



THE FURNITURE HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

No. 183

AUGUST 2011

Antique Woodworking Tools; Their Craftsmanship from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century. David R. Russell, with Photographs by James Austin. Published by John Adamson, 2010. 528 pp. £90.00

It has always seemed to me that if one is to understand antique furniture one really ought to have some knowledge of how it was made and so one should have at least an awareness of the tools that were used, whether they be braces, ploughs, awls, adzes or planes; of these, most will recognize a plane but what about the others?

A brace is an old word for a hand-powered drill for boring holes, while a plough was a special, complex adjustable plane to cut rebates. An awl, also known as a bradawl, was a small tool used to start a hole before using a brace, and an adze was an axe where the head is set at right angles to the handle and the tradesman stands astride the plank to smooth out the wood prior to planning, Windsor chair-makers also might use an adze to shape the seat or saddle of the chair.

The written history of tools is quite recent, probably the first books were the volumes by W. L. Goodman in the early 1960s on the history of planes and plane makers and then in 1975 came Ralph Salaman's authoritative *Dictionary of Tools used in the Woodworking and allied trades, c. 1700–1970*. Salaman's book is, I believe, the gold standard by which any book concerning the history of wood working tools must be judged. However, it only has line drawings and no photographs whereas David Russell's book has the most splendid photographs, and at the end of the book is a very useful illustrated list of makers' marks.

The book is essentially the catalogue of David R. Russell's 40 year pursuit of old tools and as such there are over 900 colour illustrations on 528 pages showing the 2000 tools in his collection ranging in date from some Stone Age axes through to mid-twentieth century planes. After the pages of Contents, Foreword by David Linley, Preface and Introduction the next twenty pages deal with the very early tools from the Early Palaeolithic to the Roman period. One can see the extraordinary manual dexterity required to make these ancient tools while to hold such a tool is to immediately realise how fit for purpose they were and in the case of some tools from the Roman period just how little change there has been over 2000 years.

After this initial section of very early tools one comes to the heart of this substantial book. Much the greater part concerns the woodworking plane, in all their myriad shapes and forms — all dictated by the use to which they were originally put. Continental planes, and indeed many tools, were much more decorative than their British counterparts; much like the furniture that they were used to make. A joiner or cabinet maker would have had dozens of planes of all sorts, long 'jack planes' for preparatory work, slightly smaller planes for cutting rebates, and many moulding planes such as the matched pairs to cut 'hollows and rounds' so producing the common scotia and bolection mouldings. All the tradesman's tools would have been kept in a large box with a plain rough exterior and so often with a fine interior display of inlay and marquetry work made by the man himself (Fig. 34–5).

Inside the tool-box, besides the many planes, there would have been hammers, saws, bevels and try-squares to achieve the correct angles for cutting and often made from brass and rosewood, stamped or engraved with the maker's name, and sometimes a succession of owner's names. Also illustrated, and also originally stored in the tool-box, are fine cut-steel compasses, the more elaborate ones usually being French or Dutch, but important tools for marking out. Rulers were also vital tools and the book illustrates a number of ivory rulers that folded to go into the toolbox, or pocket. Finally of the smaller items that David Russell has collected, which are wonderfully illustrated, are little plumb-bobs — almost one of the oldest and least altered of tools; the plumb-bob is simply a weight attached to a string to achieve a vertical line. Russell has shown more than two dozen, some made from bronze while others are turned and inlaid ivory or bone, most only about 2–3 inches long (Pl 269–95).

When looking at old tools it is often possible to see the sweat marks remaining from the way the tradesman held it and also to see the name stamped into the wood. This is particularly true of planes and the name was needed because they were his sole means of employment. The loss of one's tools, as happened to Thomas Chippendale's workmen after a fire in 1755, reduced them to penury; so Chippendale and his partner Rannie set up a lottery to raise money to buy new tools for them.

The book is large format, over 10 by 13ins and weighing nearly 9lbs; production standards are of a very high order and so the quality and variety of the photographs make the book good value, for anyone interested it will be a very good investment and a superb reference book.

Treve Rosoman.
June 2011.