

**8TH ANNUAL TECHNICAL DAY:
THE MAKING AND TRADITIONAL FINISHING
OF A DOVETAILED CHEST 31st May 2003, Oxford**

Ten members met at Antony Buxton's workshop in West Oxford. The theme of the day was partly woodworking techniques, using tools and methods of the 18th and 19th centuries, and partly making and applying traditional wood finishing media of the period. Antony Buxton set about making a typical pine chest or lodging box, a common piece of furniture that would have been essential for a young woman or man leaving home to go into service, containing all their clothes and personal items. Usually made of pine boards, made up to the desired width from whatever narrower boards were available to the local joiner; these boards would need to be planed smooth to remove saw marks, the side faces planed level and square and probably tongue and groove jointed. The sides then had to be cut to length and the corners dovetail jointed to give adequate strength and base and top boards similarly prepared. The base would have been nailed in place, probably in a suitable rebate, the lid fitted with a lipping at the front and side edges and fixed with strap hinges, a box lock cut in the top front edge and iron carrying handles fitted at each end. Typically such a box would have a small lidded compartment, or till at the top at one end inside, to hold small personal items.

The making of a chest like this has been described as a day's work for a local joiner. Antony took us through the various woodworking processes involved, using old tools and planes, making for himself a scaled-down version, giving us the opportunity to try our hand at planing boards, jointing and cutting dovetail joints. Cutting out the latter and fitting them would be a major part of the task as would preparing the boards depending on their initial state. We concluded that it would indeed have been possible to make and complete such a box in a day. The chest, when finished, was destined to be a small tool chest to hold Antony's collection of moulding planes previously held in a cupboard under the work bench.

During the day we alternated between box making and studying using traditional wood finishes. Simon Feingold of Manchester demonstrated and guided us through a range of historic and traditional wood finishes. This gave us a good insight into the mysteries of wood finishing that one comes across in woodworking books of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Have you ever wondered what milk paint, copal varnish and red oil are, what their constituents

are, how they should be made up, how safe they are to use and how should they be applied? Simon's demonstrations together with his detailed 'hand-outs' provided answers to most of these questions. In addition to these three finishes we looked at and tried our hand at graining (both to imitate oak and mahogany) and at French polishing. Getting a passable product was not too hard but obviously achieving a high quality finish with French polishing would take years of practice and experience. As always with days such as this everybody picks up new information or improves their understanding of the subject. A rewarding and very enjoyable day I felt. Thanks are due to Antony and Simon for preparing and conducting the day and giving their time, facilities and resources for our benefit.

Chris Foster