



From little acorns...

Lindsay Want discovers craftsmen working on signs of our times

Rick Lewis could boast about lecturing in Transylvania, firing rocks from hand-made siege machines in Denmark, building part of the Tower of London, creating cupolas for Kentwell Hall or simply safeguarding half-timbered history throughout Suffolk.

But as eloquent as he is, that simply wouldn't be in his nature. At 46, the man who had a near miss with a medieval art history degree is brimful of hands-on learning. He's an expert craftsman-cum-medieval-man: a grounded chap who regularly climbs great heights with a real sense of place and passionate dedication to Suffolk's past – and to its future too.

It's no coincidence that his workshop on the way to Barking looks out over ancient woods, nor that the oak to make the 30 waymarking bollards and finger sign posts for the historic Sailors' Path between Snape and Aldeburgh came from Stowlangtoft Thicks, a managed historic Suffolk woodland designated of Special Scientific Interest.

"It was important for the project to find a Suffolk company, using locally sourced timber and employing traditional skills," explains David Falk, the project leader and Countryside Access Development manager at Suffolk County Council. "There was no doubt about employing Traditional Oak Carpentry over other companies for this job. When Rick and I met to discuss ideas, his expertise and keenness came across immediately."

Supporting small to medium-sized enterprises was also a clear priority. "The oak is milled at Pakenham by David Davidson's family business," explains Rick with a passion that proves that it matters. "It's a measured decision every step of the way, producing prime grade material for us to work with – quality beams which won't warp or twist too badly."

Different lines of work

At just over three and five feet high, the

beams for the footpath's bollards and signs are a tad smaller than the ones Rick and his team are used to working with in their 'day' job of renovating, restoring and creating timber frame buildings.

"The traditional build techniques such as pegging the joints of the finger signposts, hand-finishing the carving and staining the logo and oiling the oak by hand represent some of our main buildwork in microcosm," says Rick.

"Even on the biggest timber-framed barns we use a very small tool kit. There may be some power tools involved, but this won't show: the thinking behind the job, the method and the hand finishing is what makes the genuine, traditional difference. I reckon a medieval man could slot into our team, no trouble: we might use pencils rather than a sharp point or 'scratch-awl' to mark up lines and he'd no doubt be bemused by the hard hats, steel toe capped boots and power cranes, but we share his tools, skills and his mindset and that's what really matters."

Hammers, axes and even trebuchets

Not all tools of the trade for sure, but Rick assures that they have all played significant roles over the years in the development of his skills and passion for re-creating and enjoying the past: "The hammer-beamed roofs in Suffolk's churches just have to be the most inspirational pieces of medieval architecture out. The sheer geometrics and artistry of the double hammer beam roof of St John the Baptist Church at Needham Market is my all time favourite. We find ourselves learning from every encounter with Suffolk's historic timber-framed structures. We look inside the ancient joinery when we're doing renovation work, peering in at the past, absorbing how things are done, working out how the ancient signature has been

achieved so we can truly get into the mindset, replicate it and recreate the perfect fit."

And that often means re-creating the very tools for the job themselves. Rick takes a geeky schoolboy pride in his collection of implements from massive broadaxes for hewing to tiny chisels and plumb-bobs. He owns up to hours poring over images in ancient manuscripts, using pre-Roman axes in hands-on demonstrations and getting a real kick out of his role as an experimental archaeologist.

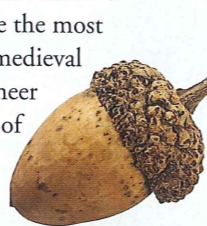
A project with an old friend found the Traditional Oak Carpentry crew teaming up with the Historic Royal Palaces to build three siege machines for the Tower of London and an amazing 'fortress' walkway to encourage visitors to think more about the castle as a military site. Despite a few design compromises to enhance the visitor experience, the walkway was created with a truly accurate historical signature in the construction itself, with the team hand-finishing all the beams and sawing the planking in such a way as to represent pit or trestle sawn timbers.

An enjoyable job all round

"The work that Rick and Traditional Oak Carpentry have done has been really key to the Sailors' Path project," reflects David Falk. "The beautiful posts are distinctive, unique and special."

All the partner organisations in the project are delighted with the results. Together with the newly developed information panels, our new trail guide and physical improvements to the path's condition, it has made the walk truly one of which Suffolk can be proud for many years to come." **SM**

■ For more details about the services offered by Traditional Oak Carpentry visit www.traditionaloakcarpentry.co.uk or call Rick on 01449 768817



Rick Lewis putting the finishing touches to the sign posts along the Sailors' Path between Snape and Aldeburgh. Right from top; Chris Butcher, Tom Staddon and Marc Lowe at work on the posts



THERE FOR ALL TO TREASURE – FOLLOW THE SIGNS ON THE SAILOR'S PATH

The enhancement of The Sailors' Path is the end result of a lot of inspiration and two years of perspiration from many partners. Its aim was to open the route to everyone, giving people of all abilities the chance to experience the path.

"Rick's beautiful artisan approach to the fingerposts and waymarkers makes the route feel even more treasured. I hope others get as much enjoyment walking the path throughout the year as I do" says

Discover Suffolk's, David Falk. The Sailors' Path Project is a collaboration between Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB and Suffolk Secrets.

The project was delivered by the County Council under a European project managed by the Coast and Heaths team and all made possible with the generous support of Suffolk Secrets, Suffolk's premier holiday cottage company.