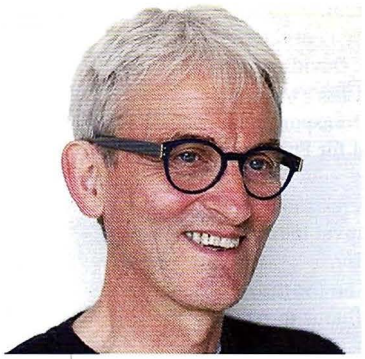
TALKING TIMBER

THE APPLIANCE OF FESTIVE SCIENCE

*Wood Technology Society chairman **John Park** gives a wood science twist to Christmas*



John Park – Wood Technology Society chairman and manager of Canada Wood UK

In this season of peace and goodwill to all men, wood figures large from the Christmas tree – real, just pop along to 'forestry.gov.uk/christmas' for your Christmas tree education and artificial (well, really!) – to the Yule Log (chocolate covered chocolate cake - what else!) and, naturally, real logs if you happen to be the proud owner of a wood-burning stove (Lars Mytting had the UK national press all fired up at the end of last year with his book on chopping and storing wood for that purpose!) or an open fire.

If only the national colour supplements could get as worked up about wood in general and wood science in particular!

While, we're on the subject of wood burning, it is actually not easy to get it to ignite (take a look at TheSawDoctor on YouTube for the latest wood snippet!) and as it burns the char insulates the wood from the heat source.

The principle known as sacrificial charring is used when designing fire resistance into an exposed timber structure. The average charring rate of wood, in old currency, is 1/40 of an inch a minute or an inch and a half an hour. See how quickly logs on a fire go out if you let the embers get too low! That's wood science!

Altogether now – "chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose ..."!

That's nuts from Castanea sativa of course (natural biological durability Class 2 going on 1, durable to very durable – ref. BS EN 350 and makes excellent glulam!) and not Aesculus hippocastanum (not widely used commercially and regarding natural biological durability it only makes Class 5 – not durable). That's wood science!

And you may be mulling some wine with cinnamon, which is tree bark of course and which should, as you know (well, you probably didn't and neither did I until I looked!), be bark from the true cinnamon tree, Cinnamomum verum, aka C. zeylanicum.

And not forgetting the cloves, the aromatic flower buds of Syzygium aromaticum of the family Myrtaceae which as you may know also includes eucalyptus which, as you should know, includes karri (Eucalyptus diversicolor; BS EN 350, Class 2) and jarrah (Eucalyptus marginata; BS EN 350, Class 1).

I can tell you how to identify which is which as to the naked eye they are quite similar – karri burns to ash, jarrah burns to charcoal.

I showed my brother-in-law that trick when he was supplied old sleepers, purported to be jarrah, to use to construct a retaining wall.

It's quite possible that they might have been, other than the one I tested! That's wood science!

And what about the holly, Ilex aquifolium. The Woodland Trust describes holly wood as the "whitest of all woods, and is heavy, hard and fine grained".

The trust continues: "It can be stained and polished and is used to make furniture or in engraving work.

It is commonly used to make walking sticks.

"Holly wood also makes good firewood and burns with a strong heat. Holly branches are still used to decorate homes and make wreaths at Christmas.'

Again in old currency, holly heartwood is classed as perishable (it isn't included in BS EN 350) as is, which of course you do all know, the sapwood of all wood species. That's wood science!

As for the ivy, that's just a nuisance in the garden.

And then there is mistletoe. Ah, the mistletoe, just for kissing under and not sacrificing white bulls any more, at least not down my road.

But don't eat that, that's poisonous. Happy Christmas! ■

Below: Holly is the whitest of all woods