

Kit & Courses

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Exeter Retort

Alan Waters tests a new charcoal kiln with spectacular results for less effort

Some of you may remember that in a previous issue of *Living Woods* I wrote about my experiences as a charcoal burner during the last 30-odd years. I also wrote about the Exeter Retort which was transported to my site for a demonstration in October. And since then, I have been lucky enough to have the retort on my site, and on my own for four weeks in December, with a request from its designers to "Put it through its paces, Alan, run-it-in and tell us what's needed to improve it".

It was great! I did four burns in total and I worked it hard, as instructed. I've always said that the only way forward in charcoal production is to invest in equipment, not only to make the job easier but to improve the quality of the charcoal. And I suppose now it is time for me to practise what I preach! So I've ordered the retort. Half of the money is from my pension, and the other half is grant money from the South Downs National Park Authority (Sustainable Communities Fund) and Defra (through its Leader RDPE Grant). We've also received strong support from the West Dean

Estate and the West Sussex County Council. And it is entirely thanks to their commitment, and belief in both the product and in ourselves, that we are able to purchase this brand new piece of equipment, the new improved mobile Exeter Retort. Thank you all.

Now I know many charcoal burners don't want to make such a big financial commitment as this, and I know (believe me, I do know) it's not an easy decision to make when profit margins are so slim. But I still believe British charcoal has a promising future and will never seriously be threatened by cheap imports. I feel confident that I've done the right thing. And hopefully at the end of the day the rewards and the results, both physical and financial, will ensure me enough profit to recoup my money, and help my tired back at the same time!

Designed by Geoff Self and Robin Rawle of the Carbon Compost Co., the Exeter Retort seems to tick all the boxes, and after five trial burns this is what I have discovered.

First they said: "Don't fill it to the top: don't put in long stuff: and don't pack it too tight." Well of course, I did



Contrary to the maker's advice, Alan stacked the retort up to the top, and got better and better results the more wood he used (above). One great advantage is that the charcoal can be pulled straight out into a sack or bag (below right)

all three and the results just got better and better. To be fair, the retort wasn't designed to make barbecue charcoal, it was designed to make 'Biochar'. Robin and Geoff are producing this new product in Exeter and selling it locally.

In my first burn I used last year's low grade hazel similar in size to large hedging stakes, about 6ft long and straight. We packed the chamber tight and stopped when it was three-quarters full. The hazel took five hours to convert from the gassing stage, and it produced 90kg of good, clean charcoal. There was not a brown end in sight and not much dust either when unloading straight into a dumpy sack. Unloading took about 15 minutes.

The next all-hazel load went right to the top and the yield was 135kg. But then we did a burn with beech billets and hazel in the bottom. (With retorts you load small stuff at the bottom and big stuff at the top.) This mixed load took a while to get to a temperature of 375°C. When the gasses started to build up and since daylight was rapidly disappearing I closed it down after three hours and went home. Next morning I discovered the wood had only started to convert. So I lit again, got it to temperature, and let it cook for a further 3½hrs. Next day to my relief I unloaded 150kg of wonderful clean



barbecue charcoal. A lot of the beech stayed whole as did the hazel, and again no brown ends and not many fines. I was pleased.

My final burn was similar to the previous one but this time it was all large beech billets. Because our beech stack was cut to 4m lengths the wood is not as seasoned as you would expect despite being cut two years ago. This has emphasised the importance of splitting large cordwood and covering it to eliminate the need for pre-burns and to have a faster turnover so that five burns a week is not out of the realms of possibility. It is also important to keep your firebox wood dry as you are going to get through an awful lot in a season. Because my beech had 30% (probably higher) moisture content I was not surprised on this last burn to have to light it again the following morning. But wait; this time I got 170kg. Best ever! I'm aiming for 200kg now and could do with some nice seasoned hornbeam. (Any offers please email wildwoodcoppice@btinternet.com!)

P.S. Can you imagine what traditional charcoal burners said when they saw the first ring kiln? "I'm not spending that money! They'll never catch on."

Details Exeter Retort 01392 431454, carboncompost.co.uk



SawPod



SawPod, produced in Britain by Tony Darbyshire and his team, has been upgraded with a 'stickier' logo to stop saw sheaths slipping in the holder, which attaches to your leg.

The SawPod is a brilliant idea, for climbers or on the ground, because the saw is so much easier to re-sheath than when hung from a belt. The only problem has been that some pruning saws 'click' into their scabbard, and the teeth on others get caught in the rough-up plastic. When this happens it's possible for the sheath to be pulled out of the SawPod, especially if you are wearing low boots and don't want the Velcro straps too tight. That's why they have put more ink into the logo to make it grippier. This has worked to some extent, and is better, but we also add a strip of Velcro to the back of the sheath and the front of the SawPod. Some people go a step further by attaching a secateur pouch to the straps, which probably also helps keep the scabbard in the SawPod. You'll never wear a saw on a belt again.

Details SawPod costs about £19.50. Call 01264 773229 or visit sawpod.co.uk for local stockists.



Better shave

James Mursell upgrades tool



James Mursell has upgraded his popular wooden spokeshaves by adding a brass wear plate. He says students love them, particularly on the larger of the two models (Medium). A kit of parts costs £45, and finished tool £69.95. It's worth registering for James's Windsor Workshop newsletter as the latest issue has a progress report on his design for a pole lathe, which knowing James is bound to be radical. Visit thewindsorworkshop.co.uk for details.

Loadhandler for logs

As we go to press a package has arrived containing a Loadhandler for pickups and trailers. Costing £110+VAT, it is designed to make unloading firewood, woodchips or pellets (or anything else) much quicker and easier. It can take a load of up to 2200lbs, and has a turning handle for winding in the 'carpet' to dump the load on the ground or in a sack. Visit loadhandler.co.uk for more details.



House-Box

Dean Crago introduces a new approach to low impact living

House-Box heralds a whole new era of sustainable, mobile, off-grid solutions. It is a revolution in both motor-caravanning holiday and full-time vehicle dwellings. Whilst I didn't initially think this may be of interest to Living Woods readers, many of my friends read the magazine and have cited Steven Haines's Planning a Sustainable Home article in the Nov/Dec '09 issue. My wagon has been called a 'luxury treehouse on wheels'!

I was recently invited to exhibit our work and run talks and workshops at a couple of eco-festivals at opposite ends of the country. I was amazed that people still hold the misconception that living or staying in a vehicle either means huddling around a candle in the cold or spending around £80,000 on a ghastly and uneconomic fibreglass motorhome. It is for this reason I am trying to promote the logical, affordable and beautiful alternative.

My partner and I (along with most readers), dream of the 'good life', one day buying our

own plot of land and building a self-sufficient homestead. We realised that whilst paying today's extortionate rent/mortgage prices and the escalating cost of utilities, that this would remain just a dream forever. We decided the best way to change this doomed scenario would be to completely restore and convert a vehicle in which to live full time. This is nothing new in itself, of course, but we chose to incorporate sustainable, cutting-edge technologies that would afford us all the luxuries of a modern home, but put us in a position which would minimise our outgoings to enable us to save for our dream, and at the same time live a lifestyle that reduces the impact we have on the world in which we live. The best of both worlds!

Priorities

We listed our priorities and after months of careful research, we purchased a beautiful (if somewhat dilapidated) 1979 Bedford TX horse box. In just eight months we restored the vehicle into a spacious and comfortable home. We have



incorporated many technologies and careful design to enable us to be as self-sufficient as possible and to minimise our impact on the environment.

We are proud to be amongst the first people to incorporate many of these technologies into a vehicle. We have a comprehensive rainwater harvesting system with a series of five filters resulting in the safest, cleanest and most delicious drinking water we've ever drunk. There is a smell-free compost collection toilet which not only prohibits the use of deadly chemicals usually found in vehicle toilet facilities, but also

enables us to use our 'waste' for growing produce for our friends and family. There is a full and comprehensive electrical system, incorporating PV solar and vehicle split-charging for all our power needs. There are full and warm SMD LED lighting arrays throughout the House Box.

As for home comforts we have a Rangemaster cooker, Belfast sink, wet room with power shower, surround sound, woodburning stove, fridge freezer, capacity to run 240v appliances up to 1500w and the ability to run multiple laptops and computers for work, films and TV as well as surfing the Internet.

Our monthly outgoings have been crushed from around £900 a month to a mere £15, and our standard of living has been enhanced. I've converted many vehicles over the last 10 years and have decided to launch House-Box. I know the technologies available, relevant legislation, solutions and how best to use the space. We also offer specialist services to fit the facilities others might find dangerous, like stoves and electrics. We sparked a lot of interest already, and we hope to be a positive force for change.

Details Visit house-box.co.uk.



Dean Crago takes old vehicles and restores them (left), fitting appropriate technology to make them warm, comfortable and sustainable



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Courses

Make a Windsor Chair

In 5 days (M-F) turn a freshly-felled log into an elegant chair. No previous experience required. Further details from James Mursell at The Windsor Workshop. 01798 815925 or www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk. West Sussex.

Wilderness Survival

Learn wilderness survival, traditional crafts and primitive living skills in Wiltshire. Visit www.wilderness-survival.co.uk for more information.

Green Woodworking and Log to Chair Making Courses

Woodland workshop/camp in South Downs, West Sussex. Contact Rich on 07717667649 or visit www.greenwoodcreations.co.uk.

Green Woodworking Courses

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Charcoal Burning Courses

Spend a day with The Dorset Charcoal Company, to learn about the complete process of charcoal production: emptying, filling and firing of a large kiln; also small-scale production using a 40 gallon drum. We run two courses a year in woods near Blandford catering for both the prospective commercial burner and the hobbyist. This year April 7th and October 6th. £60 per person. See www.dorsetcharcoal.co.uk for details.

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Come and spend some time in our woodland workshop learning Timber Frame Building. Currently scheduled courses are advertised on our website. We also run tailor-made courses for small groups. Visit www.hewnwood.co.uk or contact Alan & Mary on 01874 658440.

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sayitwithwood.co.uk

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