

A turning journey

Mike Macey talks to Mark Baker about his turning ventures



My place of work is now Grampy's Workshop and has been since I took early retirement five years ago. I'm 64, married and have two daughters and two wonderful grandchildren. I live in Bishop's Cleeve, Cheltenham, where in Grampy's Workshop I make things I want to make, but not necessarily to sell.

All my working life has been spent in engineering – 43 years with one company. Brief work history: craft apprenticeship, toolmaker, jig & tool designer both on the board and CAD, then finally production engineer. I have always liked wood but when at school I couldn't get on with woodwork and turned my attention to metalwork – it didn't break so easily.

BEGINNINGS IN TURNING

When I was still working five years ago I asked my daughter for a woodturning lesson as a Christmas present but then changed my mind, deciding it wasn't

such a good idea while I was still working. So instead she bought me a year's membership for Gloucestershire Association of Woodturners (GAW) and I have never looked back.

I have always liked wood, even as a small child. In fact, I still have small pieces of coloured wood (spalted) from that era. Living in Wiltshire at the time gave me access to trees, fields, and farmers' harvest times. A boy's true adventure.

Moving on, the opportunity arose to purchase an entire workshop, which I installed in my garage, the loft of which I insulated and doors of which I replaced with new, insulated ones. I was ready to turn with my new workshop. My daughters bought me a rustic wood sign saying Grampy's Workshop and every time my grandson, Samuel, comes to visit he has his toolbelt and toolbox with him ready to make a project of his liking. He has also made some shavings on the lathe.

The first piece I made was a pine bud vase for a novice challenge competition for GAW. I attended novice training sessions with GAW, using experienced turners as tutors and during this time I made a dibber and a small bowl. How pleased was I to take these items home and how surprised were the family to see what I had achieved in one day?

INFLUENCES AND DEVELOPMENT

I must admit I prefer the natural look of wood, to see its grain, colour, texture and features rather than it being coloured. I do admire Richard Kennedy's work and have tried making his tree bowls. Also my past history in engineering allows me to do more technical projects in wood.

Turning is a learning curve and my biggest mistake in the workshop is probably a 350mm platter that was virtually done apart from some final finishing and polishing. Cracks were

apparent and I started the lathe. There was little vibration so I thought I would just increase the speed through the vibration. Wrong – the platter shattered. Lesson learned.

In order to learn more I continue taking full advantage of the professional demonstrators we have at our GAW monthly meetings. There is always something new to take in and digest from them. As and when I do have a problem I usually seek out answers from the more experienced turners in the club. I also now feel competent enough to give others advice when asked.

My next step in my woodturning development is to become an approved AWGB tutor. I already do tutoring with GAW so it would be nice to have the seal of approval from AWGB.

Quick-fire questions

WHAT WAS YOUR ODDEST EXPERIENCE?

I had a tree root that looked very interesting and I thought I could turn it into something unusual. After machining 50% of it the trouble started. Everything I touched it with, was ruined/blunted – turning tools, bowsaw blade and bandsaw band. I think there must have been something very hard in the surrounding soil that impregnated the root wood. I won't be trying that again.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR MOST SATISFYING PROJECTS TO DATE?

Successful completion of major projects such as the clock, closely followed by the cryptex, egg and, of course, the tree bowl. Each of these has given me great satisfaction.

WHAT'S THE BEST BIT OF TURNING ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

I'm not sure I can name one – it's more of a case of learning properly, understanding what you are being told and ensuring you try to put it into practice.

HAVE YOU EVER GIVEN UP ON A PROJECT?

No I don't recall that I have, although I may have put the project to one side in order to think a problem over. I have a mechanical clock that I have planned to put into a new turned housing and this project has come unstuck and has been put to one side. I will get back to it in time.

Quite often before starting a project I give it a great deal of thought regarding the method of manufacture etc. That comes from my background and in some cases it causes additional work in order to make the project easier to create.



Bowl within a bowl

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE TYPE OF WOODTURNING ?

If anything I prefer bowl-style turning over spindle but both have their merits. I do enjoy technical pieces such as the egg, the cryptex etc. Planning is the key here, always thinking one step ahead, in particular to workholding.

My favourite wood is probably yew and basically any spalted wood. The surprise is uncovering the grain and its secrets.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCES IN TURNING/CARVING NOW TO WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED?

I've only been in the hobby for five years so not too much has changed on the lathe area from what I have seen. Probably the biggest change has been the advancement in the advertising of carbide tools. Although I have a couple of carbide tools my preference is for HSS.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PIECE OF EQUIPMENT?

That's a difficult question as each piece of equipment has its own merits. I suppose it has to be my Axminster lathe with its swivel headstock and large capacity. As well as turning large items you can still turn pens and smaller items. This was an upgrade from a midi Axminster lathe, which I still use on training days at the club. It's closely followed by the micro milling machine and bandsaw.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?

I would like to see more youngsters getting involved – at shows the interest shown by them is amazing.

WHAT ARE YOUR LIKES AND DISLIKES REGARDING THE WORLD OF TURNING?

My main dislike is the dust. It gets everywhere and, although I have a wall-mounted filtration system, it still covers the workshop. You only have to look at the front filter to see what is airborne.

I like most things regarding turning, particularly uncovering the grain and features in the various woods and then the finishing process which can turn your work into a finely tuned piece of 'art'.

WHAT HELPFUL ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR OTHER TURNERS?

Join a club and learn to turn first hand with experienced turners rather than relying on social media. Your experience at the club will put you in a better position to understand the pros and cons of all turning equipment. The last thing you want to do is buy machines and tools, only to find they're unsuitable at a later date when you are more knowledgeable.

TOP TIP/HINT FOR FELLOW TURNERS ?

Join a club, if only for the demonstrations. You learn so much and it opens your eyes to what can be done.



Peter Rabbit's Easter egg



Little people in matching cups



Wooden mechanical clock made by hand



Cryptex made from boxwood