



Batting clever

The thwack of a cricket bat striking a ball is as redolent of the British summer as rain at Wimbledon and wasp-spoiled picnics, says Nick Hammond, as he traces the lifecycle of a piece of willow that's bound to have a good innings

Photographs by Georgina Cranston



A COAL-BLACK crow caws from the perilous upper branches of the tree. He sees the approaching men and dives with the wind, spitting corvid insults as he goes. The men, in hard hats and work boots, stare up at the now-deserted branches of the willow. Its time has come.

It has stood in dignified silence here beside the Great Ouse for nearly 25 years. Its deep roots have drained the soil and countless generations of wildlife have made homes in its leaves, bark and branches. As the chainsaw bites, it's difficult not to feel a pang of sadness at its passing, but there is something unique and utterly British waiting to be created from the heart of this noble tree.

It's one of a commercial crop of about 2,500 'cricket-bat willows' grown in the parks around Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire. 'We harvest a sustainable number of trees in late

summer and autumn each year, when the ground is still dry and as bird-nesting season finishes. They're generally about 25 years old—some younger, some older, which helps provide different grain patterns [on the bats],' explains Rob Riekie of the Milton Keynes Parks Trust.

It's a useful cash-crop for the trust, a charitable organisation entrusted to look after more than 5,000 acres of public space in and around Milton Keynes. The 2014 harvest of 96 trees will raise £282 apiece—money that's ploughed straight back into maintenance and reinvestment.

The treetops are turned into wood-chip and used to resurface paths, new sapling willows are set on their journey from stripped branches and the long, chunky boles—with our tree on top of the pile—are stacked ready for collection, destined for West Yorkshire. 'It sounds daft, but I owe an awful lot to willow trees from

A quarter of a century in the making: Chris Kippax (above) lovingly crafts cricket bats from 25-year-old willow trees, which are grown commercially by the Milton Keynes Parks Trust

Milton Keynes,' says Chris Kippax in his broad Yorkshire accent. 'I was driving past Junction 14 of the M1 and I spotted the tops of some willows. I was desperately short of good English willow and, after some research, I found out who owned the trees. We submitted a tender bid and won. That timber transformed our business.'

Mr Kippax's company makes some of the world's most sought-after cricket bats, which are lusted after by ardent schoolboys and professional cricketers alike. 'They've tried making bats from willow sourced all over the world, but it's a fact that nothing is as light, strong or perfect as our own native wood. It's as if God intended it that way,' he states firmly.

Within a week of being felled, our tree is collected by an articulated lorry and carefully driven the 140 miles to West Yorkshire. Then, Mr Kippax, armed with a huge chainsaw, begins to transform it. 'I cut the trunks into >



30in lengths, which are then split down into rough-sawn clefts,' he explains. 'We're able to see the grain and select which grades will be the best.' It's a process that involves several weeks in a kiln, careful machine work and intricate hand shaving.

A moisture reading is taken from the middle of a cleft from the kiln to check that the wood is sufficiently dry. Chris then works the clefts using an industrial-sized press, which his grandfather built from scratch in 1976. They're gently but firmly squeezed, compressing the heart of the honeycomb-shaped fibres that give English willow its unique combination of strength, lightness and spring. Each cleft has its own resistance and it takes an expert's touch to get the pressing just right.

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The shaping begins and a handle is fitted using binding, PVA glue and a trademarked process to reduce the numbing thrum of recoil I well remember from my ill-hit schoolboy shots. Bats have changed since then. Past Test match greats played with light, thin blades; these days, limited-over specialists require bludgeoning beasts with a fast pick-up to clear the boundary ropes. The Kippax Colossus is one such beast, with an incredible edge that's just under 2in to combat bat-spin and convert potential slip catches into quick singles through the covers.

And it's the choice of the professionals: the world's number one batsman, Kumar Sangakkara, recently paid a visit to pick out a selection of bats, Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff was filmed wielding a Kippax in the nets and Durham and England Test cricketer Graham Onions is also a devotee.

But our bat—now made into a Grade 1 Colossus and daubed with colourful stickers—doesn't have to travel far to find a new home. 'We're a superstitious lot, us batsmen,' laughs Yorkshire all-rounder Rich Pyrah as he swings it through with approval. 'We find a bat that works and we stick with it. I've tried them



all through the years, but these are the best, in my opinion. I get through five or six a season because we're playing every day. I handpick them straight from the factory.'

And so it is that, on June 6, 2014, at Old Trafford, a humble willow tree from Stony Stratford has its moment in the limelight. A classic Lancashire versus Yorkshire Roses battle takes place in front of a packed house and, as the shadows lengthen and floodlights kick in, there might not be 'a breathless hush in the Close to-night'—as in Sir Henry Newbolt's classic poem—but it's a nail-biter for sure.

Pyrah walks to the crease at number seven with Yorkshire needing nine runs off the final two overs of the day. He swings our bat in his hands, blocking the first, then squirting a two. Back on strike in the last over,

The long road from park to pitch: the wood for a cricket bat is left in a kiln to dry for several weeks, before being carefully worked by a machine and then intricately shaved by hand



with six runs needed from just four balls, he steadies himself and nicks another two. Six from three. Pyrah spins our bat, breathes deeply and takes guard. And, as Kabir Ali steams in for the third ball of the over, he clears his left leg, leans back and swings the willow.

With a crack like a rifleshot, the ball flies off the bat and sails over the covers for a six to win the game on enemy soil. 'It was an incredible feeling,' Pyrah later confides. It was, indeed, a magic moment, 25 years in the making, from seedling to the square.

For more information about Kippax cricket bats, telephone 01977 550303 or visit www.kippaxcricket.co.uk and to find out more about The Parks Trust, visit www.theparkstrust.com