

Collecting: Tools



1 of 2



2 of 2
Coach-maker's compass plough plane

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The heft of a hammer, the balance of an axe or the certainty of a saw are the links between man and material

It is a pity that the old usage "handicraftsman" is now generally shortened, and that "craftsman" is applied much more generally, weakening the primary sense of manual dexterity with tools. It is kindness to hand allied with fitness to purpose that makes many traditional tools so appealing. The heft of a hammer, the balance of an axe or the certainty of a saw are the links between man and material. There is poetry in the curl of wood shaving from a well-run smoothing plane.

Woodworking tools take this further, since they are themselves made with tools, in part from the material on which they are to be used. Toolmaking itself used to be a handicraft, and even modern machine-made tools can have the precision and rightness that elevates them above other utensils. The makers were fully aware that beauty should be coupled with function, demonstrated by the decoration proudly lavished on many early implements. In describing a jointer in his 1688 Academy of armory Randle Holme wrote: "... all the difference is in the Tote or Handle, which every Workman maketh according to his own Fancy, all other parts in the stock agreeing."

This understanding seems to have been instinctive for David Russell, who over the past 35 years has amassed probably the world's largest collection of antique woodworking tools from the Stone Age to the 20th century. The sumptuous catalogue, which weighs in at 9lb and might require a carpenter's bench rather than a mere lectern, published by John Adamson is being launched with an exhibition of about 60 choice examples at Bernard J Shapero Rare Books, 32 St George Street, London W1 from December 1 to 11.

Born in 1935, the younger son of a worker in a Cumbrian gunpowder-keg factory, Mr Russell was apprenticed to a joiner in Kendal. His first love was the foreman's Norris jointing-plane, which he was not allowed to touch however much his fingers tingled. Seven years later his passion was assuaged, but not extinguished, when he bought his first Norris for £5 in a Sunday antiques market. Now he has around 200 of the varied planes made by T.Norris & Son of Lambeth and London from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century.

Mr Russell did not become a joiner, however. He did his national service with the Loyals, whose depot was in Preston, serving in Malaya. "I went in as a boy, and after 18 months I came out a bit of a bastard," he recalls. Thereafter he went into the building trade, at first in Bournemouth and London with Wimpey, and then in partnership with his brother and former fellow apprentice, back in Cumbria. As well as homes they built the first supermarket in the area and several schools. By the end of his career his company, by then Russell Palmer Ltd, had 250 employees.

Throughout, his passion for tools and wood persisted. His brother took to wood-turning as a hobby, and he became an accomplished carver. The collection continued to grow. Planes are at the heart of it – unsurprisingly, because there are so many different types designed to perform specialised tasks – but there are also axes, anvils, hammers, chisels, spokeshaves, saws, drills, compasses, bevels, plumb bobs and many others. His collector's instinct – he also has a library of fine ornithological books – has inevitably meant that he has not "been able to resist acquiring tools from many different trades, some of which have nothing to do with wood", among them hatters' planes and such exotics as an Inuit walrus tusk snow cutter or a Sumatran spearhead made from meteorite metal.

Retirement to France gave access to new markets for French and Continental tools, and the Dordogne is also an area in which knapped flints and ancient stone implements are found.

The catalogue not only lists and lavishly illustrates some 1,556 items, but also makers' stamps and associated material, such as Dürer's great engraving – copper, not wood, alas – *Melancholia*, which includes numerous tools and instruments, among them a smoothing plane of a type otherwise only known from the 18th century onwards. The publisher John Adamson has contributed a knowledgeable introductory history, and there are shorter essays on subjects such as the sash window, which it suggests may be an English invention rather than French or Dutch as supposed. Sashes gave rise to tools such as moulding and skew mouth fillister planes, ploughs and dowelling boxes. Wheels, coaches, violins, barrels and furniture all need their own tools. Some tools developed local characteristics. There are very useful histories of the principal makers and firms, including the Holtzapfel dynasty, makers of practical tools as well as lathes for ornamental turning.

This is a timely publication; as David Linley notes in his foreword, a feature of the Victoria and Albert Museum's new furniture galleries, planned to open in 2012, will be displays of tools.