

Reviews

The Chest of Time

Inspired by a valuable new book, *Bill Ratcliffe* considers making a tool chest a rite of passage

As I write this, I am in the middle of a week teaching Keith, a student and now friend, how to make the lid for his traditional tool chest. This Covid-interrupted project started with him coming to my workshops near Ely, Cambridgeshire, 18 months ago. He came then to make the tool chest carcass, and now I'm supporting him for work on the lid.

I want to talk about a book I read earlier this year, titled *'The Warrington Chest, 1888'*, published by The Tools and Trades History Society (TatHs). I posted it on my Instagram feed, @cravenconservation, in June of 2021. To paraphrase myself, I said I had never been so pleased with a book I had ordered, and it provided an important insight into the lives and trades in 19th Century England. In my view you can get as much or as little as you wish from this book. For me, it appeals to the conservator and the maker in me, the historian, the teacher, the lifelong student, the collector, and the human. Many books cover the technical element of woodworking, and some others are historically based. This book appeals on many levels: the chest design, the personal stories, social history, marquetry techniques and the tool history.

Traditional nod

My rather lame title, *The Chest of Time*, is a nod to *The Warrington Chest* and its contents, a time capsule which has survived the test of time. It's also a firm nod towards the traditional tool chest in general, its continued use and its link with our predecessors, having in this case survived centuries. Keith's making of a tool chest demonstrates that despite all the technology we have in 2021, many woodworkers still have that connection and the desire to make and use tool chests. There are many popular books that discuss them and their making, but this one, written by chest owner Ted Cole and other contributors, is different in being based on the research of one remarkable historic example, covering several topics,



Keith (right) cutting dovetails in the making of his tool chest. Bill describes this as a rite of passage, making your own storage as well as learning valuable skills and building an embodiment of one's abilities and purpose and perseverance



from social history, to the people, tools and techniques of the late 19th Century.

In 1888, an 18-year-old Sheffield patternmaker, Ernest Warrington, made a tool chest to keep his tools safe. After Ernest's early death at the age of 27, the chest passed into the hands of his brother, Tom, also a patternmaker. After Tom's death in 1953, it was inherited by his daughter. She gave it to her neighbour, Bernard Broadhead, who also trained as a patternmaker. In 2018, when Bernard went into residential care, it was sold by his daughters, and bought by TATHS member, Ted Cole.

Remarkably, this chest has survived in near-perfect condition. It is skilfully and beautifully made, with exotic wood marquetry and veneer of an uncommonly high standard. It has the most unusual design with full-width and half-width tills and the most ingenious system of locking supports for the sliding tills. Recognising its uniqueness and its outstanding beauty,

Ted invited a group of tool enthusiasts and historians to help him tell this story of the chest, its tools, its context in Sheffield and the patternmaking trade and share this wonderful find with the world.

I do not wish to spoil your read, should you decide to get this book, however, I must mention some key sections, so join me on a whistle-stop tour, of sorts. The book starts by explaining how the chest came into the hands of current owner, Ted Cole. It is an interesting tale in itself. Chapter One then provides the context of the industry, plus living and working in Victorian Sheffield. I am sure many of us have old tools stamped 'Made in Sheffield', and an insight into the trades and areas of Sheffield will only make you appreciate the workers and makers even more.

Then we have the Warrington family history. This is so well researched, including a family tree, street maps and photographs, bringing to life 18-year-old Ernest. Chapter Three describes the tool



Bill with his own tool chest, and above his head the sort of framesaw you can find in *The Warrington Chest*, and being used to cut veneers at Hay Cabinet Shop in Colonial Williamsburg

chest in detail, with the use of quality images, leading readers to the interior, which is a highlight of the chest. Once the lid is opened it reveals the glory of the stunning marquetry. The till/tray lids and the inside of the chest lid are adorned with boxwood, ebony, pitch pine, mahogany, holly, satinwood and brazilwood.

The skills used include marquetry, stringing, cross-banding and the main point to make is that I cannot do justice to the quality of the interior. You have to see it. Which is why the book is so valuable, demonstrating the number of different skills that had been included in the making of this chest. Above all, Chapter Four is devoted to the stunning marquetry, focusing on the 'how' by completing some re-enactment and the making of replica veneer panels. This shows the traditional techniques in a step-by-step format, including the use of a frame saw, as demonstrated by harpsichord maker Edward Hay and his apprentice cutting veneer by hand with a frame saw at the Hay Cabinet Shop in Colonial Williamsburg. There are images of the key timber veneers used, and the use of a mitre box for forming chevron patterns.

Anyone with a passion for the history of traditional woodworking tools will love Chapter Five, offering you a fully-stamped tool kit to study, beautifully photographed, listed and researched. There's even an Appendix listing all the tools in the chest. The book concludes with excellent drawings of the chest's construction and a full 'Table of Dimensions & Components.' This is such valuable information; facts and figures for a historic tool chest for study purposes or perhaps to attempt to replicate one day. I am still considering that as a future project.

So, what is it about woodworkers and tool chests? Is it more than something practical for storage? We, people in general, like to organise our lives, we have our lives in boxes, we live in a box full of smaller boxes, we have cabinets, drawers, filing cabinets, sheds and numerous forms of storage. Just look around your home or workshop and see how many boxes, drawers, containers and cabinets there are. Having a tool chest also appeals to the 'collector' inside us all. We can assemble a collection of our favourite tools, curate it, take joy in admiring its contents. The expenditure-guilt is offset by all the amazing objects we aim to make.

Centuries ago, people completed lengthy apprenticeships, and buying tools was relatively expensive so they made many of their own. Your tool chest contained a massive investment in time and money. Your trade, and your ability to earn a living, were contained in a lockable but mobile chest, and your tools were stamped to



Bill's own tool chest, which he built based on lessons from *The Anarchist's Tool Chest* by Christopher Schwarz

identify them as your own. Stamps were used more to protect tools than stamp items of furniture made with the tools.

I accept we are all different, but for me the tool chest is much more than simply practical storage. For me it is a connection with the history of our craft. Making a tool chest was once part of your apprenticeship and a rite of passage for a cabinetmaker, patternmaker or related tradesperson. The Warrington Chest is a beautiful example, and we are fortunate that it is honoured in this amazing book.

Initial training

I have made several tool chests over the years. Some were at important stages of my learning journey, like the one made during my initial training when I was 17 years old. Then there was the one I completed as the first project at the start of my Degree in Furniture Restoration in High Wycombe, as a continuation of the town's apprentice traditions in the furniture trade. More recently I made the tool chest I've always wanted to make. It has been probably the most enjoyable making process of my career, not the most challenging, but so rewarding. I enjoy working from a tool chest. It makes me disciplined about my tool kit, it protects my tools and I have everything at hand. Opening my tool chest starts my working day and closing it is a good feeling at the end of a productive eight hours.

The inspiration for this build was reading the excellent *Anarchist's Tool Chest* by

Christopher Schwarz, which I am sure many of you have read.

His book provides historical background, plus information on much of the practical making process. Yet you're not spoon-fed every detail; you need to problem-solve, think about your own tool kit, how you work and make a tool chest to suit yourself. This is an important part of the learning process for any woodworker; not just the making and tool handling, but also the thought-process and the planning. This helps you understand construction methods and the flow of tasks required. In my opinion that is also why it has come to be seen as a rite of passage.

I would argue the most important quote from the *Anarchist's Tool Chest* refers to the stage when you complete the making of your chest: "After you build your tool chest you should be able to fit every tool you need into it. Set it at your right hand (or left, if you are sinister). And let it serve as a reminder that it holds the tools to build almost anything you can design. And more important, it holds the tools that can release you from consumption, decay and further consumption."

My tool chest sits at my right hand and is used daily. I would encourage everyone to have a go at making one, for the enjoyment, the learning and of course, to have a chest for your tools. My advice, for what it is worth, is to read a few tool chest books, make notes, pull out the nuggets of information that resonate with you, make a plan and then go for it. Depending on



Cutting multiple dovetails is an ideal way to embed skills and display one's abilities

the space you have, there are many plans and designs out there. For inspiration, *The Warrington Chest* is a great place to start, and the *Anarchist's Tool Chest* is a more holistic resource, superb with practical information, in addition to the history. Then there are the myriad of other designs, like Mike Pekovich's much smaller portable tool chest. These projects are also a useful combination of working off plan, so you can customise elements of the interior to suit your tools, which allows you to be more creative too.

If you find dovetailing a challenge, then what better way to focus the mind and practise, practise, practise? A project that can require more than 100 dovetails is ideal for embedding that skill.

We have now come full circle. One of the main reasons why the tool chest was an ideal apprentice piece or training project, was to perfect and demonstrate your skill, the chest itself being a bonus. But it is not simply about needs, it is about the learning and the connection with our craft. The stunning Warrington Chest, built by an 18-year-old patternmaker in 1888, may be all the inspiration you need to make something far less ornate but nevertheless of a quality to adorn your workspace and to protect your tools.

The Warrington Chest can be bought from taths.org.uk and is good value at £12.50 plus p&p. Authors and contributors include owner Ted Cole (@cole.ted), Jack Metcalfe (@jackmetcalfe), Simon Barley, Jane Rees, Andy Tuckwell and Nick White. TATHS is a charity founded in 1983 to further the knowledge and understanding of hand-tools and the trades of the people who used them. This is an important job and buying this book supports them in this task.

New Books

Matthew Lepper reviews Richard Wile's new book, and asks: 'What is sharp?'

What is 'sharp'? The latest book by Richard D. Wile, *A Sharpening Handbook*, tackles that very question. Drawing on his personal experience as a woodworker, tool designer, and luthier, Richard breaks down the one thing that undoubtedly frustrates many a woodworker as they blaze their own journey through the many genres or types of woodworking.

His emphasis on manual methods makes this the perfect one-stop reference for novice to intermediate hand-tool woodworkers.

In each chapter he takes a deep dive into the basics of sharpening, steel/metallurgy, abrasives/sharpening media with exceptional photographs, profile charts, and geometric illustrations that this visual learner greatly appreciated!

As someone who considers themselves a hobbyist, I quickly recognised that sharpening aid engineering and media choices have evolved and that I have failed to keep up. Most of us seek efficiency wherever we can find it, and Richard's suggestions for sharpening workflow will likely make sharpening your tools much easier and repeatable.

Whether your chosen tool is a hand plane, chisel, carving gouge, or skew chisel, Richard offers tips to help research and develop the sharpening solution that will work best for you.

Along the way he offers multiple solutions including my personal favorite, the ruler trick, which was popularised by David Charlesworth in the 1970s. "A thin metal ruler," Richard writes, "is placed along one edge of your finest stone and the blade placed on top with the edge near the opposite side of the stone. A few short passes with light pressure parallel to the side of the stone is enough to complete the ruler trick."

It's a shortcut of sorts, but for those that have my problem of bringing home vintage hand planes to give them a second life, this will save you a lot of time that could be directed at woodworking. *A Sharpening Handbook* is published by Algrove Publishing and is 104pp.



The Stick Chair Book by Christopher Schwarz is something of a tome for chairmakers. *The Cleft Stick* is a brilliant digi-newsletter for anyone interested in coppicing and is free and worth downloading at ncfed.org.uk.

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The Federation of Naturalists

The Cleft Stick

News from NCFed and the UK Coppice Industry

Gathering and AGM 2021

The Federation's Annual Gathering and AGM was held during October, near Reading in South Cambridgeshire, hosted by the Chilterns and Thames Valley Coppice Group. It had been a long time coming and was a huge success. More than eighty coppice workers, friends, representatives from allied trades and organisations turned up to chat, exchange information and simply enjoy being with a group of lovely, like-minded people. Full report inside.

A Pint With... Nick Gibbs, the well-respected editor, writer and public speaker, talks to CS about...

Take a Better Picture How Harold guides you to better use of your camera. How to produce images that will make an impact on your social media channels (and NCFed's too).

Safer Forestry There has been a fall in fatalities in the forestry industry this year. Forestry workers' safety remains a key issue. Important advice to keep us all safe in the woods.

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