

Culture Obituary

Charley Brentnall, 1952-2024, pioneer in timber structures

12 March 2024

Expert in structural timber first inspired by ancient buildings, who loved to unite modern design with that deep knowledge and taught and learnt in equal measure through enriching collaborations



Charley Brentnall. Credit: Carpenter Oak

I once asked Charley Brentnall what his job description was and he laughed, aware that his way of working – with wood and with people – transcended simple definitions. As one of the world's leading experts on timber construction, his influence on several generations of architects and 'makers' is impossible to overstate.

Charley studied ceramics at Bath School of Art, learning a way of working where he could think with his fingertips which he translated to timber. After art school, he began working on the conservation of old timber-framed buildings in Suffolk, developing skills relating to the creative choreography of structures but also the idea of making as social practice, where collaboration was an essential part of the process.

One of his first projects was for Bedales School, where he dismantled and re-erected a medieval barn with pupils. Fascination with ancient structures led Charley to establish Carpenter Oak & Woodland, which heralded a re-emergence of interest in traditional framing techniques. However, always keen to look forward, Charley also began a series of collaborations with architects that married contemporary design with his deep knowledge of timber construction.

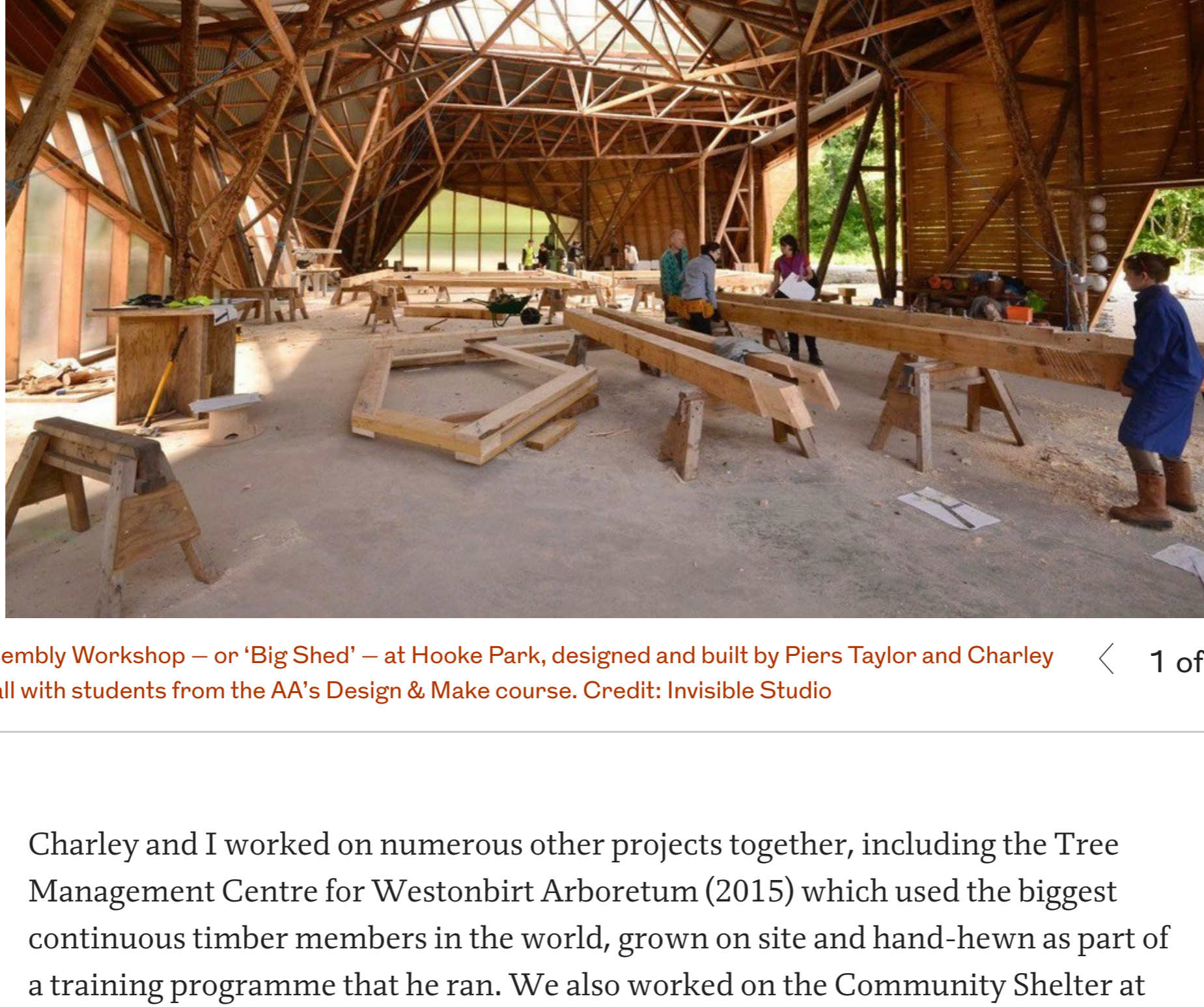


Community Shelter at Westonbirt Arboretum, a gridshell of steam-bent oak laths with ad-hoc bracing devised on site. Credit: Invisible Studio

Key to these was Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, which initially worked with Charley on the Olivier Theatre at Bedales (1996), where a huge oak frame was used in an exemplar of low-energy passive design. Peter Clegg describes it as critical in the development of his own thinking about environmental issues and – along with the 2001 Earth Centre space frame – among the most important of his career.

Peter Clegg introduced me to Charley soon after we set up the education and research programme Studio in the Woods in 2005. He quickly became my key collaborator and close friend. When I began working for the AA at its rural Hooke Park campus on a new Design & Make programme, the first person I called was Charley, who became the 'make' tutor for the course.

There we collaborated on the Assembly Workshop (2012), which Charley described as 'doing a PhD by accident'. This period of Charley's working life led him to co-found Xylotek Advanced Timber Structures, which continued the innovation developed at Hooke Park with projects such as the demountable ABBA Arena with architect Stufish (2022), a pavilion designed by David Adjaye for the 2023 Venice Biennale, and a boardwalk with Asif Khan now on site at Canada Water Dock. While these were all technically challenging, Charley described the process of working with others as the place where the real joy happened.



The Assembly Workshop – or 'Big Shed' – at Hooke Park, designed and built by Piers Taylor and Charley Brentnall with students from the AA's Design & Make course. Credit: Invisible Studio

Charley and I worked on numerous other projects together, including the Tree Management Centre for Westonbirt Arboretum (2015) which used the biggest continuous timber members in the world, grown on site and hand-hewn as part of a training programme that he ran. We also worked on the Community Shelter at Westonbirt, which was constructed with local community groups, many of whom had severe physical and emotional difficulties. He came to every project without judgment of other participants, happy to hover at the edges as they developed their own autonomy but ready to take the helm if needed. When the time came for a big lift he'd lead with the calm and focus of a zen master.

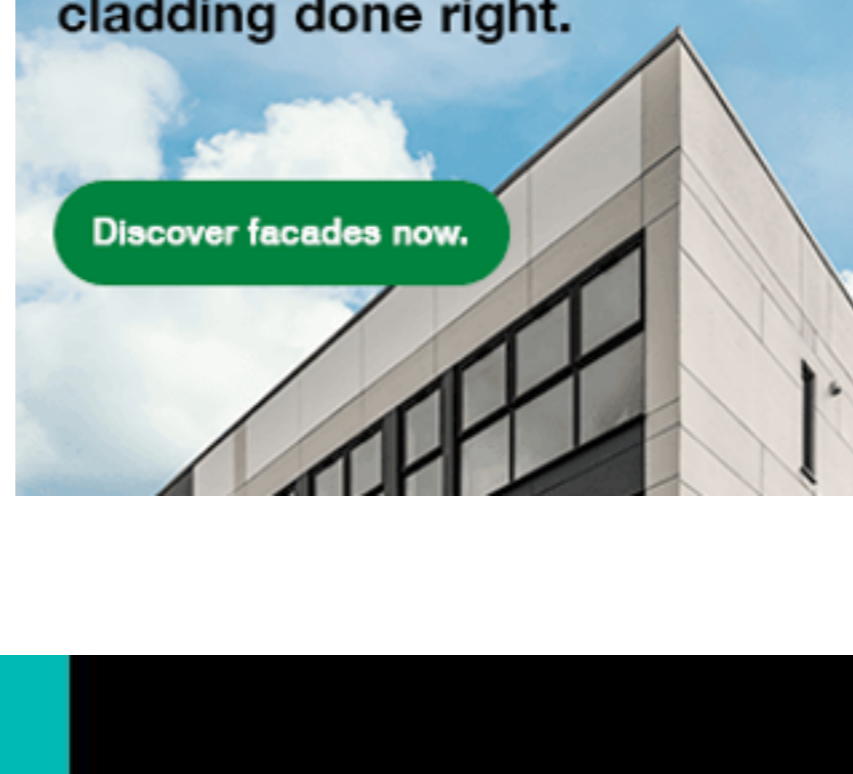
Charley lived in a way that was always absolutely individual and unique. With his wife Sue, and children Holly, Tom, Rosa and Beau, he spent decades in the same house near Bath – much of that time without a washing machine or fridge, preferring to keep his milk in the spring outside. He operated on his own timescale, and for various periods of his life didn't own a car – unusual in the countryside – trusting always that something would turn up, wherever he was. Something always did, occasionally taking him somewhere other than he had intended, but most things involving Charley ended up going in new directions.

Piers Taylor is the founder of Invisible Studio

Region: **United Kingdom**

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