

Wood-carving can be compelling, verging on the hypnotic. Rosanna de Lisle falls under its spell on a course in Dorset

It cuts like butter, this stuff." Guy Mallinson is holding a log, a chunk of trunk that was recently a sycamore tree. Eight of us are in the woods beside the River Mangerton in Dorset to learn the ancient craft of wood-carving, and I don't think I'm the only one thinking the timber looks dauntingly durable. Will it ever yield to hands used only to tapping a keyboard and chopping the odd carrot?

But Mallinson, who has designed and made furniture for clients as diverse as Prince Edward and Walt Disney, exudes a confidence that's contagious. "The material comes off easily. It's a lovely feeling," he says, as he finds everyone a promising log. There's ash, apple, hornbeam, walnut – and the sycamore, which is the softest option. But I fall for the darker colour of the walnut.

This is green woodworking. Green in all senses, as the timber has been felled within the past 12 months. It is sustainable. We'll carve it purely by hand. We are in an entirely natural environment. And we are all, from Paddy, the demon local forager, to Hester, my fellow blow-in from London, total novices.

By the end of tomorrow, our logs should be bowls. "But," Guy says, with an enthusiasm bordering on glee, "it's in the nature of this wonderful material that you never quite know what's going to happen." I spend the next 36 hours wondering if I'll be going home with a sculpture instead of a salad bowl.

The first job is to clean up the cleft face of the "bowl blank". Guy takes a gouge and with a tap-tap-tap of the mallet sends it smoothly and diagonally across the grain. He makes it look as easy as scooping ice cream from a tub.

But when I stick the gouge into the dry, dense walnut and pound it with the mallet, shocks jolt up my arms. Butter? Guy clearly hasn't heard of easily spreadable.

The trick is to keep the blade a few millimetres in, and to steer the gouge as you hit it; this way the blade travels the distance, and leaves a smooth groove in its wake. But progress is painstakingly slow: the curls of wood that come off are no



A groovy kind of love

thicker than the shavings of Parmesan in a rocket salad.

Thankfully, whenever I flag, Guy or his teaching assistant, James Verner, another local furniture maker, move my bowl on a stage: flattening the base, carving the rim, hacking off the surplus corners. By the end of day one, it resembles half a hard-boiled egg.

Hollowing out the yolk is even harder on the hands. But carving is compelling, verging on hypnotic. I lose track of time as I try to line up the furrows and smooth the tops off the ridges between. All I can hear of my classmates is the rhythmic chorus of seven hands tapping; everyone is too absorbed to talk.

We find our voices again over lunch – roast chicken and tabbouleh dished up by Guy's wife, Boo, an artist. Two of the group recently moved here from within the confines of the M25 and, to the amused pride



Chips with everything: Guy Mallinson demonstrates the wood-carver's craft to the group, above. There's also one-to-one tuition for Rosanna de Lisle (left)

of born-and-bred locals, can't stop raving about the bucolic loveliness of this part of Dorset. Still, everyone agrees that new blood breathes new life: first Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall put the area's food on the map, now Bridport has a boutique hotel.

The last stage is to plane the rim. Suddenly my chunk of walnut looks... like a very chunky bowl. I want to continue honing it, but Guy insists it's time to put it in a plastic sack (to dry out over the next few months) and join everyone for a drink. After two days of solid hammering, the prospect of chilled white wine is enticing, yet it's still a wrench to down tools.

Will the timber yield to hands used only to chopping the odd carrot?

✦ Guy Mallinson's bowl-carving courses run monthly and cost £250 plus VAT, including materials and lunch. He also runs courses making utensils for the cook and gardener (same price). Mallinson Ltd, Mangerton, Bridport, Dorset (01308 485111. www.mallinson.co.uk).