

## The Hand Plane Mystique

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Among all the hand and power tools that I have learned to use, hand planes occupy a special position. Among the Japanese pull-type saws, chisels, mortise gauges, routers, jigs and lathes, hand planes most represent the experience of learning to be a craftsman, what it was like for me to acquire the competence I needed to get to my next level of development as a woodworker.

When I see other woodworkers struggling to understand or accept their obsession with some new-to-them tool or technique, I remember what handplanes meant to me.

At first, handplanes offered a confusing range of choices and decisions I was not prepared to make. First off, seemingly sane, prudent people said that handplanes were indispensable tools in their work. And yet, how could I be so unable to even take a shaving?

Then there was the wide price range and my reluctance to waste money that I needed to spend on other tools. I needed experience to decide whether to use hand planes seriously and, if so, which ones to buy. But I had to buy one and learn to use it in order to get the experience.

So I studied, jumped in, got some experience, changed my mind, studied some more, made some more decisions, and so forth. Working with planes led me to learn about types of steel alloys, sharpening methods, properties of wood species, how to read woodgrain, and on and on.

Of course, there were many conflicting opinions from other people along the way. Some knew what they were talking about, but some were just pilgrims like me, enthusiastic about their latest progress. This experience, which lasted more than a year, represents the

essence of learning the wider craft of woodworking.

I was skeptical, to say the least, even though many craftsmen considered hand planes to be much more important than I had thought. Squaring up a board with a miter box and hand plane had been the first thing that I had attempted in Junior High shop class and it was the beginning of the end between me and the shop teacher, Mr. Pomeroy. For many years afterwards, I considered planes as a necessary last resort when the table saw and jointer were wrong for the task or had not produced the desired result.

I had a few planes, but the only ones I used at all were a Stanley #4, and a Stanley #9 block plane look-alike. (I did not know them by those names. They were my *bigger plane* and my *smaller plane*.) I had not learned to sharpen either one very well. I had inherited a low-angle block plane and a wooden dovetail plane, but did not even know what they were.

Despite my skepticism, I played around with my #4. Progress leapt forward when I found Charlesworth's article in *Fine Woodworking* on tuning up a hand plane. I spent a few hours flattening the sole of the #4, smoothing the frog, etc. Then I bought a new, thicker, harder Hock plane iron. Finally, I managed to sharpen it correctly.

Soon I was making thin shavings with a minimum of effort. (Luckily, I practiced on mahogany scraps instead of oak.) As I practiced, I found that my technique improved considerably.

This was strangely satisfying, very encouraging, and tended to reduce my scepticism about the whole subject. Actually, I think I was hooked right there. I realized that

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my former frustration was inevitable-- planing wood requires a properly set up (fettled) plane, a razor-sharp, dead flat blade and a bit of technique.

My reading had taught me two more things: the variety of hand plane types and the range of prices were surprising and confusing. Regarding variety, if a hand tool catalog was dazzling, Patrick's Blood and Gore website was disorienting. What were all these planes used for, and which were still useful in the power tool era?

Regarding price, I could buy a new Stanley #4 for about \$65 or a new Clifton #4 for \$300. What in the world did a \$300 plane offer that a \$65 plane did not? Garret Hack's book answered some of my questions about the uses of hand planes, but not the second question. Why would anybody but a collector buy a \$300 plane. What did I need? Where should I start?

My skepticism returned. My Stanley #4 worked fine, I thought. Still, people who seemed to know had little good to say about modern Stanley planes, and spoke well of the Lie-Nielsen and Lee Valley planes. I bought a Lee Valley medium shoulder plane and a Stanley #90 Rabbet plane. The difference in quality between the LV and all my other planes was striking. Although I doubt that I will ever buy the extreme top-market planes, the value of a LV (and presumably, LN) plane is now obvious to me. They arrive ready to use, except perhaps for a bit of honing. This removes one significant barrier to learning.

I began to appreciate how personal using a hand plane becomes. Hand planes represent a confluence of practical wood-working and the esthetics of the work itself. Planing is very repetitive. You have to notice which way the grain of the wood is running. You begin to notice how the plane feels when

it is cutting well, how the tote fits your hand, whether the sole needs a bit of oil from beside your nose or a wipe with a waxy rag.

You notice the appearance of the shavings. A difference of just thousandths of an inch in the depth of cut and the opening of the mouth may make the difference between success (smooth shaving) and failure (tear-out).

A bit of backlash in the adjuster knob really does become a nuisance. A spot of rust on the plane body or the back of the blade becomes a blemish.

I recognized that my conversion had become irreversible when I began to wish for molding planes so that I could hand-trim edges, especially round overs and rule joints; and for router planes so that I could clean out dadoes. I even tried (not very successfully) to use a router bit held in my fingers as a plane, to finish fairing the edge of a molding.

I was hooked. I had studied and practiced my way out of confusion and developed a valuable new skill. This experience increased my empathy for the struggles that other beginning woodworkers experience.

It also changed my attitude about my potential as a woodworker and my strategy to improve. I could learn what I needed, but I had to take the plunge, so to speak. Studying and listening to others is useful, of course, but it is very difficult to separate valuable advice from the posturing of another novice who may know less than I do. Once I got some hands-on experience, I could find my way through the maze of conflicting opinions. And it was fun.

(For more specific facts about hand planes, see *Notes & Reflections*, Chapter 27: Hand Planes.)