

# BENTLEY

No.38 SUMMER 2011



BENTLEY

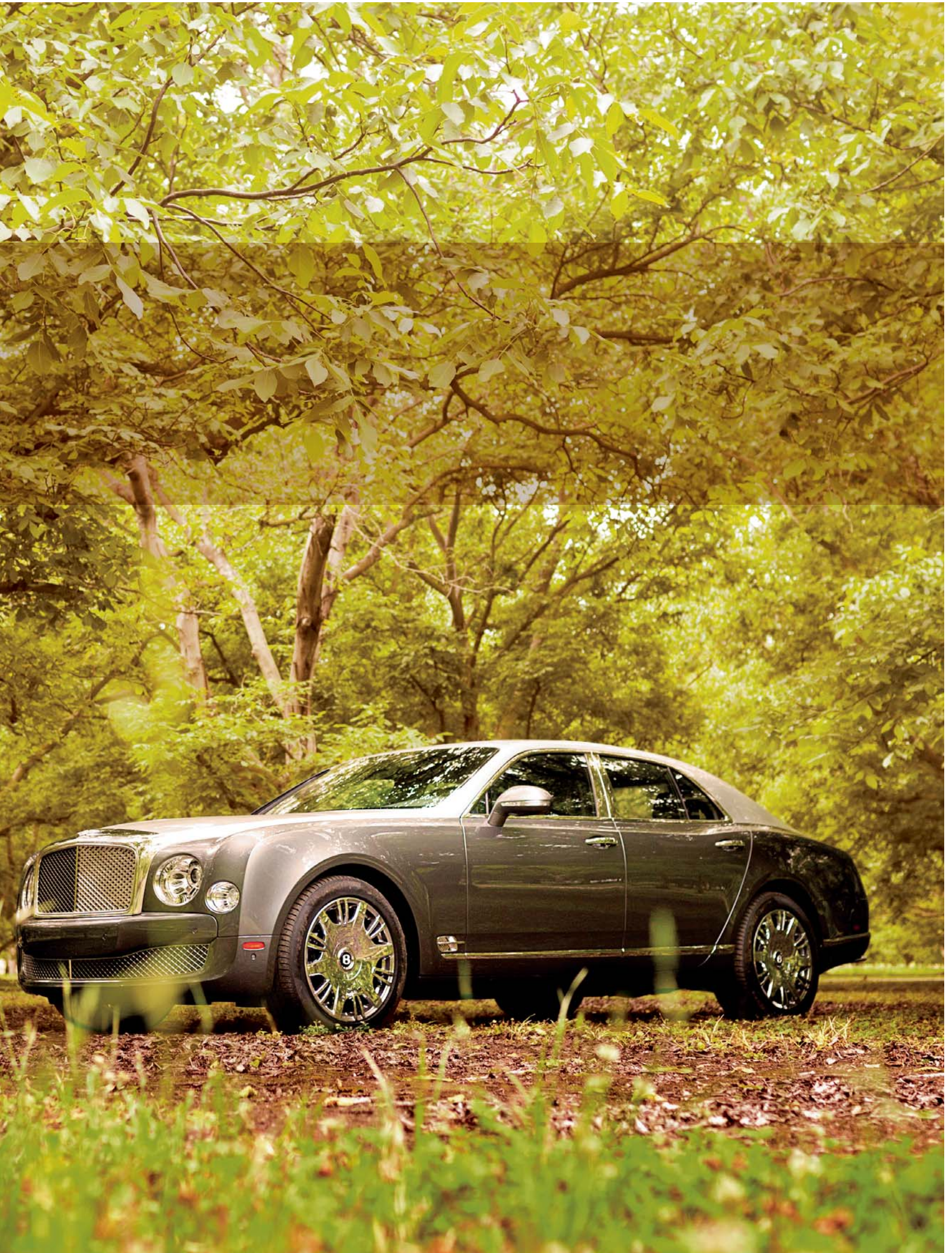


# Ingrained expertise

EVEN WHEN IT'S FRESH OFF THE LINE, THERE'S ONE PART OF A BENTLEY THAT'S ALREADY OVER 80 YEARS OLD. **TIM BURT** DESCRIBES THE LONG AND CAREFUL JOURNEY OF BENTLEY'S FINE WOOD VENEERS, FROM WALNUT ORCHARD TO CREWE >









**Left** Cyrus Jones, whose orchard yields a crop even more precious than the walnuts he harvests. **Right** Woodsman Frank Wilson examines his prize – the sought-after burr growth at the foot of the walnut tree.

## Ingrained expertise *continued*



Cyrus Jones shoves his gnarled hands deep into his jeans and contemplates the Mulsanne. More than two tonnes of British engineering has rolled into Cyrus' orchard, mid-way between the Rockies and the Pacific. The 81-year-old farmer, who inherited the smallholding from his father, considers the car from a number of angles. He examines the engine, runs his hand over the fascia and tries the driving seat for size.

"Ain't that a car," he says, rasping. "Got myself a truck up at the house, buried behind all the junk; not that I drive anymore."

When Cyrus first started farming this orchard, Dwight Eisenhower was President. "Used to be fruit and cottonwood round here," he adds. "Now we shake nuts from the trees, at least from the 28 acres still producing."

Cyrus is worried about oak-root fungus. The disease curtailed last year's walnut harvest, yielding a crop of less than 700lb. This year, some of the older trees may not survive. Yet Cyrus has something extremely valuable, hidden from view towards the back of the orchard.

And Bentley wants it.

The Mulsanne parks beside Cyrus' prized possession, a large tree of the same vintage as its owner. The Bentley, its 6.75-litre engine cooling down, is flanked by two obese pick-up trucks that escorted the car off the road – the end of a 5,500-mile journey from the assembly line in Crewe.

There are no signposts, and barely a track to where the elderly orchard-owner is waiting. A burly woodsman – almost half Cyrus' age and twice his size – is raking dead grass away from the tree. Frank Wilson leans on the rake and explains: "The more muscle in the tree, where the root tangles with the grain, the tighter the pattern inside. It looks as if a cow wandered up and took a shit on the trunk. But this is like gold."

A couple of Frank's workmates, sizing up the walnut, laugh at the analogy. But they know he is right. Each member of the crew, who travel from Oregon to Idaho in search of trees, recognise the 'special one' when they see it.

For these are the log-hunters: the timber industry's equivalent of the legendary "rabassiers", the Provençal truffle detectives. Like the truffle experts, the log-hunters work in secret, guarding their woodland knowledge. Each day, they cover up to 500 miles searching for the right quality walnut, maple or oak, from which to source fine veneers for the world's luxury carmakers.

In this part of America, the log hunters are also called stumpers – reflecting their passion for the base of the tree. The upper trunk, where the grain runs straight, is of little interest; it might be used for furniture, or just firewood. The real value lies close to the orchard floor, where dense burls can make a tree worth up to \$50,000.

As with any rare commodity, the combination of rising demand and dwindling supply attracts rogue traders and a black market. Walnut trees are no exception. In recent years, log thieves have targeted older stocks. So the stumpers demand absolute secrecy about the exact location of Cyrus' smallholding. They demand anonymity for the nearest town, the region and even the state.

"It's a pretty old orchard and it's about ready to pull out," says Cyrus, who's lost most of his teeth but none of his faculties. "I just don't know what it will take to part with it."

A short while later, sipping a beer over a steak sandwich, Frank claims that good-quality walnut is becoming rarer – even without the log thieves. Setting his bottle on a table mat advertising 'Buckaroo Tattoos', he says that modern farming techniques are reducing the burl-growth that make Bentley veneers so distinctive.

These days, walnut farmers rely on hybrid strains that require less irrigation. The newer orchards are also grown closer together, increasing the nut yields. Their trunks are white and true, with few of the deformities – the burls – that occur in orchards where Persian walnut roots were grafted to black walnut saplings.

"There's fewer and fewer burls left, so prices are rising," says Frank. "So we have to be real careful about pulling them out. We don't want to damage other trees and end up paying for them too."

Once a tree is identified, a price agreed and certification of ownership signed, the stumpers will bring an excavator into the orchard. First they 'top' the tree, removing the upper branches and much of the trunk. Carefully, Frank and his team then cut around the roots. "And we just push the tree over, cut the neck with a chain saw and send that little piggy off to market."

The market, in this case, is thousands of miles away in southern Spain. After a 40-day ocean journey, the decapitated American tree trunks are delivered to a dusty industrial estate on the outskirts of Valencia.

Once again, the location is kept deliberately confidential. There are no signs on the warehouse doors to indicate that this is home to Europe's largest processor of fine veneers: Eurogroup Belcaire.

Eurogroup, which has contracts with American stumpers and other log-hunters around the world, has expanded its 17,000m<sup>2</sup> facility to capitalise on Valencia's heritage as a capital of the woodworking industry. For generations, factories on the Costa Blanca have supplied veneers for ocean liners, for private aircraft and now mainly for premium carmakers.

Manufacturers including Porsche, Jaguar and Rolls-Royce source their veneers from the Eurogroup plant, where stockpiles of walnut, maple, ash and oak lie in the yard. Eric Pirtle, one of the company's three directors, admits that Bentley is among the most demanding. "They are not easy negotiators when it comes to wood quality," according to Eric. "Bentley needs 5-carat diamonds; a 1-carat diamond is not good enough."

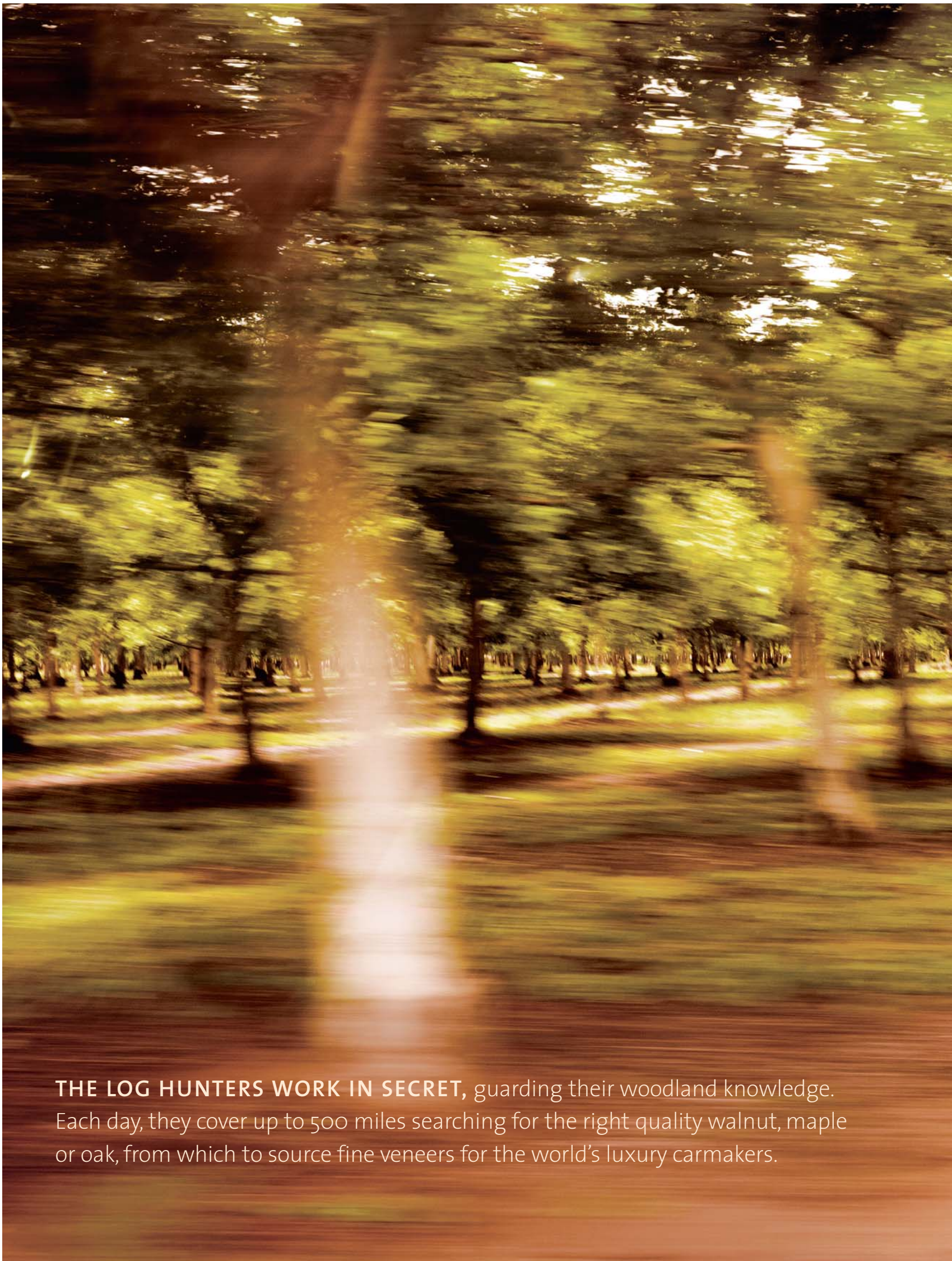
The company's 120 workers, of whom a third are craftsmen, spend about three weeks processing each tree trunk from raw lumber to wafer-thin veneers. Much of the Eurogroup system is a closely guarded secret and photography is prohibited in parts of the factory. But Eric is happy to demonstrate how the trunks are first stripped of their bark, shaved clean by aproned woodcutters using rotating saws. Impurities and loose debris are removed in a secret process. From there, the naked logs are turned on giant lathes, where sheaves of wood are split apart. At the end of the clipping line – after further confidential treatments – woods that arrived as container tonnage emerge flat, pliable and sold by the metre.

The Spanish climate, with 300 days of annual sunshine and relatively high humidity, is perfectly suited to storing the neatly stacked veneers, ready for



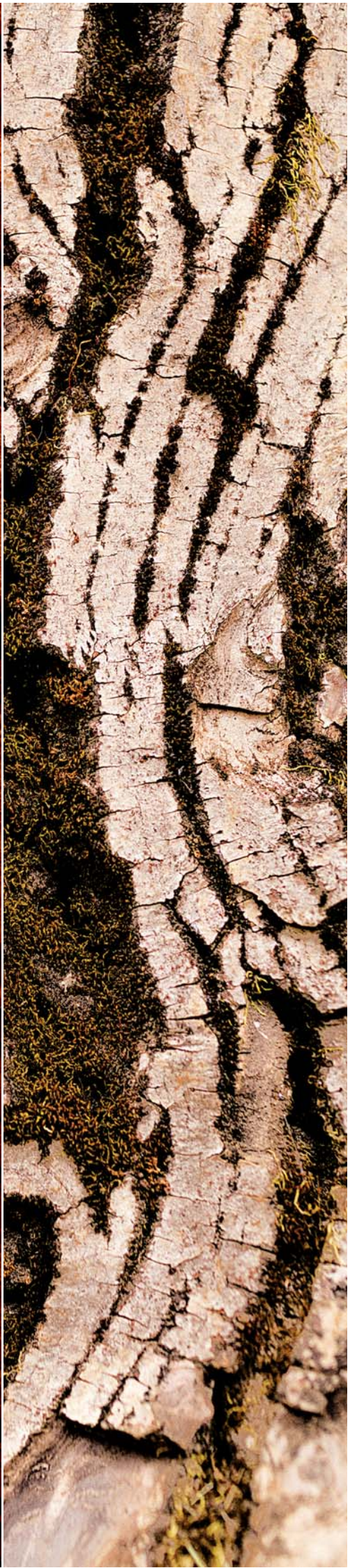
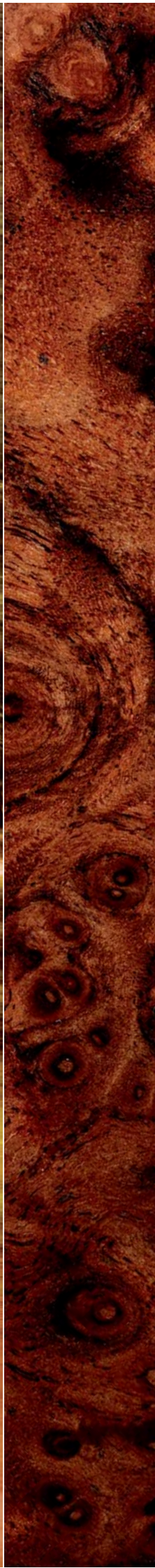






**THE LOG HUNTERS WORK IN SECRET**, guarding their woodland knowledge. Each day, they cover up to 500 miles searching for the right quality walnut, maple or oak, from which to source fine veneers for the world's luxury carmakers.









## Ingrained expertise *continued*

inspection by Bentley. This is where Adrian Minshull, Bentley's veneer selector for the past 17 years, comes each month to take his pick of the walnut, oak and vavona used in the Mulsanne models.

Adrian chooses only about 1 per cent of the veneers on offer. Even so, he is concerned about the growing scarcity of the best wood. "We used to see logs that would produce 20 car sets, which might come from 200-year-old trees. Now it's about 5 to 10 sets per log," he warns.

For a Mulsanne, a 'car set' comprises a veneer bundle of 24 leaves, all drawn from one burl. If a buyer wants additional veneer for picnic tables, iPod holders and steering wheels, Adrian will allocate another bundle from the same part of the tree.

Back in Crewe, Adrian picks up a bundle in the Bentley veneer storeroom, where the stock is valued at £250,000. He flicks through the leaves like a picture book, describing how each piece of veneer in the car has to match the one beside it, ensuring a consistent pattern across the fascia, the consoles, waistrails and every other covered surface.

From the storeroom to the assembly line, it takes four weeks to cut, mould, lacquer, sand and polish the woodwork for each vehicle. In total, the wood shop uses about 10-15m<sup>2</sup> of veneer for each Mulsanne, with walnut the preferred choice of most customers.

"We cut the veneer according to the widest part of the interior, so the wastage rate is 50 per cent," says Adrian. "It's not like leather. We cannot use the whole hide."

Given the veneer's value, there is zero tolerance for chips or defects. Bentley workers wear cotton bands over their rings and watches. Jeans, zippers and studded trousers – anything capable of a scratch – are strictly prohibited. Nothing is left to chance. Before apprentices are allowed near the line, they make trial parts and key boxes to test their skills.

Customers touring the plant, choosing bespoke designs for their cars, often stop to admire the apprentices' showcase. But few realise that their veneers have also been on a journey, stretching thousands of miles and up to 15 years from first being identified by the stumpers in America to the factory in Valencia and finally to the showroom.

Back in Spain, Eric Pirtle says customer tastes may change and woods sometimes go out of fashion. But he adds: "Like fine jewellery, the prettiest designs are always sought after. And for us, walnut remains the king of diamonds." **B**

*Tim Burt is former motor industry editor of the Financial Times.*



**Above left** The precious burr roots and trunks are prepared and then shaved into fine leaves at Eurogroup's Valencia workshops in a jealously guarded process.

**Above** Journey's end for the burr walnut: around 10-15m<sup>2</sup> are needed for every Mulsanne.





FOR A MULSANNE, A 'CAR SET' COMPRISES A VENEER BUNDLE OF 24 LEAVES, ALL DRAWN FROM ONE BURL. IF A CUSTOMER WANTS ADDITIONAL VENEER FOR PICNIC TABLES, IPOD HOLDERS AND STEERING WHEELS, ADRIAN WILL ALLOCATE ANOTHER BUNDLE FROM THE SAME PART OF THE TREE.

