

David R. Russell, with photographs by James Austin, *Antique Woodworking Tools; Their Craftsmanship from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*

John Adamson, 2010, (£90)

Regional Furniture Society members have always had a considerable interest in exactly how furniture was made and the tools employed by cabinet makers. This, admittedly expensive, book is an absolute feast for those interested in the nuts and bolts (or planes and braces) of cabinet making. There are over 900 full colour illustrations on 528 pages and there is also a useful bibliography: this is quite short, probably reflecting the fact that the study of old tools is really quite a recent one. The book is very large format and is thus quite heavy - just under 9lb - but this has enabled the publishers to print large photographs, many of which are close-ups, to show useful detail. The production standards of the book are of a very high order. Manufacturers' stamps are shown in 575 detail photographs and, possibly a first, some 269 makers of plane-irons are illustrated.

The book is really the catalogue of David Russell's collection of woodworking tools assembled over the last 40 years, and while a considerable proportion reflects his own love of planes, and while we know quite a lot about plane makers from books by Goodman and Philip Walker, little is known about the specialist trade of making the irons. He has also collected most of the diverse range of tools associated with joiners and cabinet makers. So there are exquisitely turned ivory plumb-bobs (inlaid with brass), rosewood and brass-plated braces, boxwood spoke shaves, ebony and brass spirit levels plus many more tools that are both a joy to look at and pleasing to work with.

One of my favourite tools is an American cornice plane (pl. 786-8). These were used, as the name implies, to make long lengths of mouldings to make up box cornices. They

are usually just under 3in. wide and have quite complex shapes that in Britain would have taken at least three or even four separate planes to make the same outline. I am inclined to believe that the softer, white pine that is more common in America allowed such wide planes to be used whereas the Baltic pine used here in Britain is a bit harder. These planes also have a transverse hole set close to the front or face of the plane that could take a small tommy-bar sticking out on either side; a rope could be wound around it enabling a boy apprentice to haul the plane over the embryonic cornice. I have also heard, but have never had confirmed, that the rope could be attached to the axle of a water-wheel and so pulled along: the tradesmen must have been very quick witted to operate such a primitive power tool.

This is a beautiful book but it is not really for the novice as the explanation of how some of the tools were used is not as comprehensive as one would find, for example, in Salaman's *Dictionary of Woodworking Tools* (the revised edition of 1989). However, there are only line drawings in Salaman so the two books are excellent when used in conjunction. There are two further bonuses in that David Russell, who lives in France, has also acquired many continental tools and it is very interesting to compare them with their British counterparts. Continental tools often appear to be much more decorative than British ones, and perhaps they rather reflect the furniture that they were used to make.

Woodworking tools are beautiful things to look at and to use. David Russell's collection, contained in this sumptuous catalogue, really helps us extend our knowledge and understanding.

Treve Rosoman