

A motif plaque

The House of Samworth now immortalised in a distinctive way by woodcarver **John Samworth**



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN SAMWORTH

1 Inspiration may be found when and where you least expect it, so grab it and record it whenever you can. Your camera phone is ideal for this. Recently, on a walk through Falmouth, I noticed a badly weathered stone carving over the entrance to King Charles the Martyr Church. There is a more modern replica carved on to the granite keystone over the back door. What appealed to me is the manner in which the letters entwine, binding themselves together, there to stay for eternity.

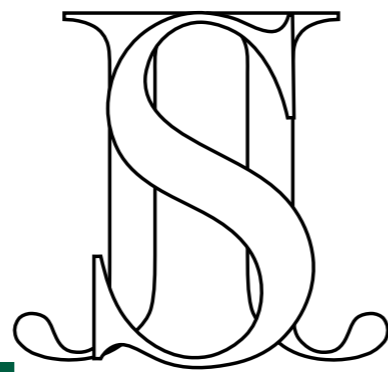
2 The initials of family members form the basis of my family's motif. By typing the letters into a computer

programme, it is simple to test a number of designs quickly. To keep the symmetry of the motif, consider reversing a letter as I have done here. The effect here is to join the two Js together with one S. You could keep your motif as simple as this or embellish it with other elements.

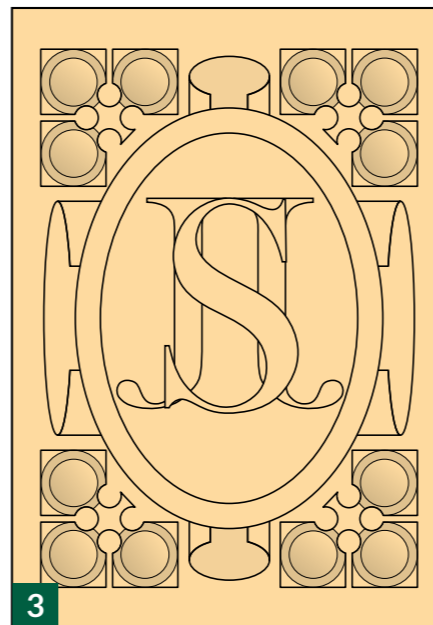
3 For my final design, I have framed the initials within an oval border. The space I intend to fill is rectangular, which leaves some awkward triangular corner spaces to fill. These may be filled with any design that you may have some association with or simply design which you like. I have chosen



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the traditional designs of the dogtooth and scrolls, because they add an air of age, an illusion of heritage to the whole design. The actual design is to be carved in relief into 20mm-thick lime wood of a full A4 paper size.

4 First, you should copy the design on to your wood. I prefer the technique of tracing or drawing designs on to the wood, because it begins the hand-eye learning process of the shapes, which helps in the understanding of the shapes within the design. Mark all around the sides of the wood for the depth of the carving. I would suggest an even depth of between 10mm and 15mm.

5 Start by taking out the wood from the centre of the dogtooth design. Make these circular holes using a 10mm No.8 gouge. Small plugs of wood can be quickly extracted leaving four tidy holes. The wood inside the hole is fractured by the cut, leaving the central cross design strong and intact. Repeat on all corners.

6 Using a parting tool, trace out the intricate sections of the design to prevent damage to the wood fibres in places that will later hold crisp, square edges. I have marked with an arrow the actual cut direction of the nearest incision, to work with the grain keeping the central oval crisp. Make the first cut in the waste wood. Swap hands and cut backwards on the far side, in the opposite direction as shown here. Remove the rest of the waste wood using a small flute or a veiner, down to the level of the central holes.

7 Remove the waste wood from the corners using a skew chisel. If the apex of the dogtooth design is in the way it may be lowered, but keep the green centre as the high point.

8 First with a flute gouge then with a broad flat gouge, square off and tidy up the edges of the design. Continue to reduce the height of the background around the entire plaque.

9 Tip: When clearing out the small channels between the dogtooth leaflets, it's better to carve into the centre of the design. If you carve away from the centre there is a tendency for the back of your gouge to run across the design, leaving an indent in the area we want to leave crisp and square.



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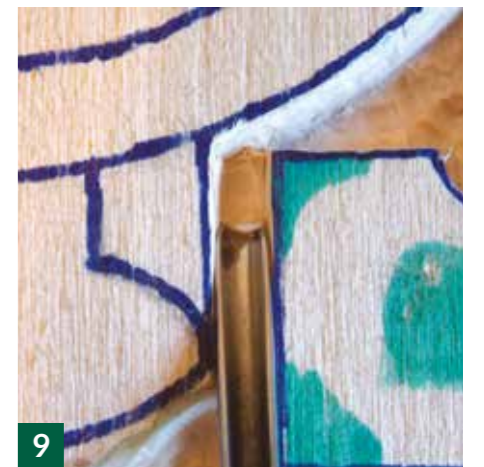
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10 To start the boss leaflet, find the grain. Here it is running left to right across the picture. Lower the level of the unmarked wood. Reverse the cut direction when cutting close to the outside edge. Make your initial cut with a veiner to prevent the wood from crumbling. Deepen and widen the circle around the centre.

11 I require the central boss to be the high point, about 1mm higher than the corners. I have shaved 2mm off the corners and started to insert a dip between the corners. ▶



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Here I have re-marked the corner tips with green and highlighted with blue the second side where to insert a dip.

12 The central boss requires rounding. Using a No.8 gouge, start to shave wood from the top, working all the time with the grain. To complete the edges, continue the shaving and as the gouge approaches the edge increase the angle sharply, so that eventually you are cutting down vertically.

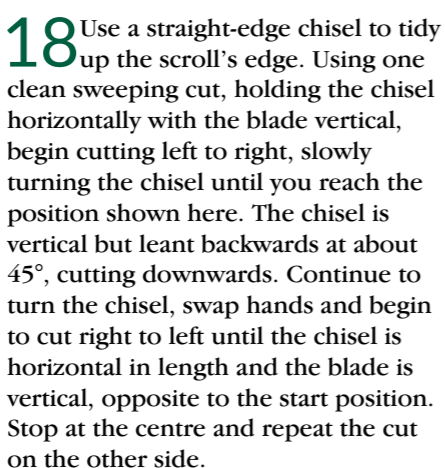
13 Your cut boss should look like the picture here. You can see how fine the shavings are, the underlying shape you are aiming for and the original high point still marked green. Shave this off too.

14 Tidy away the waste with a flute, ensure the central ring is low to catch a deep shadow, round off the corners of the leaflet and apply a small rounded chamfer to the edges (optional). Repeat the process on all the leaflets – there are 12 of these to cut, I got better at them as I practised. I would advise anyone cutting these for the first time not to proceed in order around the piece but to randomly cut them around the piece.

15 Take the background back to its final depth and smooth off the surface. To avoid stab marks appearing in the smooth surface, use a parting chisel to clean the shavings out of the angle.

16 Using a straight skew chisel, tidy the end of the scroll. This is a sideways, slicing cut with the grain. Stop at the top of the curve, swap hands and work in from the other direction. Ultimately, I want the lettering and the oval in the centre to be the highest points. Reduce the scroll's height by 2mm.

17 Invert a straight, small sweep gouge and round off the straight sides about a third of the way down from the top. This is because the bottom of the scroll will curve up to meet it, but this curve starts in the centre of the scroll. Use a flute to remove the wood from inside the scroll's corners. Do not cut back right to the edge – use the wood left above the depth line to make the curves flow as if one continual piece of paper.



19 You are aiming for this shape. The edges currently appear too thick, but the extra wood will be removed by the undercutting in the final stage.

20 With a flute, begin the process of removing the waste wood from the centre of the design, leaving the letters as raised wood. Note the stop cuts used to prevent the flute from slipping and the wood from splitting into the letter design. It is at this point the design's visual impact jumps out from the wood.

21 Using the straight skew straighten off the straight edges. Note that I still avoid the stab cut in favour of the sideways slicing cut. For me this leaves a clean finish.

22 Use a shallower sweep gouge, here a No.6 sweep with bullnose, to form the inside curves of the letters. Remember, on inside curves use a gouge with a greater sweep than the curve and on an outside curve use a gouge with a shallower sweep than the curve. A slicing cut is used to leave a cleaner finish than a stab. The bullnose is essential here – if the gouge was square, then the corners would be digging into the wood and the centre of the blade would not clean out the waste.

23 Cut out from the corners to prevent wood splitting along the grain. Once a small incision is made the edges can be safely tidied up. Continue all around the letters, lowering the visible parts of the back letters (the two Js) by 4.5mm.

24 Finish off the scrolls by undercutting the top fold of paper with a veiner. Start about 1mm in from the edge. This creates the illusion of a thickness to the paper fold. Finish off the scrollwork by undercutting the outside edges and shaving off the construction lines. Because I want this piece to have an appearance of age about it, it is important to leave the tool marks to show. These will catch and reflect the light, enhancing the design.

25 I have finished the piece in simple beeswax and hung it on the wall, just above head height. By applying wax, the polishing naturally brings out the high points, which play to the light and contrasts with the shadows. ■

