

Grand designs of students building bridges in the wood

TV architects teaching people to build bridges that go nowhere? It might sound daft, but **Martin Hesp** has been to the Dartmoor Summer Arts School to learn why such strange edifices are a good idea

In a remote and beautiful Westcountry valley, a bridge that spans half a river has been overshadowed by a bridge that leads into thin air.

Which might sound like the beginning of some nonsense poem by Edward Lear, but is in fact an accurate description of a very real project that's been going on in a quiet corner of the Teign Valley.

It's all part of the Dartmoor Arts Summer School which has just been enjoying its fourth year of creative success in the hills and dales surrounding Drewsteignton, on the northern flanks of the national park.

Building bridges that lead nowhere might seem bonkers, but these are very special structures, inspired by special teachers and built by special students.

Let's deal with the latter ingredient first: most of the students on the summer school's spatial structures course read architecture at university – and it may come as a surprise to learn that people studying the art of building never actually get to build anything while in the hallowed halls of academe.

But at the summer school that's exactly what they get to do – and it's a fast and furious learning curve. At the beginning of the week they are given a brief by the two tutors, architect Piers Taylor and timber specialist Charley Brentnall – both of whom feature regularly on TV's *Grand Designs* programme.

Part of the brief is to create something that would allow an experience that would otherwise not be possible in the particular location – and this year that materialised in a structure that would allow the owners of a field deep in the Teign Valley a direct view of the midwinter sun.

Now that is a challenge – because the golden orb sinks to just 15 degrees above the horizon at midday in mid-winter, meaning that the field in question is forever in the shadow of tall and steep Hitchcombe Wood.

To feel the sun on your face you'd need to stand on some kind of elevated platform. The students came up with various ideas, but they were restricted to using a limited amount of structural materials, all of which had to be sourced from the immediate surroundings.

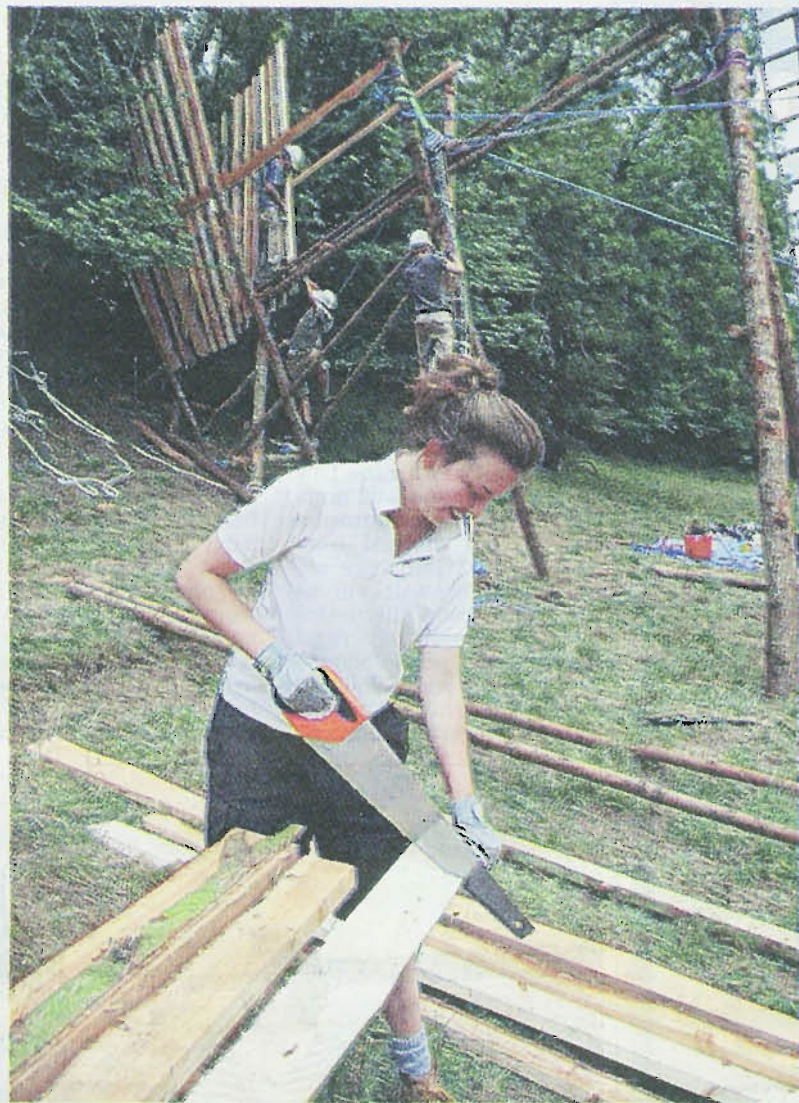
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After that it was time to get busy – the course is a five-day one, and by Friday afternoon the work had to be finished.

The resulting structure looks a bit like something from the Californian Gold Rush. There's something very raw and real about the wooden version of a rope bridge which juts out across the river meadow from a steep bank – and which, indeed, would allow a person scaling it to enjoy the feel the midwinter sun high above the field.

Last year a similar brief in the same location resulted in the design



Student Rosie Sinclair at work

little half-bridge that still allows passers-by a birds-eye view over the river – this year it's the much bigger winter sunshine receptor.

"We made it as simple as it could be. There were other more complicated designs but it got stripped down otherwise we'd never finish it in time," said Piers Taylor.

Charley Brentnall added: "As the three dimensional work begins to take shape, it informs the people building it and things change. And because there's a lack of experience – almost a naivety – of what you can and can't do, there's no barrier for these students. That forces me to back off and ask 'how can we do that?'"

The pair have a profound interest in using local materials to make structures and buildings.

"Historically we took materials from where they were – there was no alternative," said Mr Taylor. "The act of only using a material from the surroundings is important culturally – and now people are beginning to think about how they use materials from a local place."

"For me there is a huge sustainable implication to what we're doing and the whole issue of minimising waste. How you select the material and you use it is really important. There is no waste here at all."

"No wastage of material – no wastage of money either," he added. "The tutors don't get paid – we do it because we love it. And the skills being used here are applicable for lots of things, particularly in a rural com-

One of last year's students – local boy Thomas Randall-Page, whose parents were partly involved with setting up the summer school – was helping on the course last week.

"The act of building something is so vital, yet so lacking in our education," he said. "It's not uncommon for architects to fully qualify without ever being on a building site."

"In a course that takes seven years, you'd really hope people were a bit more practically versed. It's like writing a cookbook without ever being in a kitchen – you know the theory, but actually it doesn't work without practical experience."

Practical experience is partly what the Dartmoor Summer School is all about. Each July the village of Drewsteignton is transformed into a hub of creative activity.

For a week, established artists from the South West and further afield congregate to teach a range of innovative courses. Traditional skills such as iron casting, stone carving and cob techniques feature alongside digital photography, documentary filmmaking and spatial structures.

Four years ago, the initial organisers had a dream to develop a school where artists and teachers could come together to work, learn, discuss and exchange ideas in a rural location that would offer inspiration.

The beautiful river meadow just above Clifford Bridge is certainly capable of providing inspiration – particularly when, perhaps, you are standing 30 feet above the grass with



Architect Piers Taylor and timber specialist Charley Brentnall

PICTURE: RICHARD AUSTIN

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