my



2  
Is this one of the two spheres in progress? What are the markings showing



4 Is that a template? And what are the blocks used for?



4 What are the names of these tool?



5 What's this? WHEN do you use it? What are those tools in the background? And the green fabric?



6 What are the names of these saws at what stage do you use them?

“To dwellers in a wood, almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature.”

Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*

lead from the tree. The indentations are usually where the shape of the tree altered beyond that of a symmetrical form. Removing the bark and sapwood reveals the natural meandering of the tree’s profile,” she explains. Alison carves these areas using an arbortech, a spokeshave and very gently curved carving chisels.

The crisp surface created by the spokeshave shows up the patterns in the wood made by the annular rings and the medullary rays. Alison traces the lines of some of the rings out in pencil on the wood. This shows her where to carve the rows of grooves that snake round each sculpture, creating their sense of movement and tactile texture. She is particularly looking forward to this stage with the spheres. “This trunk had five different centres which will mean it will be such fun to carve. All the centres have their own sets of rings so we will have to make lots of decisions about which lines we follow. For me this is what it’s all about – making these risky decisions,” she says.

These decisions are based on how best to highlight the intrinsic patterns in the wood. “The different sized rings show the discrepancies in the years of growth while some lines will be compressed where a branch was. I want to be true to the annual rings and tell the story of the wood and how this tree grew with the carving,” she explains.

Alison carves the grooves in the wood by hand using a chisel and a mallet. Different depths of grooves are worked using different sized chisels. It may take up to an hour to work a groove a couple inches long. “It’s extremely time intensive work, but it is worth doing well,” she says. It is important to have sharp tools to work with, to help with efficiency and the visual crispness of the line. Alison uses a wet stone grinder and then a sharpening paste and planishing tool to keep her chisels sharp.

**Finishing touches**

When all the lines have been carved into the wood the finished spheres need to be treated. They are both sanded before the sphere destined for the garden is given four coats of natural linseed oil mixed with pure turpentine. It will then be left to weather. The one for the inside will be oiled and



7 Carving across crack.. Or shakes. What tool is that you're using?

given three or four coats of beeswax to give the oak a sheen.

Alison likes the way her work can be displayed both inside and outside as both environments can add to the beauty of the oak. “Inside the wood becomes more golden. Outside the pieces settle into their environment weathering to a silver grey colour,” she says.

The two spheres will take approximately six months to complete. Alison has a team of four other part-time workers to help her, although she does most of the actual carving herself. This is the part of the process she enjoys the most. “I get into a making zone as I have to really concentrate. There is a lot think about – how the grain changes direction and where to put your tool in,” she says. “I am very happy being in close proximity to wood. I get a lot of satisfaction at being adept with the tools. It takes a long time to get to know the material and tools well.” It is this skill combined with the respect that Alison has for the original tree and the wood she uses, that makes her work so powerful. ■

• Words: Diana Woolf • Photography: Jacqui Hurst

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8 Who is the man in the pic. Would be nice to give him a name



9 Is this sandpaper? What grade? How long does it take to sand all those ridges