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## *Review*

# **What Wood is That? A Manual of Wood Identification**

By Herbert L. Edlin

Thames and Hudson, London, 1969. 160 pp, 79 black and white illus. and 40 wood samples. 42 shillings (50 shillings in U.K. only).

In briefest outline, this recently published book sets out, in simple terms, how to identify forty different timbers. As a preamble the author gives a short history of man's progress in harvesting and converting timber to its multitudinous end uses. He gives some interesting insights into past techniques in handling wood, also into methods of harvesting timber in other countries. This section is followed by details of wood formation and structure to assist in identification. Then comes a fairly comprehensive key by which a selection of forty timbers can be identified from each other. This key is backed up by a section which describes these timbers, and the trees which produce them.

One of the first things which comes to mind when reviewing this book is the realisation that something similar has been done before. In fact a book by Dr. Alfred Schwankl called "Welches Holz ist Das?" was translated by Mr. Edlin under the title "What Wood is That?"

and published in 1956. The basic idea of the two books is the same, namely to provide a key, assisted by actual wood specimens, whereby diverse timbers may be identified. In this latest work the keys have been taken from the original book, with due acknowledgement to the publishers, Franckh'sche Verlagshandlung, Stuttgart.

In style, the two books are totally different. Whereas Schwankl tends to be strictly technical Edlin goes for a more generally informative text. Not only are we given details of the physical appearance of the various timbers but we are treated to a considerable introductory comment on woodworking history. There is also a good account of the features present in timber. In the earlier work this forms the opening sequence in the book. The terms in which these features are described are relatively simple, and the work is well suited to instruction of the layman.

Next the key. This is the *raison d'être* of the book. It is a key which differentiates between forty different timbers on the bases of colour, structure, weight, smell, botanical features and class of use. That there should be a different key for each of these characteristics is a very clever idea as it allows the identifier to approach his task from several angles. But that the key should be confined to forty timbers is not so clever, particularly when there are such notable omissions as silver fir, gaboon, obeche, Scots pine, Norway spruce, ramin, Parana pine and utile. Why, for instance, in a book published in England is ponderosa pine included when the most widely used European pine — our common red deal — is excluded? The unhappy problem the author has to contend with is how to make a limited book cover most eventualities. A grave pitfall not resolved by this work is the possibility of identifying a completely strange timber as one of the chosen forty, although the presence of the wood samples would tend to militate against this to some degree. This eventuality might better be avoided by a more judicious selection of the forty keyed specimens. Colour is a notoriously fickle property of timber, and to use it as the primary key is, in my mind, questionable.

Each timber identified is described by text and illustration and a lot of useful and interesting information is contained in this section. I found the "two colour" index rather confusing. This covers actual variation in colour in a timber, but also variation, real or apparent, that arises due to structural differences ... for example the small dark rays of beech make this a "two coloured" wood. I wonder will this be readily appreciated by every reader? Mr. Edlin is in conflict with several wood scientists in stating that the bird's-eye feature of bird's eye maple is caused by masses of epicormic buds. Both Desch and Jane suggest that it is caused by a dimpling of the cambium perhaps due to a fungal disturbance of cambial growth.

Despite these adverse criticisms, I think that this is a valuable book, and a useful addition to the wood scientist's shelves, as well

as to those of the carpenter or other timber user. It has limitations, as outlined, which should not be ignored, but it also has much of historic interest and adds usefully to the many texts concerned with timber identification. No-one can deny that to have one's own collection of forty timber samples is a decided asset when faced with a problem of identity.

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