



# *Timeless country gates*

THE NATURAL CURVE OF THE WOOD IN ED BROOKS' DESIGNS  
HARMONISES WITH THE UNDULATING DORSET LANDSCAPE

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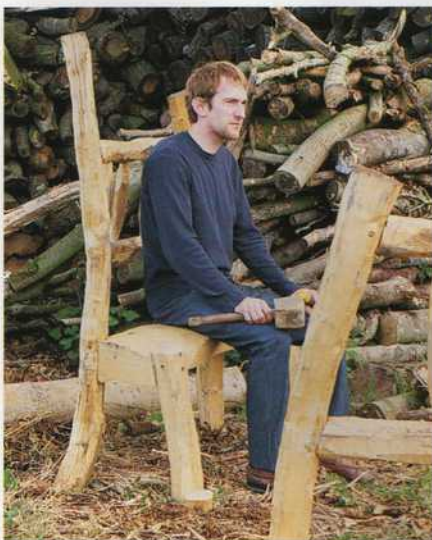
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Geometry is a word that slips in and out of Ed Brooks' conversation all the time. But there is no need to be alarmed – he is not going to quote Pythagoras or brandish a set square. Being a landscape designer, applied geometry is a necessary part of Ed's discipline. Currently, he is winning plaudits for his gate designs, which reflect his love of 'non-geometry'.

The gates have turned out to be a personal style statement, but not one Ed anticipated when he started work on his first major project after graduating in landscape design and plant science. His initial commission was the landscaping of the gardens and courtyards at Champernhayes, a 15th-century farmhouse with holiday cottages near his home in Dorset. Ed talks with reverence about the way in which these old buildings grow out of the landscape. 'It is a wonderful place, steeped in history,' he says.

As he worked on the gardens, he realised the place needed gates and benches that were in keeping with the character of the ancient buildings. 'The gates were a particular problem,' he explains. 'There were none on the market that would do. Everything was too rigidly geometric.' Even so, it did not immediately occur to him that he might do something about it himself.

Ed bypassed woodwork as a child, and had never suspected he had a talent for it. His brother was the one who messed about with wood as he grew up, imbibing knowledge from their father, David Brooks. David has been involved with wood all his life – in forestry, as a carpenter, and now on oak-framed buildings. For the gardens at Champernhayes, Ed had ordered in a



load of tree trunks to stabilise a banked piece of land and his father noticed that there were chestnut trunks amongst the oak.

'My father mentioned that, among British timber, chestnut is easy to work with and second only to oak in its resistance to rotting. I began to formulate an idea for a gate and took up a mallet and hammered wedges into the natural splits in the trunks of chestnut to see what shapes would appear. The wood was responsive and split into various curved lengths. I could see potential in the shapes and drew up a design for a single gate. Luckily, it worked an absolute treat and my earliest gate is still one of my favourites. I love the way the curves respond to the building and the landscape.' His clients at Champernhayes were equally delighted with the gate and insisted Ed design more for them. Each is an individual creation, rooted in its location.

From the start, Ed used a method of working he still follows. 'I split the wood, choose the pieces, arrange the gate layout and oversee its assembly, but usually my father or another carpenter >

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** the original gate that Ed designed at Champernhayes echoes the subtle curves of the old farmhouse and cottages on the site, and of the distant landscape as it falls away towards Charmouth Bay

**ABOVE LEFT:** Ed has designed a rustic style of bench, the seat of which he regularly tests for comfort while each is constructed. The finish on the benches is worked up at the outset by using a spokeshave, then sanding by hand. The benches weather to a beautiful driftwood grey after a summer in the sun

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Ed designed this tree house for his client's grandchildren. It appears self-supporting but actually nestles into the multiple trunks of an ash tree. Timber from the surrounding woodland was used to make the staircase, handrails and gates. A trapdoor in the floor of the decking allows the children to drop down into the centre of the tree using a rope ladder



**TOP LEFT AND RIGHT:** the first gate in which Ed used copper has a geometric oak frame. Ed hammered the copper uprights, distorting the verticals, and shaped the horizontals into curves

**ABOVE TOP:** this gate is based on the traditional Dorset five-bar models

**ABOVE BOTTOM:** the hand-forged and studded hinge was made to Ed's design

puts it together. I have to be around while they are doing it,' he adds, 'because it is important to be open to changing the design as it goes along.'

Having successfully completed his first work, Ed began experimenting with other materials. Someone in his village mentioned having used plumbers' copper tubing to make architectural models, and Ed wanted see if he could incorporate it successfully into a gate. 'Copper tubing is wonderful to work with,' he enthuses. 'You can use it as it is for a simple linear effect, but if you hammer it gently, it can be worked into all sorts of curves, and it weathers beautifully.' Ed's Champernhayes pieces became part of a portfolio, which he showed to potential clients, and more commissions followed. When a gate is commissioned, Ed visits the site or requests photographs, and initially sketches several designs. Then he draws up the chosen one, adding in the final detailing.

Ed likes to use local Dorset timber – usually windfall timber or woodland thinnings – for the gates and rustic benches he also designs. 'Most of the wood has been lying around for a while and isn't really seasoned,' he explains. 'Chestnut is very stable. When it is put together, the joints don't move with changes in temperature and humidity.' The gates and benches use mortise-and-tenon joints, incorporating mainly oak dowels, which the Brooks make themselves.

When Ed starts work on trunks of chestnut, he lops off the branches and chooses the ones with distinctive natural curves. The rest go for firewood. 'When I split a trunk, I'm excited to see what curves will appear. You have to work with the wood and go where it takes you, otherwise you might as well have it sawn at a timber yard.'

'I start with a chainsaw, then I use wedges and a sledgehammer. After that comes the tricky stage,

working with a hand axe and spokeshave, which is a curved blade with a handle at each end. I use the axe to get down to the finished shape and dimensions, and the spokeshave removes the axe pits, providing an amazingly smooth finish.'

Everything about Ed's gates is individual. Even the gateposts are a considered element in the design. He seeks out slender trunks of windfallen oak, textured and coloured like driftwood. And for every gate, he draws up a design for the hinges, latch and, if required, downbolts, which are made by a local blacksmith. 'I usually keep the fittings simple but every set is different, made for its specific gate and echoing its lines or curves.'

Ed loves to work on a variety of projects simultaneously. 'I hate routine,' he admits. He divides his time between the family home in Dorset and a base in London, where he is involved in designing urban regeneration projects. He also works on ecological landscaping, including meadows, and one-off assignments such as the tree house he designed and installed in a client's woodland. With his long-time interest in historic buildings, Ed has also begun to work with his father on restoration projects. 'It is a brilliant collaboration,' he says.

'Whether I'm working on a gate, a garden or a building, my style is rooted in the vernacular,' he continues. 'Most of what I do relates to historic buildings and ancient landscapes and I'd hope that my gates are equally timeless.'

*Ed Brooks' Dorset workshop is at Manor Gardens, Wootton Fitzpaine, Bridport, Dorset DT6 6NH, 07899 792810. His work can also be seen on his website, [www.edbrooks.com](http://www.edbrooks.com). Prices for a single gate start at £500; a set of double gates, from £1,000; benches, from £550.*

BY CELIA RUFÉY PHOTOGRAPHS MARK BOLTON