



## Barn Club

A Tale of Forgotten Elm Trees,  
Traditional Craft and Community Spirit

Robert J. Somerville

Nature/Environment

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“Craft is an event as much as a product. It is something that happens. What remains is both in the beauty of the object and in the hearts of those who took part.”

—**ROBERT J. SOMERVILLE**, author

### A Different Way of Working

What happens when we imbue our landscapes with buildings made by the community? How does the process of building change when we leave behind the whines and whirrs of power tools in exchange for the dexterity of hands? When every mark in the wood tells the story of a joint effort?

When renowned craftsman Robert Somerville spotted ‘The Great Barn’, an ancient elm barn on a farm near his home in Hertfordshire, England, he became seduced by the building processes of a bygone age – before power tools and mass manufacture. When neighbors Esther and Bruce Carley commissioned Robert to build the ‘Carley Barn’ using these traditional timber-framing methods, Robert brought together friends, family and even strangers, to join his ‘Barn Club’ – to make a building in their local community that would stand for hundreds of years to come.

*Barn Club* shares the story of those people who gave their time for free to learn this ancient craft and achieve something truly memorable, while honoring the elm trees that were once ubiquitous in the British forests. Volunteers were able to get away from their day jobs and work closer to nature. Without the loud and disruptive sounds of machine tools they could enjoy the convivial banter of a team working towards a clear, tangible goal and rediscover rural craftsmanship – a slow skill, that could not be pressured by deadlines.

The tale of the elm tree in its landscape is central to *Barn Club*. Its natural history and historic importance but also its long decline make for a fascinating story told by the author, a long-time admirer of this diverse and remarkable forest denizen. As Robert says: ‘I believe that when we think of making something and we set out to gather the materials and the wherewithal to do it, we stand at a fork in the road. On one side we see a well-trodden path of power tools and technology, on the other, a path of handwork, far less travelled in our day and age. By taking this second path, as we did to make the Carley Barn, a different world opened up.’

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**Robert J. Somerville** grew up in rural Kent, England during the 1960s. A childhood spent in the woods, orchards and marshes inspired his deep love for the natural world. After studying engineering and architecture at Cambridge University, Somerville went on to run a design and building business in Devon, utilizing local wood, stone and earth. Somerville lives with his family in their self-built eco-house in an idyllic small-holding.

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