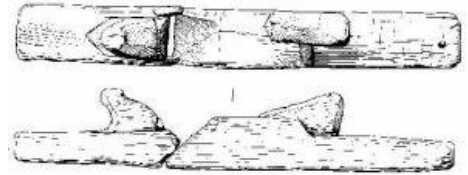


OLD WOODWORKING PLANES

By Andrew Stephens

Since time began, man has made use of wood as an important raw material for many products, including houses, boats and furniture. To work wood, man needed tools, the earliest of which were made of flint, stone, wood, bronze and iron. The earliest extant tools are in museums and there are many which have survived from Ancient Egypt. In this country many tools have been unearthed which date back to the time when the Romans disseminated their new technology to conquered lands. The Romans were the first to manufacture planes from iron, although the material continued to be the basis of plane making throughout the medieval period, and was only gradually replaced by wood as the Middle Ages came to an end.

The most famous planes to survive from the Tudor period were brought up with the "Mary Rose" which sank in 1545. These planes were wooden, and are more continental than English in design. On show in the "Mary Rose" museum, they are in remarkable condition for their age, particularly considering their having been underwater for 450 years.



Until the late 17th and early 18th centuries nearly all woodworking tools were made by the user or the local blacksmith; the craftsman crafting the wooden parts and the blacksmith the blade. Around this time the first recognised plane and tool makers started to appear. The two earliest recorded British plane makers were Frances Purdew and Thomas Grandford, who both worked in London.

There were three generations of Thomas Granfords, and it is thought that the first worked from 1654 to 1685. Recent research has found that many planes once thought to have been made by Granford were actually Purdew's work. (Photo 1.) In fact, we only have one plane which can be identified for certain as having been made by Granford.



Image 2. Shown left is an early 18th C. moulding plane by Robert Wooding (1706-1728). Note the flat chamfers round the top and the early shape wedge. Little is known about Purdew, other than that he lived in London and was a contemporary of Granford. Several moulding planes are known by Purdew, four having been sold recently at auction. Other famous plane makers from that period include Robert Wooding, an apprentice of Granford who worked from 1706 to 1728. Moulding planes by Wooding do come up for sale today on a fairly regular basis and command large prices. John Davenport and Robert Hemmings are two manufacturers known to have been working in the early 1700s, although little is known about either of them.



Image 3. Shown left is a superb example of a very early plane (possibly even 17th C.) Again the wide flat chamfers & early long shaped wedge. The plane has been shortened at both ends, as chamfers are not as wide there.

Early named moulding planes are scarce, and there is an intriguing reason for this. The earlier versions were in general much longer than the later moulding planes-usually 10 to 12 inches compared with the standard 9 1/2 inches of later planes. If an early 19th century craftsman bought some "modern" moulding planes to add to his collection of earlier models, he would

discover that the earlier, longer planes stuck out further on the shelf. The answer to this problem was easy-he just shortened the older ones to match! Unfortunately for us today, it means that many early planes are without a maker's name; the front, where the maker's stamp would have been, has been removed. The moulder in picture 3 dates back to the early 18th century and has been shortened both at the front and back, but displays many period features, including the large wedge and flat chamfers. You can see the similarities with the Wooding moulder in photo 2.



Image 4. A rare beech bridal plough plane with ebony arms by A. Mathieson & Son, Glasgow & Edinburgh. One of the best quality plough planes Mathieson made; they only commercially made one better.

As better tool-steel became more readily available and the process of producing it cheaper and easier, tool manufacturers started to spring up in all the major cities, including London, Sheffield and Birmingham. As the population became more affluent and the demand for furniture ever greater, the demand for tools increased considerably. By the mid-19th century the tool making industry was huge, with literally thousands of manufacturers all over Britain. Some of the biggest and perhaps most well-known today were Alex Mathieson and Sons of Glasgow and Edinburgh, who by 1898 offered the largest range of tools in the world (Photos 4 and 5), William

Marples of Sheffield, Robert Sorby of Sheffield and Mosely and Sons of London.

Image 5. A very rare 25 1/2" long dovetail steel jointing plane by Mathieson. It has a gunmetal cap and a very good nicely gained rosewood infill. Pretty heavy but a joy to use. Long wood filled jointing planes such as this are few and far between and command high prices.



It wasn't until the mid-19th century that steel started to be used as the basic material for plane making. Stewart Spiers is widely recognised to have been the first manufacturer of steel planes in Britain, starting his business in 1840. (Photos 6 and 7.) Spiers' original ideas were copied by Mathieson and improved upon by Thomas Norris. It was at this time that Britain produced some of the finest quality tools ever made.



Some of the planes made by Spiers and Norris have, in my opinion, have never been surpassed.

Image 6. Rare early "improved pattern" dovetail Stewart Spiers (Ayr) mitre plane. Note screwed sides and early long shape of lever cap. Nicely rosewood fill and with original snecked iron.



Image 7. One of the rarest Spiers planes ever made around 1930s to try to compete with Stanley planes.



Basically rubbish compared with most Spiers planes but its rarity would command four figures at auction today.



Image 8. Good early Norris of London 13 1/2" long dovetail steel plane. One of the best planes ever

made.

Only the earliest Norris planes had rosewood infill like this—most found today have beech infills.



Image 9. Early Norris smoothing plane. Dovetailed coffin shape No A2.

A 1913 patent blade adjuster and rosewood infill.

By the early 20th century Stanley of America had started to take over the metal plane market all over the world. In Britain, however, it was the late 1930s before they displaced Spiers and Norris, and only then because of the low price of their planes. Although Britain produced the best quality planes, Stanley produced the biggest range, priding themselves that they could produce a plane for virtually every job. The range of planes offered by Stanley from around 1900 to 1950 was the biggest ever and is unlikely ever to be surpassed.



Image 10. One of the more rare Stanley planes. A No 9. Cabinet maker's block or mitre plane.

Early 1900s made by Stanley Rule & Level Co. USA.

Due to the shape of the back not many survive damage because of being dropped.



Image 11. A more unusual Stanley (USA) 95 edge trimming plane. Initially used for truing up man-made boards before veneering.

Today, sadly, quality new tools are few and far between, with companies such as Stanley and Record producing a fraction of the range they once did, and those they do produce being of dubious quality. However, companies such as Lie Nielson are now reproducing some of the planes that Stanley once made, which are just as good. And there is one company in Britain

worth mentioning who are making copies of early Norris planes of outstanding quality in gunmetal and steel. Karl Holtey's planes are the best modern planes money can buy. Some people believe that they are actually better than the originals and I wouldn't argue about that, though at prices ranging from £1000 to £2,500, they are not within many craftsmens' reach. (Photo 12.)



Image 12. New quality adjustable block plane by Karl Holtey with steel sole dovetailed to gunmetal sides and very nice rosewood infill and thick parallel blade. Just simply the best modern plane money can buy.

Many people today laugh at me when I say I use nearly all old tools in my work. "What do you use those old things for when you can buy new ones?". Why indeed! In common with many craftsmen I speak to, I didn't always use old tools. I remember when I started my first real job after leaving school, at a large antique restoring business in Hampshire. I arrived with two boxes of shiny new tools, many having been bought by various well-intentioned relatives. I unpacked these tools and saw some of the established, older restorers glancing over their shoulders and sniggering, and I wondered why. It didn't take me long to find out. I soon discarded my blue plastic-handled Stanley chisels in favour of much older models.

Many of the older planes are as useable today as they were when they were made, and in many cases are cheaper to purchase than new ones. Moulding planes are a good example; you can buy a good cabinet moulding plane cheaper than one router cutter and you don't have to remove all the burn marks afterwards! I remember having a very heated argument with a colleague a few years back about using moulding on a chest of drawers, which needed new feet and moulds. By the time he had found a suitable router cutter and set up the router ready to use, I had made all the moulding and had one section glued on. We never had that argument again! It is sometimes hard to find moulding planes of the right profile to cut moulds found on furniture, as most moulding planes were made for house architecture. But if you can find suitable planes, once they are set up and sharpened it is so much easier than using a router.

As for bench planes, if you are lucky enough to own or to have used a Spiers, Norris, or similar un-named example you'll know what a joy that is. No chatter even on the most awkward of grains, the extra weight which is so beneficial, and most importantly, the comfort of use. The thick parallel iron found on these planes in itself weighs more than a complete modern plane. I usually find anyone who takes the plunge and purchases one of these old wood filled planes, whether a named example or not, never looks back.

Unfortunately for us craftsmen, many of the best tools ever made are sitting on collectors' shelves gathering dust. It's sad really, but I suppose looking on the bright side

they are being preserved for future generations. However, in my opinion these planes were made to be used, and should still be used and enjoyed by the craftsmen of today. If you don't use old tools, all I can say is - you don't know what you're missing!