

THE BUCKLEBURY BOWL TURNER

Some reminiscences made 20 years ago

When I was at boarding school in Berkshire in the 1930s, having little interest and even less skill in cricket, I used to spend my summer afternoons exploring the countryside by bicycle. Thus it was I discovered the Bucklebury bowl turner, and thereafter spent many happy hours watching the old man at work. He has been dead many years now, and the shed where he worked is pulled down, but in his day he had a certain fame since he was believed to be the last man in England working with a pole lathe. His tools and lathe are now at the Museum of Rural Life in Reading.

George Lailey was of the fourth generation, at least, to have practised turnery at Bucklebury. The business, he told me, had formerly been a very thriving one, making a wide variety of objects, and in his grandfather's time employed six men. These were probably not all turners, since they used to fell and convert their own timber, and I had the impression that other woodwork was also undertaken. But at the time I knew him, George Lailey worked alone and his raw material came from a sawmill in the form of blocks of elm about 12 inches square and 4 inches thick – the grain running longitudinally. His sole production was of shallow bowls which were sold at the door or to some branch of the tourist trade as it then existed.

The workshop, which stood by itself in the middle of Bucklebury Common, was a substantial timber building about 20 feet long by 10 feet broad. The door was in the centre of one side flanked by a window each side. As one entered, to the left was a pile of timber in front of which was a low chopping block and a seat. The first process in making a bowl was to take a piece of square elm and trim with a hand axe roughly to the shape of the outside of a bowl. This took some time and was done with such care that the amount of rough timber needed to be turned off at each end was minimal. At one end was a centre hole, and at the other three small sharp blades. In use, these blades were driven with a mallet into the centre of the flat side of a prepared block. The mandrel was then looped into the strap so that the beginning and end of the loop was towards the turner. The mandrel was fitted to the headstock and, with a sharp blow, the point of the tail poppet driven into the centre of the elm block. Finally the wedge below was knocked tight. Thus, when the treadle was pressed down, the work was spun towards the turner and, let go, the pull of the pole reversed the turns.

I remember that, apart from the perennial joy of watching an object take shape under a man's hands, my youthful eye was fascinated by the way in which the strap, going up and down, appeared to 'walk' to and fro along the mandrel at each stroke. I remember also a characteristic creaking as the strap pulled the pole down.

When the outside of the bowl was finished the turner took up his mallet and, leaning over the lathe, knocked back the wedge holding the back poppet. The half-completed bowl was then taken out and turned round. But before replacing it the old man pulled down on the strap until he could grasp the pole and move the strap along to a new position, each place defined by a couple of nails sticking out of the pole. An

equally primitive system varied the effective length of the treadle crossbar. So accurate were these arrangements that I never once saw the strap slip off, though it appeared in constant danger of doing so.

Immediately in front of the turner was a wooden tool rest and behind him a bar so fixed that by leaning against it he could exert greater pressure on the work. It was on the other end of this bar that I used to sit and watch. All the tools he used were hook chisels. While the sharp U-curve of their cutting edges left inevitably a series of ridges on the outside, for turning the inside of a bowl their shape had a special advantage. The shanks of the chisels were curved in a horizontal plane, so that it was possible to make a narrow cut following the shape of the bowl without removing the rest of the wood. Of course by the time the cut had reached nearly to the centre of the bowl, at the bottom, it was impossible to see the cutting edge, and it must have taken a great deal of skill and experience to do this by 'feel' rather than by eye. But the saving in labour and timber was enormous, and could only be achieved with such tools. From the core was later turned another smaller bowl, and from the core of that a third, yet smaller. In former times, I was told, even the last pieces were turned into flat mushroom shapes, to make the tops of hat stands in milliners' shops.

Before removing the work from the lathe the Bucklebury turner invariably put two pencil lines, one each side of the rim, and between these, against the spinning wood, pressed a piece of yellow wax crayon. Once out of the lathe, a sharp sideways tap broke out the central core, which was then put back in the lathe. The final finishing touches were done sitting down with the bowl on his knees. With a small adze the scar left inside from the breaking off of the core (I might have said the pontil mark) was trimmed smooth, and then the foot was shaved with a draw knife until there was no sign left on the turning.

One day I collected enough courage and pocket money to ask the old man to make me a bowl while I waited. Although he had a number in stock he did agree, and when he had finished I asked him to sign it. I wish now I had dared to ask if he would 'let me have a go', though I know I should have failed miserably. I have since turned a 5 inch bowl on a treadle lathe, one with a heavy iron flywheel, and I know what hard work that was. With a pole lathe the working of the treadle has not only to counteract the spring of the pole itself but also the inertia of the wood, turning one way and then the other. I admire those old turners for their energy as well as their skill.

I remember the old man telling how during the 1914/18 War, there was a requirement in the munitions factories for round wooden scoops with long handles - like saucepans. The government specification was that handle and scoop must be all of one piece. Eventually the job came to him as the only man who, with his pole lathe, could make such an article. He was evidently proud of this his contribution to the war effort.

The bowl has never been treated in any way and, apart from some discolouration and slight warping with age, is as it left the turner's hands. It is $8\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter and stands $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches high (I could not afford the larger size). The outside shows clearly the marks of the hook chisel, but the sweep of the curve shows real art and is enhanced by a raised band two

thirds of the way up. The inside is wonderfully smooth and it is only with the tips of the fingers that one can sense a slight unevenness where the core was trimmed off in the centre. Round the rim can still be seen traces of the pencil lines and the yellow crayon. Underneath is clearly legible the inscription:

G.W. Lailey. Maker
July 4 1936

I do not know how much of his work he signed. I suspect little has survived. So I treasured that bowl. But even more do I count myself lucky, actually to have seen the making one of the last examples of a very ancient craft.

Note from the author: This article was written many years ago but not published at the time. Now seems an appropriate moment to resurrect it, although sadly I no longer have the signed bowl.

Gabriel Olive