

The 20-minute book review

Connexion journalists speed-read the latest releases on France. In the interests of fairness, each book gets 20 minutes of reading time.



Antique Woodworking Tools

David R. Russell £90

John Adamson, Cambridge

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FURNITURE maker David Linley – otherwise known as David David Albert Charles Armstrong-Jones, Viscount Linley – says of this book in his foreword that it “shows clearly the kinds of tools that enabled craftsmen to make the most beautiful pieces of furniture and other items”.

And, in its own way, it does exactly that.

An initially daunting piece of literature – it weighs in at nearly 4kg and is big enough to make a good coffee-table – it collects together items dating from four million years ago to the present day. From stone choppers and scrapers to sharpening stones, axes, planes, saws and drills...

The tools that have shaped history and, in many cases, the histories of the craftsmen who designed the tools to create the kind of work that they saw in their heads.

This is a mammoth project by Russell, who has lived in Bordeaux for 20 years, and as Linley says, every person who has

picked up a tool has wondered how it came into being and just who thought of such a cunning way of making complicated tasks simple. Here are the answers.

Take the boatbuilding plane discovered in Denmark that dates from 200-450AD – its wooden shape is recognisable as the tool that can be found on every DIY fan’s

workbench – unchanged over nearly two millennia.

Or the claw hammer that was recovered from the Thames mud and which dates from 1530. It looks as if it could still spring a couple of nails out of some wood and bang them straight back in.

Russell also tells how the tools were developed. The Great Fire of London in 1666 led to craftsmen developing new complex joinery methods and cre-

ating mouldings as they were encouraged to use soft fir wood instead of oak.

Elsewhere, he links the length of a cricket pitch and the grid pattern that dominates American city plans. It’s all due to London astronomy professor Edmund Gunter who designed a 22yd chain in the 1620s for land surveying which led to cities being built in square blocks of 10 acres – or 10 times 10 chains.

