



Jonas Kirk

Jonas and his wife Janet came to visit and Jonas brought his disassembled pole lathe, tools and equipment with him to demonstrate the traditional ways of working green wood that wood bodgers used in England in the early part of this century and before. Jonas still works as a builder, and unlike most of the people who have contributed to these books, has not yet retired. I imagine he never will. The first part of the interview was recorded over lunch, and there were various interruptions, including problems with the tape recorder, so it jumps about from topic to topic somewhat. (Given Jonas' irrepressible enthusiasm, I suspect it would have done so whatever the circumstances.)

Jonas: I was born in 1936 in the little country town of Louth in Lincolnshire, which is fenland country in England. It's the next county down from Yorkshire, near The Wash, where King Canute threw his crown into the sea. I was born into quite a reasonable worker's family. My mother was a farmer's daughter and my father was a bricklayer, and they came from a line of blacksmiths, wheelwrights - most of them worked with their hands. They might not have been well-educated scholastically, but they were educated as far as I was concerned in their way of life and what they did with their life. So I was fortunate to be in an environment that gave me a good start in life.

I've got one brother and three sisters. Two of my sisters have since died. I was right in the middle. I was the lucky one because I was the first son - I was the first one to carry the name on of Jonas. My father and grandfather were Jonas, too.

The school I originally went to was fairly old - a little school called Kidgate School where all the poor kids went. Then I won a scholarship to go to a Grammar School that was started up in 1535, in the reign of King Edward VI, and was

called the King Edward VI Grammar School, and not everybody got into it. To my mother that was the greatest thing that ever happened.

I started at Kidgate at four and a half, just after the War and things were a bit tough by the time I went to the Grammar School. My Dad was building, but he was having a bloody hard time of it. People didn't pay their bills on time. But though there wasn't much money in the house, there were lots of other things that compensated. We kept pigs, and killed one once a year and made our own sausages, pork pies - we were quite self-sufficient.

My Dad was a bit too old for the army, and during the War he was on bomb damage and reconstruction of aerodromes and things like that. He was in Dad's Army. He'd go off to Armed Guard on a Sunday in his battledress with his rifle (no bullets, though - they didn't give them any bullets - just the rifle!) and he'd take all this ham and bacon and home-cured stuff and come back with butter and sugar - he'd barter. That's how people lived.

I started going to work at the age of five, helping my father. I used to mix the plaster he put onto the ceilings, which were of lath and plaster. I used to mix the cow hair into it. Cow hair was what reinforced it. You'd buy so many pounds of cow hair and you'd work that into the plaster - it was used to hold the plaster together, which was killed lime and sand in a fatty solution. My father didn't have lots of money, and I was his labourer. When he first started his work he had a handcart that he used to push around with bits of brick and sand in it. Then he bought an old Raleigh motor bike with a belt drive and sideboards on it. After that he got a BSA and put a box sidecar on it to carry his materials around with. Every time he went to do anything and I had a chance to go, I was helping him. That's how I started.

We used to work in areas where there was no electricity, and when Dad was up there putting the plaster up (it was called "pricking up the ceiling"), there was me down below holding the bloody candle. I'd jump when the hot wax fell on me, and he'd yell at me to keep the bloody candle still. When you watch somebody like that, it's surprising what sort of an influence it has on you. With him, whatever he did had to be dead right. He was his own worst critic, and I think I'm the same with myself. It's got to be just so. You don't half do a job - if you don't do it right there's no point doing it at all.

I'm a bricklayer by trade - I spent a seven year (from 15 to 22 years old) apprenticeship, first with my father, and later with a civil engineering firm. I went straight into that when I left school when I was 15. I've still got my papers (my indentures), and I've also got my father's and my grandfather's apprenticeship papers. My grandfather's are on parchment, with a silver seal on it.

When I was an apprentice the foreman wore a bloody bowler hat! Oh yes! And when you were laying bricks your shoes had to be polished. If your shoes got dirty it meant that the mortar was falling on your shoes - whereas it should be kept on the bloody bricks, mate - you're not doing your work properly. But that's all gone now.

I used to go out to the back of the store and knock apart butter barrels for firewood, to make a few bob. I also worked as an errand boy for the local grocery chain called Home and Colonial Stores. I used to work in the evenings after school and on Saturday mornings delivering groceries on a bicycle with a carrier on the front. When I first started as an errand boy the boss bloke, old Gee,

(Geeson was his name) told me that I'd be paid a shilling an hour, which meant I earned about ten bob a week. Later, old Gee asked me to work during my school holidays. I agreed, but when he paid me after the first week I still only got ten bob. So what I did was, I presented him with a time sheet for the work I did the next week. Old Gee, the poor old bugger, just about blew up on the spot, but he paid up at a shilling an hour in the end. So for my holidays I got thirty bob a week. It's a funny thing, but when I left school and left my job as an errand boy, poor old Gee was quite upset.

I'd also go mushrooming, and bluestalking, and rabbiting for threepence a skin, so the art of survival was there from the start. We would sell the bluestalks (a mushroom type fungus) to a local green grocer, old Manty Wilkinson. Old Manty was a mean old bugger - he'd skin a fart for a ha'penny - but we would catch him out: we'd soak the bluestalks in water before we took them to him and that would make them weigh more!

I can remember when Dad used to go to work on a pushbike, and I'd sit on the handlebars. They didn't have calliper brakes like they have today, and if I didn't jump up every time he put the brake on I got my backside nipped! (*Laughs*). I went away with him a few times, and lived away with him in some school holidays. He'd go away on these jobs - he was the sort of bloke like I am, if it meant getting away somewhere to make a few shillings to keep the house going, then that's what he would do. We went to this place once way up near Scunthorpe somewhere and it was bloody wintertime and bloody cold, and I'm on the back of his BSA with all bloody brown paper down the front of me under my clothes to keep me warm (Dad was the same) and we fronts up to this little hut. It was a little square brick place with a fireplace in the corner, a table knocked up out of a couple of bits of wood, some chairs, and posts with sacking across to sleep in. It was like an oversized bloody dunny. It was after the War and they were building houses as fast as they could on huge estates - no facilities, just houses. I used to help Dad, but I was also the bloke who made the supper and made the dinner at night when we got home. I'm about ten or twelve at this time. Not long after finishing that contract he started building houses himself. He used to build private houses, like I did when I was in England. They'd be a one-off thing - no two the same, and they had to be bloody perfect.

You couldn't sark 'em like they used to do with wooden boards, you had to use reinforced rubberised roofing felt under the roof slates and tiles. In northern Europe they sark a house because of the snow coming in under the slates. If you don't sark it, you've got to torch it, and that means you've got to point every bloody joint from inside the roof space.

I finished my apprenticeship when I was 22, just before Janet and I got married. To my way of thinking, an apprenticeship is a good start to being a craftsman or a tradesman. You really learn all the aspects of what you're supposed to know, and you can't learn it in five minutes, and you've got to be out there and in amongst it. In the last few years of my apprenticeship I was working for one of the biggest civil engineering firms in Britain and built things ranging from factories and tall chimneys to railway bridges. They were international.

My father went broke because people wouldn't pay their bills. For a while Mum was working in a fish shop. We lost everything we had, and in 1953 we moved down to the south of England and Dad and I went to work with John Laing Pty Ltd, this big civil engineering firm, and I became one of their top apprentices. I think I did well there because of the grounding I'd had with my father before I

joined them.

The first time I built a brick wall - it was only a little one - and I thought it was terrific. My father came along and said, "That's no bloody good!" and kicked it down! He didn't do it out of malice. "My father done that to me, and I've done it to you, lad," he said, "that'll show you that you're not sometimes as good as you think you are." It was his way (and my grandfather's way) of saying, "Look, mate. Don't think you're so bloody cocky." You know what I mean? There was nothing wrong with the wall, and it's the only time it happened. I've never had to re-do anything I've ever done since. It was a traditional Master and Apprentice relationship. I had to be in at a certain time and everything was laid down. I didn't resent it, because that's how it was in them days. A lot of my friends were bankers in so-called higher jobs, but I was learning something creative as far as I was concerned.

In our way of life then you did what your father did and you were proud of it. You try and do it either as good as your father, or you try and better it. My father was only a country builder, and I learned a lot of things at John Laing's that he never had a chance to learn - a lot of engineering principles, a lot of stone work - cutting stone, and circular work, and when I did do work that bettered his I got a bit of resentment from him. It was a bit hard. We used to have arguments. We're both the same - we're both hot-tempered.

It's hard for me to delegate when I'm doing something. It's got to be done a certain way, and if someone's doing something wrong in front of you, you take it off them and do it yourself. I still do it now, unfortunately, and I don't mean to do it. My mother always used to say that I was like my grandfather. He liked poetry, and music, but my Dad wasn't much that way inclined. I like the finer things - I can appreciate them, and I sort of progressed a bit further than my Dad had and I think there might have been a bit of jealousy there with him. He seemed to change a bit once I left England, but he visited us out here once and we still had a few arguments. But in the last few years of his life I could tell in his voice that he realised that perhaps what he'd done hadn't been quite the right thing. And I know I've got to watch it, too. I'm helped in this by the guidance of my missus - she's a brake on me, and that helps.

Janet: I'm the meat in the sandwich between him and the children, and it's difficult at times. He's a very hard person, but he's a very good person as well. He tries to be a perfectionist, and you can't always be, and if he can't he gets upset.

Jonas: But back to working in England: National Service was in, and I signed up for it at the age of 18, but I was allowed to finish my time. As soon as I finished my time I went into the Air Force. When I got my first pay I marched up to the pay table and when the officer gave me my money it was only thirty bob, so I said, "What's this?" and he said, "That's your pay", and I said, "Bloody hell! I used to pay more than this for a round of drinks!" I signed on for nine years' service and my pay went up from then on.

Janet and I got married while I was in the Air Force, in 1959. I'd only been married a fortnight and I got posted to Australia! That was the best thing that ever happened to us two. It got us away from our families and made us so bloody independent that it upsets a few people.

Anyway, I did two and a half years' tour of duty out here and met some of the

best blokes you'd ever meet. I was an aircraft electrician. When I was a kid I'd really wanted to be a carpenter and cabinet maker, but my family were bricklayers, so that's what I became. Now, I don't decry what I've done, but wood has always been my love. I love timber - always have done, even when I was a little boy. I always had my own shed and was always knocking up things. But the chance to be an aircraft electrician to me was good, because it meant that I could learn something else. I didn't only learn about electricity - I did engineering as well - all from the RAF. I ended up staying in for the nine years. You got higher pay that way compared to being just a national serviceman.

When I was out here I was attached to the RAAF, and I was radioactive for a bloody year - I'd glow in the dark, virtually. I was working on aircraft from Christmas Island that were radioactive because they'd flown through the clouds when they were doing all the atomic testing - Canberra bombers. We were in the decontamination unit.

We worked in this bloody cage with a white floor and a white bloody fence, in gloves about fifty sizes too big. Ever tried to undo 4BA nuts and bolts with gloves like that? I'd end up taking the gloves off. Anyway, the white floor and cage and white overalls were all propaganda. You'd have to front up to this machine every night and put your hands in, the bells'd ring, and you'd have to go back and wash yourself and give it another try. It's never come against me, and my kids are alright, but a couple of my mates are dead, but they were at Woomera, and I think they got a much more intense exposure.

Anyway, that phase passed after twelve months, and then I went to the Air Trials unit. They used to fly the meatboxes (Meteors) with the target behind them - Blue Streak missiles and all that. Being an electrician I had to look after the batteries and the electrics.

If you worked on an aircraft, you flew in it. If you signed that 700 in the Log Book after a full service you had to fly in the bloody thing, mate! That was a good policy! It made sure things got done right! I used to have to set up the generators during flight. I did lots of hours in Dakotas and Bristol freighters and planes like that. When I look back it was great, it really was.

Janet: I enjoyed it too. We were stationed out of Adelaide, and he was home almost every night, unless he was on duty. But he never came straight home from work - he'd go and work at a friend's garage till late at night wiring up cars.

Jonas: I did everything I could to earn a few bob.

But all this time I was still in love with wood. It's so versatile. Each piece of wood's got a beauty all of its own, and that's what dictates to me (and to a lot of other people who like timber) what I'm going to make with it. There's no such thing as crappy wood. It's pliable in terms of what it can be made into. Part of its charm is that it's also unpredictable. When you're working with a material you've got to harmonise with it - you've got to humour it. You can't dictate to the piece of wood what it's going to do - it's going to do what it wants to do and you've got to work in with that, otherwise it won't bloody work. That's why I tend to stroke wood - it's surprising what your fingertips can tell you. I often don't even know I'm doing it, but it's telling me lots of things. And when I look at it, it tells me lots of things. I see a piece of wood and I think, "Now that'll make a beautiful so-and-so." And if you don't approach it that way I don't think you're really appreciating what wood is all about. It's a sort of love-hate relationship. There are times when you want to

do something and the bloody stuff won't do it. But that's not the wood's fault - that's your shortcomings because you're not quite appreciative of what's needed to do what you wanted to do.

I used to work with an old bloke who was a carpenter and joiner. We'd lay out a roof on the floor, and we'd cut all the rafters, ridge and hips and purlins, and cut out all the bird's mouths, and we'd take it up onto the wall plate and everything would always fit. It's a satisfaction that's hard to put into words. He'd sharpen a saw and it would virtually sing. He was one of the finest tradesmen I've worked with - he knew every aspect of his job inside out. He was deaf, and we had to use sign language.

There's nothing like cutting a piece of wood with a well-sharpened saw - it's completely different to working with a dull one. The tool's working efficiently - it's like the difference between someone singing a song with the right notes, and someone who makes it sound bloody horrible. But when the cut's nice, it's like a song.

And blacksmithing. I used to watch my uncle turn out beautiful wrought iron work - leaves and buds coming out of a piece of metal. Watching him doing the right things and hitting it in the right spot. I've done a bit of it myself, and it's a similar feeling to working with wood.

I like coaches and coach building - I've been amongst it. I can look at these coaches and carts - even the simplest bloody baker's cart, and I think of the bloke who made it, and what sort of thoughts must've run through his mind as he treated the bits of timber, and chamfered a bit off here, and fitted it all together. I'm still amazed when I watch a wheelwright put a tyre on a cart wheel - actually shrink the bloody thing on, mate. Like you suggest, it's almost a romantic attachment. Sometimes I think I was born about a hundred years too late. I'd have fitted into society a hundred years ago better than I fit into it now. Sometimes I feel like a bit of a freak in some respects.

But to get back to what I actually did. After I got out of the RAF I began building houses in England. At one stage I had twelve men working for me. (My first job was for a hundred pounds, in 1967. I built the bus shelter outside of the place I finally owned, for the Parish Council, and my daughter tells me that when she went back for a visit that it's still there.) I can do every job in the building trades without any problems, but I didn't get all of that from formal training. All I've done for most of my working life is learn. While everyone was going off enjoying themselves, I was learning. I do all my own mechanical work. I think if you're going to survive in this world you've got to be a Jack-of-All-Trades, mate. You've got to take every situation as it comes and sort it out for yourself, because nobody is going to sort it out for you. If you've got the money, you can always pay someone else to do something for you, but that way you don't learn anything.

It's the increasing trend to specialisation that has stuffed up the building trade these days. They're all specialists. I've seen some specialist tilers, mate, and I tell you what, I wouldn't let 'em tile a bloody dunny! I'm a country builder, and I had to know about everything to do with the trade - and everyone else's trade as well. You can't tell a bloke to dig a trench straight if you can't dig one straight yourself. Unless you know what's involved you can't appreciate what you're asking when you say to someone. "Look, mate. Shift those five hundred bricks there." But

that's all gone now. Everybody's got a special job, and consequently you've got a fragmented building industry. We live in a land of specialisation now, and I think this is where we suffer. It's spoilt the building trade. People don't have a true feeling for what they're doing - it's just a way of making money the quickest and cheapest way you can, not a way of life any more.

When I was quite young my father sometimes used to take me for a walk on a Sunday morning. He'd walk around and talk to all his mates before he went to the pub. (It was called the *Turk's Head*, and there were times when I've had to drag him out of it.) One day he introduced me to one of his mates who made walking sticks, "This is my boy..." and the bloke replied, "Ah! Well, I'll make him a walking stick while he's here." I watched him get a bit of cane and heat it and bend it to make me a walking stick, and I walked home that day with a walking stick with a brass end on it.

Another bloke he used to see a lot of was the local stonemason. He was a stonemason and a half. In a country town you meet a lot of people who are traditionalists because their father did what they did, and his father before that. I used to meet these people and they were absolutely terrific.

I used to go to school with a bloke whose father was a coffin maker - he's taken over from his dad now. In fact he buried me sisters and he buried me Dad. (Me Mum's still alive and looks after herself - still makes her own bread.) He went to Kidgate school with me and I used to play with him at his house on the way home. I can still remember going to his dad's workshop up this little alleyway where all the harness makers were, and the horse people. You'd go into this place and it'd be knee deep in bloody shavings. Knee deep! Old Vic was a joiner, and was good at his job, but a lot of his money came from making coffins.

But we live in a different world today, and there's a lot that I had that I can't give to my kids...

Janet: He couldn't. He was always working. The children didn't really know him as they grew up, especially the older two that we had first - in fact he knows the grandchildren better. He was working so much, that when the two big children were at school I used to go to work with him so I could see him. He was always home so late at night that I'd go with him and be his labourer - doing concreting, laying bricks. If I didn't do that I wouldn't have seen much of him at all. I quite liked working with him, but it is unfortunate that he saw so little of his older children through always having to be at work, and couldn't share much with them the way he did with his own father.

Jonas: But we've been pretty lucky with our life, despite all the drawbacks it's had and all that's happened to us. Life's still been good to us, and Australia's been a lot better than I would have imagined. We didn't come out here to live till I was 39, and people told me I'd be too old to get a job, but I arrived here on a Friday, got a job on the bloody Saturday, and I've worked ever since. Mind you, there's been a lot of Poms over here that I wouldn't employ in a fit. Honest I wouldn't.

What I like about Australia is the way you can do what you want to do without worrying that in some respects you might upset people. It's much better here

than in England in that way. But not so much for myself. In England I was well off in the sense that I had plenty of work. We had a nice house in a pleasant little village, I had all my tools around me and we had lots of good friends. I used to go to a pub that was 450 years old, and I used to work on houses that were 400 and 400 years old. I miss that... (and I miss the good old English tomato, I must admit!)

When I first bought the old place in England there was no inside toilet. It had three earth toilets, and one of them was a twin toilet - with two holes in it, a big one and a small one. They were still there when we left. I never destroyed them. We used to put the stuff from them on the garden, and I tell you what, mate, we had some of the best cucumbers! But that's just recycling. It's only organic matter, but people get a bit uptight about it. But it's nothing to get uptight about.

I was doing a staircase for a woman recently. I've nearly finished it. I was doing it all by hand. The woman was watching me do it - I was putting all the little infills in it where the balusters come up. She said to me, "I wouldn't have the patience to do that." I said to her, "Well, I like doing what I'm doing. I've done it all my life. To me it's not a chore, it's something that's got to be just so." "How do you come by the knowledge to do all this?" she said. "Well, I've learnt from other people." That old bloke I mentioned who used to sharpen saws, he also worked as a plumber and I've watched him wipe lead joints. I've seen that pride in the work that it takes to do it all properly. I've watched these people do this sort of thing and it does have an effect on you. People say, "I could never do that", but they've never tried, obviously. I still meet people with that traditional attitude of pride in what they do, but most of them are in their eighties! It's sad.

I've got a handsaw. and I use it quite a bit. Blokes come up to me and say, "Oh Christ, mate. Why don't you use an electric saw?" But that's not the point. Most of them can't use a hand saw efficiently anyway. Half the time they're not bloody sharp. Tools are only efficient when they're sharp - when they're tuned up properly. And you've got to feel an affinity for what you're doing, otherwise you might as well not do it.

We own nearly 200 acres up the north coast, in from Kempsey. One of the reasons we bought it is because it's full of trees, and all the trees have got their own character. I'm not a tree-hugger by any means, but I appreciate what the Lord has put in front of us, and to be able to use it... I think it was put there to be used - everything is here for a purpose, and it's up to us as individuals to make that a reality, if you know what I mean.

Another reason we bought the land was that I'd like to leave something to the grandchildren. Not money. To me mate, money's just a means of paying the bloody electricity bill, and the bloody gas bill, and whatever other bill comes along. You don't really need as much as you think you need, and that's the same with possessions. Unless a possession is something that can be used to make something better for somebody else, or better for yourself, you don't really need it. I'm not a bohemian or anything like that - I'm a practical person, but it seems to me that we've got too much greed and selfishness about in the world today. We've all got to live in this world, and some of us have got good standing in it and others haven't, and the ones that haven't got good standing should be helped by

the ones that have. I think there might be some light at the end of the tunnel because I don't think we can go on doing what we've been doing - especially to our environment. I'm not a greenie by any means, but there's only a certain amount of everything available. There are things we can use better than we do so far - like solar power, though we still need a bit of technology on that. But if we carry on like we are carrying on we're going to end up with about six levels of civilisation. If we don't change our attitude there'll be stuff-all left for the next people who come along after us.

I would like to say, at this stage, how much I appreciate being in Australia and what Australia has done for my family and myself. Having left England and left my father - I know me Dad was upset when we came, though he wouldn't say nowt - I was the only son with the name Jonas, and the only builder in the family. We came over with nowt, we've done quite well since we've been here, and the people have been fantastic.

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