



*Back to basics—
Chairmaker
John Brown in
his shop where
the only power
tool is a band-
saw. Brown
says the candle
reminds him to
work carefully.*

Good Work

Outspoken and unapologetic, a Welsh chairmaker makes a plea for hand tools

by John Brown

My grandmother used to tell me that most of life's ills were caused by men chasing money. Even 50 years ago, the poor old dear could not understand what all the rush was about. She had a theory that the heartbeat hadn't altered since time began and that the pace of life should be regulated by this fact. I didn't take any notice of her at the time, but recently, I've had cause to recall her words. The speed of modern life is out of synchronization with the human body. If we could slow our lives down a little, think of quality before quantity, there would be more time to savor the pleasant things before we are forced to rush on to something else.

Woodworkers are not excused from this malady. Every bit of literature, every handbill or periodical to do with the craft is packed with advertisements for machines. A young man interested in making things out of wood can be forgiven for believing that machines are a fundamental necessity. Hand tools have been relegated to the small advertisement section or antique dealers, as though they were relics of the past whose use went out with grandfather.

Save materials, and stay comfortable

The price of timber once seemed of little consequence. Now, with rain forest problems and a general scarcity, this has become a very

against these ills. But to mummify yourself in this way can only be to the detriment of careful work. Picture, if you will, a cabinet-maker working on a fine piece of oak furniture clad in a hard hat. I am sure the sense of control of the operator is impaired by wearing all this safety equipment.

Machines aid quantity, not quality

The reason for the introduction of machinery in the 19th century was to speed up the production in the factories. Water, then steam and, finally, electricity provided ample power, and in that great age of innovation, machines were invented to cope with more and more process. The owners cared not a jot for design or quality unless it affected sales. Quantity was the main criterion. "How can we make more profit?" they asked. Unskilled people could be trained to work a single-operation machine in days. The fact that these operators had no interest in their work and did the job for what money they could get interested no one, except people like John Ruskin, C.R. Ashbee and William Morris.

Since the last great war, it seems that these same principles have been adopted by modern woodworkers. Yet the motivation is entirely different. I have never known a craft woodworker who does the job only for money, or at least admits to this. Woodworkers pur-



"Tools talk to the craftsman. You will know when they are right. What the machine does by noisy, brute force you will be able to do with quiet cunning."

expensive raw material. A return to the use of hand tools, apart from being less wasteful, would add more value to this precious material. I fully appreciate the average woodworker cannot render tree trunks into planks. Handsawing huge bulk is pure sweat, so the use of a power saw is necessary. That is all that is required to lead a full and satisfying woodworking life.

Power machines are unfriendly, for they are very noisy and make a lot of unpleasant dust. Craft woodworking should be a creative activity, with the practitioners as artists. Surrounded by ugly, noisy, dusty machines, the woodworker does not have the environment in which to do good work.

There are two main health hazards from frequent use of machinery, apart from cutting off the fingers: dust and noise. Neither is instantly apparent, as is an amputation, but nevertheless they are just as dangerous. The most frightening is nasal cancer, which is closely associated with wood dust. And constant exposure to high levels of noise can damage the ears and lead to deafness.

Of course, you can wear protective clothing and apparatus

sue the craft because they love it. They enjoy working with wood, and they get great satisfaction from seeing a well-finished piece. They try their hardest to do fine work and to produce an artifact of delight. I don't suppose there has ever been a time when so much effort has gone into producing good work.

Unfortunately, a large part of the works on show are made by machines. And at what cost! Many thousands of dollars are spent on these machines, saws and re-saws, lathes, planers, thicknessers, spindle molders, mortising machines, doweling machines and biscuit joiners, dovetail attachments, belt sanders and portable machines of all kinds. New ones every week. Apart from the initial expense of this armory, there are attachments to buy, numerous cutters for different profiles and sawblades to be bought. Few of these things can be satisfactorily sharpened by the user. They have to be sent away. The operator becomes a mechanic producing precision engineered works. This has little to do with woodworking.

What about the extra time it takes to do a piece by hand? Well, it can take a little longer, that's true. You need to be well organized,

the workshop needs to be laid out properly and, above all, you must have a first-class bench. You must know your tools. Everything must be clean and sharp. Tools talk to the craftsman. You will know when they are right. What the machine does by noisy, brute force you will be able to do with quiet cunning.

I doubt there's much of a saving in machine work over hand work for the small, one-off maker. If you're an amateur, it doesn't matter, and the quality will be so much better. A professional will have to charge a little more. People will pay it. With the saving in capital cost, bank interest and the time-consuming business of setting up machines, you could be better off anyway.

It is difficult to know whether machine-mania was led by the woodworking press or the craftsman. I am inclined to the former opinion. It looks as though the machinery manufacturers have the technical press in a vise-like grip, leaving the humble hobbyist to believe that unless he buys the machines, he will be a second-class woodworking citizen. I was always led to understand that machines were there to do the tedious work and that the craftsman's skills should actually do the making. Gradually, the idea of what is tedious has been updated, for it is now possible to make compli-

cated pieces entirely with machinery. The only handwork left to be done is to lift the wood to the machine. I am sure the manufacturers will cope with this in time!

Classroom is no substitute for apprenticeships

It's a pity the apprenticeship system has gone, when young people were exposed for five years to good practices, working alongside skilled men. Pride in work, pride in a fine set of tools, I know this is now unfashionable, but there is nothing wrong with being proud of one's achievements. It is between a man and his God whether that pride is false or not. Some woodwork is quite tricky and needs a lot of practice. The wonder and joy as each hurdle is leaped has to be experienced to be believed. The material you work with is not uniform. It is moody, it can be deceptive, sometimes hiding faults until the very last moment of finishing, and you have to start all over again. Handwork breeds patience.

The kind of accuracy you can achieve cannot be measured in "thous." It's not necessary. I have heard of micrometers being used on tenons. Frankly, I find this ridiculous. Author Norman Potter tells the story of a visit to his workshop by a Gimson-trained cabinetmaker named Rex. Rex recalled how the famed English Arts-and-Crafts furnituremaker would run his finger along the under edges of a newly finished piece, saying, "Kindly, Rex, keep your edges kindly." You will find no specification called kindly edges in the standard woodworking textbooks.

I would not go so far as to say that there are no skills necessary to working machines. It is important to be able to read and interpret complicated instructions. What you end up with is engineering skills—precision engineering in wood. As a substitute for apprenticeship these days, we have training colleges. These young people, having been taught design and machine skills, feel they should come out of college and



The form is simple. John Brown's traditional Welsh chair in oak has simple lines and an elegant shape. Surfaces worked by hand have an unmistakable texture.



***A delicacy no machine can match**—A chair leg takes shape under a deftly used spokeshave. In skilled hands, the process is surprisingly quick. Brown lives and works in the coastal hills of southwestern Wales (right).*

jump straight into the first division. One or two cheekier ones do just this. The main skill required is in hiding machine marks. I suspect these young people never feel that wonderful, solid confidence of the apprentice who has just finished his five years, and with his beautiful handmade toolbox full of fine tools is about to set out in the world to do good work.

This piece was made by a person

Handmade work has soul, it has verve, a sparkle that a machine cannot reproduce. The apparent "perfection" of some machined operations has trapped the craftsman into feeling that this is the way it should be. There is no excuse for lazy or shoddy work, hand or machine, but it is nice to think that this table or this chair was made by a human being.

You often see people inspecting furniture minutely to see if all the joints are tight or if there is any slackness in the dovetails. Perhaps they are looking for graying pieces that cover a mistake. This annoys me. Do these people do the same to a painting in an art gallery? A firm I know makes one-off pieces, things like Welsh dressers and furniture in the Georgian style. The joinery is impeccable. This company has the latest in machines. Yet the furniture is so ugly it is possible to detect their work from a good distance.

When they first started, organic farmers were ridiculed by the establishment as "mud and muck" freaks. Now, demand for their product far outstrips supply, and with farming problems as they are, I think they will have the last laugh. No one has grasped this particular nettle when it comes to woodworking. I often feel that the craftsman of today is recreating in his little heaven the very hell that the industrialists of the last century were so soundly drubbed for. Woodworkers should look anew at their hand tools. Take the meanest, rustiest plane you have. Clean it, grind and sharpen the blade like a razor, and then set it up. Now, with the plane set very fine, run it over a scrap of oak. Hear the sound it makes, and feel the perfect finish. What a thrill!



I have worked with machines in other people's employ. I have owned some machines myself. Years ago, I examined what I was doing and went organic. I haven't regretted it once. It was a renewal of my love affair with wood. We must do our best to turn things round. We must educate ourselves and our customers to realize what quality really means, quality in making, quality in design and, finally, quality in life.

Craftsmen who agree with these sentiments should, at a certain date, give up their machines. Then they should tell everyone what they are doing, broadcast the message, print it on their note paper, make a statement. But what I have said is about as fashionable as advising people to sell their cars and take a bus or even walk. Real progress can only be spiritual progress. The calm and unhurried atmosphere in my workshop makes enough to pay the bills for a simple life, no more. □

John Brown lives and works near Newport, on the south coast of Wales. He is the author of Welsh Stick Chairs. Last year, he made 23 chairs by hand.