

A Woodworker's Journey of Discovery

Learning to love
hand tools *and* power tools

BY JOHN LIVELY

Twenty-five years ago, the closest thing to a handplane I owned was a Sears 3-in. by 21-in. belt sander. With a new 80-grit belt in the thing, I could flush up the end-grain edges of glued-up panels and tabletops. A 100-grit belt was just great for leveling badly made joints and for flattening undulating boards. A final sanding with a 120-grit belt left any surface ready for hand-sanding and then finishing. Who needed handplanes? They were, after all, artifacts from the 19th century and periods of prior darkness that never knew the thrill of grinding wood away in a flurry of dust. God had made belt sanders for a reason, and he saw that they were good.

Then one day I was eating lunch in the local burger joint and spied a man looking through a Garrett-Wade catalog. Its glossy pages were full of artfully styled, color photos of handplanes I never knew existed. Smooth planes, jack planes, fore planes and jointer planes. Rabbet planes, router planes, block planes and scrub planes. Planes with corrugated soles, planes with lignum vitae soles, smooth planes with adjustable throats, chisel planes with no throats at all. I was in love, and the only cure for this passion was possession of the loved objects.

A month later I sat at the kitchen table and unpacked a large box marked FRAGILE. Even my 6-year-old daughter marveled at the contents: A Primus jack plane in white beech and lignum vitae, a Primus “reform-type” smooth plane with a pearwood body and an adjustable throat, a Primus jointer plane that seemed almost the size of an aircraft carrier, a Record 3-in-1 plane, a Record No. 71 router plane, and a Record block plane. The entire order consumed more than

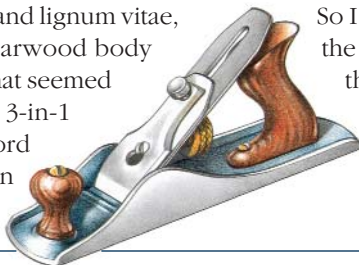
half of my monthly graduate-assistant stipend, and my wife was properly horrified.

In the process of making my first real workbench, I discovered that putting these planes to work wasn't so easy. The wooden jack plane, for example, despite the fact that its iron was freshly honed, would dig into the wood, tear a deep rent, then skip out only to dig in again. Shavings lodged between the chipbreaker and the top side of the blade, and the throat of the plane would clog up. I spent more time taking apart the plane, cleaning out the shavings and putting it back together than actually planing wood. I had not felt that stupid since my big sister taught me to drive a stick shift, and I was sure I was the victim of some cruel Luddite hoax.

Fine Woodworking to the rescue

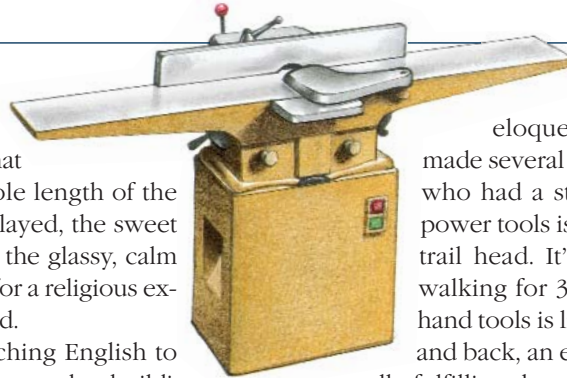
About this time, my first issue of *Fine Woodworking* arrived, complete with an entire article on how to tune up and adjust handplanes. There even was a little drawing showing a bunch of shavings jammed between the plane iron and the chipbreaker. The way to prevent this, the text explained, was to grind and hone the leading edge of the chipbreaker at an angle that made for a seamless fit with the back of the iron. Then as the plane sliced through the wood, the shaving wouldn't have a crack to wedge into.

So I made the modifications and adjustments called for in the article, reassembled my plane, regulated the iron, set the depth of cut and took a pass down a piece of maple that was destined to become a stretcher in my new bench. I figure there are only a few times in life when the angels sing to you out loud, and this was



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one of those times. The wooden jack plane peeled off a translucent shaving that curled out and didn't break for the whole length of the pass. The high-pitched note the plane played, the sweet resonance it produced in my bones and the glassy, calm surface it left in its wake—all these made for a religious experience beyond anything I had imagined.

Several years later, I moved from teaching English to making furniture. My shop had grown into another building and included a tablesaw, an 8-in. jointer and a 12-in. radial-arm saw. But I couldn't afford a thickness planer, which was just as well, because every board then had to be thicknessed by hand. I had begun to think in the summer of 1977 that machines were the devil's work, and while you did have to pay him his due, you did not have to sell him your soul.

A year later, I had spent so much time using handplanes and scrapers that my fingers started to look like Vienna sausages, my forearms had ballooned out like Popeye's, and I began to walk around hunched over. Sometimes at the end of a long day at the bench, I'd trudge into the house, run the kitchen sink full of hot water, sit on a bar stool and soak my hands for 30 minutes. I wondered how long I could keep up this madness. Handplaning was no longer full of high romance and lyrical harmony. I had become, in the absence of a thickness planer, a machine myself. I either had to break down and buy a \$2,000 planer that my infant woodworking business couldn't afford or I had to join the real world and get a job. The angels were busy elsewhere.

A real job and a thickness planer

As it turned out, I did get a real job, and a thickness planer to boot. In 1980 I was hired as an assistant editor at *Fine Woodworking*, and so I was able to resume doing woodworking as a hobby. I also got to enjoy the use of a brand-new shop that the editors set up as a test lab and photo studio. It didn't take me long to appreciate what high-quality woodworking machines could do, especially the thickness planer, and this meant handplaning became fun again.

As an editor at *Fine Woodworking* I also got to hear a lot of other woodworkers wax philosophical about woodworking. At one extreme, the hard-core hand-tool users saw the power-tool people as insensitive, macho Philistines. At the other, the power-tool users viewed the hand-tool users as hippie idealists more interested in the Zen of woodworking than in actually getting anything built. The only thing the two extremes had in common was the undying conviction that they both were right.

Most woodworkers fall somewhere between these two radical positions. They take advantage of power tools for their speed, capacity and ability to replicate results. And they pleurably employ hand tools for everything that's not worth a power-tool setup and for the refinements power tools can't achieve. The most

eloquent argument for this point of view was made several years ago by a teacher of furniture making who had a strong preference for bench work: Using power tools is like driving a Jeep from your cabin to the trail head. It's not a lot of fun but a lot better than walking for 30 miles down a rutted rural route. Using hand tools is like taking a long hike across the mountain and back, an experience infinitely richer and more spiritually fulfilling than the Jeep ride. For a number of years this attitude made sense to me. Plainly it favored hand tools, but it gave generous permission to use power tools when appropriate. How enlightened.

Change of heart

Now I'm not so sure about the hand-tool bias of this enlightenment. In the last 10 years, I've begun to discover that machine-tool woodworking can be immensely satisfying all by itself. The act of face-jointing a cherry board on a well-tuned jointer can be as rewarding as slicing through feathery walnut with a well-honed and adjusted smooth plane. And this kind of satisfaction can come from almost every machine-tool operation I carry out. But before this could happen, I had to make a commitment to buying reasonable quality in power tools and then to tweak their performance well beyond just what's acceptable. I mean doing things like taking the time (and a dial indicator) to set jointer knives within a tolerance of 0.001 in. Or adjusting all vibration out of a bandsaw. Or honing the mill marks out of machined cast-iron surfaces.

Unlocking the full potential of power tools requires as much understanding, skill and sensitivity as using hand tools. An experienced touch and a sharply attuned intuition play a vital role when a high-speed cutter engages an inscrutable, organic material like wood. I once watched a man lose two of his fingers when a panel-raising cutter encountered a punky knot in piece of poplar. The thing literally exploded. There's a lot more at risk here than imprecision, tearout and end-snipe. And it's a little ironic to find out that the machine-tool setups and material-handling techniques that are the safest also produce the best results.

It's very hard for most of us not to lust after manganese-bronze handplanes, brass-backed dovetail saws and rosewood mortising gauges. But once you get won over to machines, you discover a unique and abiding thrill to safely managing the perilous embrace of wood and fast-moving carbide and steel. Loving power tools for themselves and what they can do when carefully coaxed (and not just tolerating them for "appropriate" applications) has made my basement woodshop a much, much better place to spend a fair summer morning when most sane people are hiking or golfing or tending their gardens. □

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