

3000 BC

5000 years ago the East Anglian Fenland basin was densely forested by gigantic oak trees.



5000 years ago a rise in sea level caused the rivers to back up and flood the ancient high forests. These huge trees died standing in water and eventually fell into the silt of the forest floor where some have been preserved under anaerobic conditions until now.

Due to the cultivation of this productive land the preserved trees emerge from the peat. These Black Oaks are extremely fragile when exposed to the elements unless wrapped, converted into planks, dried and stabilised.

Fortunately some Fenland land owners recognise the significance of these ancient trees and are very supportive of their constructive use.

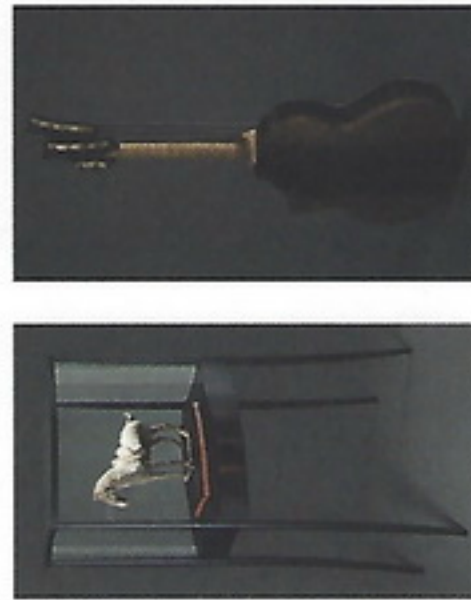
The famous intensity of colour associated with Black Oak is a result of soluble irons in the mineral sub soil reacting with tannins in the oak.

Some individual trees have a staggering branchless height well in excess of 100ft.

There is clearly a finite supply of Black Oak buried beneath the peat and it is in decline. There is an urgent need to preserve as much as we can for future generations.

2000

Today Black Oak is the nation's rarest and most valuable native hardwood.



2

3

Occasionally weighing over 1000kg per cubic metre Black Oak is by far the densest native hardwood, meaning very fine, detailed, accurate work can be achieved.

At 5000 years old Black Oak is the nation's most ancient hardwood.

Black Oak has intense and unique colour fade characteristics, along with stunning medullary figure - this offers great creative opportunities for visual impact, particularly when used as a contrast and in combination with other native hardwoods.

It has recently been discovered that Black Oak is a tone wood with a unique sound and is highly prized for use in hand made percussion, wood wind and stringed musical instruments.

Black Oak is the only native hardwood that is black.

1. Set of 6 tables by Adamson and Low and Steve Cook
2. Display cabinet by Richard Williams
3. Guitar by Gary Southwell

Black Oak has many unique characteristics and beautiful features making it highly prized by craftsmen making objects of the very highest quality.

2012

At over 13 metres long
The Jubilee Oak is a giant
amongst giants.

In March 2012 we unearthed an astonishing Black Oak specimen from the peat. At 4,800 years old and over 13 meters long this Fenland giant was spectacular.

The Jubilee Oak is a very rare and special example of Black Oak. The sheer scale of this tree is what led to its extraordinary degree of preservation. It was so vast that its apocalyptic descent would have smashed and crushed everything in its path burying itself in the silt of the forest floor which formed an airless 'grave' where it lay for thousands of years.

This rarest specimen provides us with the unique opportunity to give a fascinating insight into the majesty and grandeur of the ancient high forests that covered much of Britain thousands of years ago.

We had to preserve the full length integrity of this tree. To cut it into more manageable lengths was unthinkable.

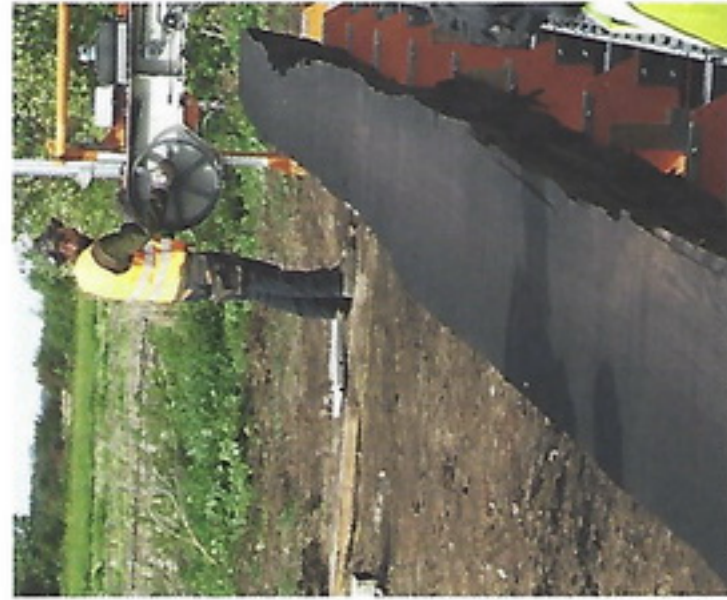


"I have been working with Black Oaks for over 20 years and seen some extraordinary trees emerge from the peat but The Jubilee Oak took my breath away." *H Low 2012*

It soon became clear that, staggering though this branchless length was, it was actually only a small section of a much, much larger tree.

2012

With the aid of two tele-handlers
and the longest saw mill in the country
we milled 10 consecutive planks.
They were unlike anything seen before.



To preserve Black Oaks they must first be converted into planks in order to manage even rates of water extraction. Once dry the planks are preserved in perpetuity.

It is impossible to predict what any tree will yield before it is opened up, this is particularly true of Black Oaks as the seen surfaces have been buried in the peat for thousands of years. The Jubilee Oak hinted at great potential but there was always the possibility of unseen defects preventing us from retaining the planks full length.

We were unprepared for what this extraordinary tree actually yielded. 10 magnificent, breathtakingly beautiful consecutive planks quite unlike anything seen before.

When left "in the round" these sub fossilised trees split alarmingly along their medullary vessels and completely disintegrate.

Every one of these extraordinary planks represents a unique creative opportunity.

The greatest challenge the project had to resolve was drying the planks well enough to retain them full length.



We closed the road in East London while the 18 people required to handle the weight of each plank stacked the kiln.

Black Oak must be dried artificially as traditional air drying is too aggressive. The milled planks were transported to The Building Crafts College and a bespoke dehumidifying kiln was designed and built specifically to dry The Jubilee Oak planks. In order to dry planks of this length the 15 metre kiln had to contain 3 dehumidifiers and 11 additional fans.

Complete control was essential over air flow, moisture extraction, temperature and relative humidity. All of these elements, together with daily measurements and monitoring, led to considerable adjustments and balancing.

Eventually – after 9 months the dehumidifiers were switched off for the last time.



Incurring this degree of shrinkage over a short length is famously difficult, we were attempting to achieve this with planks over an unprecedented 13 metres long.



Drying was an astonishing success. These are now arguably the rarest, most valuable 10 sequential planks in the world.



After 9 months we had extracted 397 gallons of water. Staggeringly this equates to 4 gallons per cubic ft and reduced the weight of these planks by 1.6 tons.

The planks had shrunk by over one third of their sawn thickness, a quarter of their width and even 150mm in their length, and yet were flat and true for over 13 metres.

Leaving aside their ancient provenance and unprecedented length, the fact is some of these quarter sawn planks are figured over their entire length and are breathtakingly beautiful.



The planks are magnificent and without doubt a national treasure.

Large tables are symbolic at traditional ceremonies and state events. The Jubilee Oak represents an opportunity to make the greatest of them all.

2015

The Jubilee Oak planks represent a unique creative opportunity, they have a surreal sculptural quality and visual impact quite unlike anything else.



Maintaining the full length integrity of these planks is at the very core of this project.

It has been acknowledged by the designer/maker community that the importance of these planks requires input on design from more than one individual.

A design team of specialists in all the relevant disciplines has therefore been assembled. It is unusual for a team of designers to work together in this way and has required a great deal of respect and humility from all within the team.

The design team started from the need to preserve a rare discovery, not the more conventional approach of satisfying the specific needs of an individual client.

2015

There are many design challenges and considerations unique to this endeavour.

Why a table?

- As a table top The Jubilee Oak is at a perfect height to be seen and touched in its entirety.
- As a stand alone object a table is viewed from all angles and its visual impact is not compromised by being viewed in context with anything else.
- A table has many practical functions, display, dining events, meetings, for serving refreshments etc, so as well as being a sculptural object the functionality of a table can create revenue.

- This table is likely to be housed in a variety of public spaces throughout its lifetime and these public spaces are used for a range of ever changing activities, therefore the table must also have the flexibility to be multifunctional.

- The design challenge has been to find intelligent and creative solutions to all these issues without compromising the full length integrity of these planks.

Our many sponsors engaged with the project on the understanding that a table is to be made from The Jubilee Oak and the table made available to the public as a gift to the nation.



2016

Ely Cathedral Chapter have formally committed to housing The Jubilee Oak table for the first 18 months after its completion.

The design team have come up with innovative, unexpected, creative and intelligent solutions to the many challenges within the design brief.

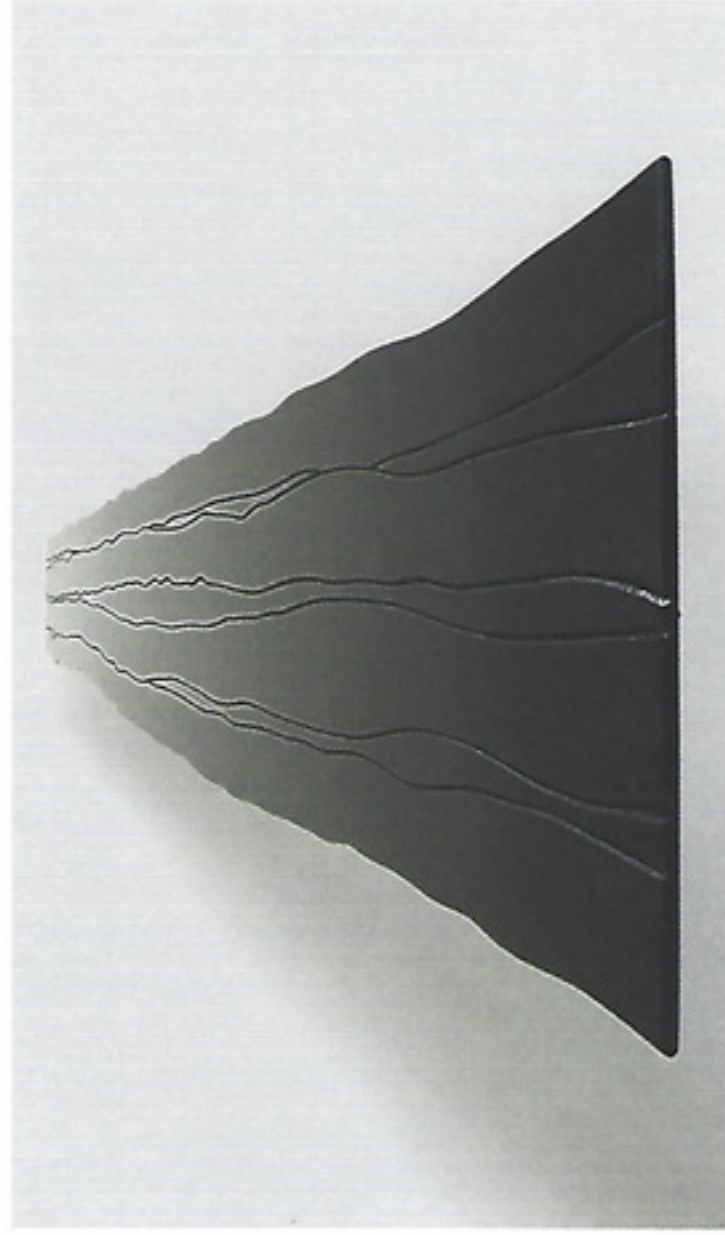
They have done so in consultation with The Fabric Advisory Committee and Chapter at Ely Cathedral thereby resolving all the conservation concerns pertaining to such an important historical building.

Most importantly the design team have remained sympathetic to the integrity of The Jubilee Oak. The planks have been retained full length and techniques developed to enable their individual shapes and character to be used and highlighted. We are calling this technique the 'river joint' which while reflecting this most prominent Fenland feature also enables the true story of the ancient high forests to be told at a glance.

By displaying this table at Ely Cathedral we are hoping to raise awareness amongst local landowners of the urgent need to preserve as much Black Oak as we can.

2016

Preserving a unique piece of our nation's heritage.



The 'river joint'

2017



The table understructure will be made from patinated bronze enabling the confident and multiple dismantling in stages to facilitate various functions.

To mitigate the liability of size the two outer planks can be folded down reducing the width of the table to just 900mm. The entire table can be pushed to the edge of a space and used as a serving table or for display. As well as a practical function, in this form the table is also worthy of comment as the two river joints are spectacular when exposed in this way.

The Principle of The Building Crafts College (BCC) has generously offered the use of his joinery workshop – a space long enough for the fabrication of the Black Oak top. We hope to inspire the next generation of craftspeople by continuing to involve students from The BCC in the project.

This entire structure can be completely dismantled for storage, transportation and installation.

2018

We have saved this ancient tree for the nation and are now seeking donations in order to start fabrication.

All of the challenges and uncertainties associated with The Fenland Black Oak Project to date have been spectacularly overcome and a charitable organisation has been set up to protect the 'not for profit' ethos of the project and to establish appropriate use of The Jubilee Oak.

By donating to The Fenland Black Oak Project you can play your part in preserving this ancient tree and creating a work of art that we hope will become a part of our national heritage.

For more information about how you can support the project please visit our website or contact Hamish Low.

Email

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Website

www.thefenlandblackoakproject.co.uk

The Fenland Black Oak Charitable

Incorporated Organisation

Registered Charity Number: 1178790

All contributors donating £1000 or more will have their names carved into the underside of The Jubilee Oak top as a reminder to future generations of this shared vision.

