

WORKING WOOD BY HAND (MOSTLY)

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James Mursell & Peter Galbert on the
Tools and Techniques for Shaping Seats

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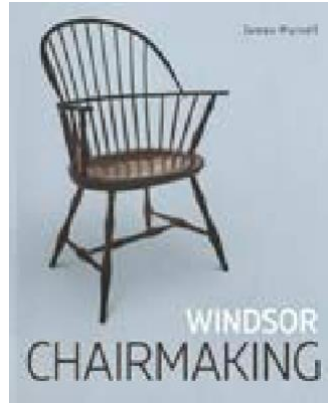
A Travishing Approach to Shaving and Scraping

James Mursell was a fruit farmer when chairmaking drew him toolmaking from the orchard

According to James Mursell the golden period for Windsor chairs began in 1720, ending just 80 years later. His own chairmaking vocation was conceived 40 years ago, taking off in 2001, and hitting its current peak during Lockdown when his toolmaking leapt into the world of resins and digital design. In his excellent book, *Windsor Chairmaking*, James relates how his woodworking was inspired by a practical father in childhood, accelerating



The Windsor Workshop courses, including this one to make a continuous bow chair (above) are invariably sold out. James Mursell's book *Windsor Chairmaking* (above right) offers excellent guidance for most chairmakers



when he took over part of his family fruit-growing business in the 1980s. "I began to make simple furniture in winter evenings," he writes, "based on lessons learned from my father and at school." When his woodworking eventually moved along a more serious path he realised he'd need to improve his techniques. "I made my first chair in 1996 at West Dean College with Jack Hill. I had started to do a little woodwork, but it was obvious I needed to learn some hand skills. I was fruit growing at the time and had left it rather late in the winter to find a course, and that was the best I could find. I didn't really want to make a Windsor chair as it didn't really seem like 'proper' woodworking. After half a day I knew that I had found something that really suited me."

In 2001 the farm was closed, fruit growing being unviable, and James took a leap of faith into chairmaking. "The upside

of this difficult decision, and one that I have never regretted, is that it allowed me to devote all my time to Windsor chairs." He made chairs, to sell, and then when in 2002 he broke a travisher he designed his own made from a scrap of sycamore. "When I brought it to my first course in 2004, having taken over from Jack Hill at West Dean, my students seemed to really like it." Wooden spokeshaves soon followed when he couldn't find what he wanted, and the design of his travisher evolved until it reached the current shape in 2006.

Popular Kits

Initially both spokeshaves and travishers were popular as kits, saving consumers a few pounds (though not many) and offering them the opportunity to use their own timber. "I own a couple of old Record spokeshaves," wrote Olly Parry-Jones in a 2011 issue of *British Woodworking*, "but feel I need another smaller 'shave for freeform shaping and quick rounding-over." First he had to make his "new wooden toy", complete with a Ron Hock blade, but was initially frustrated pushing the tool. "Reverse the process and cut with the spokeshave heading towards you and the experience becomes enjoyable. It's almost effortless in use, with ribbons of shavings peeling away."

Sean Hellman had a similar experience when he bought a Windsor Workshop Travisher Kit. "I have vaguely been looking for a good travisher for some years," he wrote in *Living Woods*. "I don't make chairs myself anymore, but some of my students do. If you turn all your spindles and legs on a pole lathe then using anything other



An early Small Spokeshave Kit



James Mursell with his Travisher Wood and Travisher Deluxe



than hand-tools on the seat is just not ‘proper’. A travisher is a traditional tool used for shaving and smoothing out the concave shapes on chair seats and any other dished concave surfaces.”

Sean considered it a lovely tool to use. “The most comfortable way is pushing it away from you using your thumbs. It is light and feels comfortable to use for long periods if necessary. I appreciate the grub screws that lock the blade into place, rather than a traditional friction fit. Blade adjustment is quick and simple, and I found no problems at all doing fine adjustments. You could carve the whole seat out from flat with this tool as it is so easy to do and the travisher feels so good in use. Unfortunately this would take a bit of time, especially on deeper seats, and some hard woods. Some roughing out with an adze or chisels would speed up the shaping process.”

The travisher blade has a small sweep or curve, Sean added, so ridges are left in the wood. “These are easily removed by running the travisher across them at 90°, after which scrapers will smooth everything off evenly, and a quick rub down with a few grits of fine sand paper will finish the job perfectly. I had to remake a seat for a sculpture and used a 2in thick oak slab.

“Using the tool on a seat soon showed me that I needed to round over the back two corners of the handle as they were digging into my hand. When you make from a kit doing such adjustments to a tool is almost second nature. With a new ready-made tool we are more likely to hesitate for fear of spoiling it. I left a tooled finish on the seat which looked beautiful. The blade takes a good edge and stays sharp for a long time. On the whole, a lovely product that I would happily recommend to anyone thinking of buying a travisher.”



Using a Spokescraper, and The Windsor Workshop range of tools (above)

Eventually production of kits for both tools, like those trialled by Olly and Sean, came to a halt as demand faded. But The Windsor Workshop spokeshaves were an immediate success for being lightweight, traditionally wooden and easy to adjust.

“You have a pair of tiny grub screws that are used to fine-adjust the projection of the blade for a precise setting,” Olly wrote. “You could set the blade parallel or leave one side projecting slightly more than the other so you can alter the depth of cut without adjusting the blade.”

Versatile Wooden Spokeshave

James agreed in an early issue of *Quercus*. “My introduction to spokeshaves came at school where we had traditional wooden shaves with the blades held in place by friction. When they are sharp and set correctly they were great, but being old the tangs often slipped in the body, leading to suddenly thicker or finer shaving.” Ironically it is the versatility of a wooden Windsor Workshop spokeshave that makes them so popular, especially



The Windsor Workshop Traviscraper



James Mursell is a fine chairmaker as well as teacher, author and toolmaker

once you learn the knack of setting the blade deep and use the wear plate in front of the blade to control the cut by twisting the handles rather than keeping the tool flat, as many users do. “Conventional cutting requires good contact between the whole surface of the wear plate and the wood being shaved,” writes James. “Wooden spokeshaves come into their own when one escapes that mode of working. I favour a coarse setting on my shaves not because I am always taking heavy cuts, but so that I can take the greatest range of cuts, from very fine to deep without having to reset the tool. Unfortunately few people use them enough to develop the knack.

“To achieve a very fine cut the contact with the wood is only at the very front of the wear plate. The blade skims over the wood taking the lightest possible cuts. I sometimes demonstrate this technique using just two fingertips to hold the tool.”

For this trick to work you may have to file the brass wear plate fitted to the latest Small Spokeshave model. The wood on the Mk.1 will wear out from frequent use, even though it was made from maple. Today’s beautiful walnut body makes Windsor Workshop’s two sizes of shave lighter and even more manoeuvrable, but also softer and more likely to wear out, so the brass insert makes sense,

Brass is not the only material James Mursell has been trialling. In 2018 a black, resin travisher was launched having been conceived with the aid of a local engineering business. “I was thinking that I wanted a wider range, with a premium model. I told the guys who do the CNC machining on the wooden ones that I’d like to have a brass insert on the travishers. They tried machining a pocket for it, but the edge was never terribly crisp. So I asked how it might be if the body is nylon or something. ‘Nylon is horrible to machine because it melts,’ they said, and getting the feed rate right is really difficult. ‘You want to use Delrin because that’s the go-to product for anything now.’ I played around with a block they gave me, and I liked the feel and the weight.”

DuPont, who make Delrin, market its as being “a highly adaptable material that bridges the gap between plastics and metals and offers unique properties. It is specified for high load

mechanical applications and precision parts, where strength, stiffness, stability and reliability are important.”

A 3D model then had to be made, produced with the smoothest of edges. “You can’t do anything with it once it’s been machined. You can’t clean it up. It must be right from the start.” The Delrin travishers are good to touch and use, the black and gold looking especially good and distinctive, even beside the TWW maple ones.

Two Ways to Scrape

A further addition to the Windsor Workshop range, in fact there are two, were a couple of scraper-based tools, the Traviscraper and the Spokescraper. You can already buy scraper planes, but a card scraper is the only obvious alternative to a sort of travisher fitted with a heavy scraper blade. Having used an adze, a scorp or a travisher to remove the bulk of the waste from a chair seat, you need something to smooth the curves. A convex or gooseneck scraper is perhaps more flexible and the cut may be more visible, but it has none of the weight of the Traviscraper, which is a tool to fall for immediately. Jon Beamish, a novice chairmaker, ordered one while still on a Westonbirt Woodworks course recently, the day he shaped his first seat.

“From the outset, the Traviscraper felt like a quality-made tool with the ergonomic resin handles and brass body giving it a pleasing weight and balance,” he says. “It was extremely efficient at removing material regardless of the direction of the grain and left an exceptionally good finish, in a fraction of the time of a standard cabinet scraper. It was particularly good on the difficult end-grain of the ash we were using.”

Paul Hayden, who runs the courses at Westonbirt Woodworks (as well as making many chairs himself) has been using The Windsor Workshop travishers for years, and loves the new Delrin version: “When I first started teaching I used travishers from Bristol Design. The blades were good but fixed into beechwood handles with machine screws which were fitted exactly where the user’s thumbs would push on the back of the tool. I redesigned them a bit myself and added copper wear plates to the soles as they wore away, but my modifications were not nearly as good as James’ work at The Windsor Workshop. His travishers are beautifully designed from scratch. He is himself a chairmaker and teacher so he knows what is needed. They use blades of a similar design to the Bristol Design tool but are now made by Ben Orford who is both a smith and a chairmaker, and also understands what the tool needs. James’ new resin tools, with massive brass inserts, are gorgeous. As with all small volume manufactures they are a bit expensive but well worth the investment for anyone serious about chairmaking.”

Wooden spokeshaves have proved to be attractive for woodworkers of all makes and models, but it was his travisher that put James Mursell’s name on chairmakers’ lips. And though he recognises a prejudice against scrapers does still exist, it may be the Traviscraper, made from Delrin, brass and aluminium, that makes his brand unique, and hopefully, with his product range growing and his courses always full, his Golden Period is yet to peak.

James Mursell’s tools, plans and book can be ordered from www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk, where you can also book a course. Travishers cost £185 for the Deluxe and £155 for the Travisher Wood and £150 for a Traviscraper. A Small Spokeshave costs £125 and the Spokescraper £130. Prices exclude p&p.

Bottoming with James

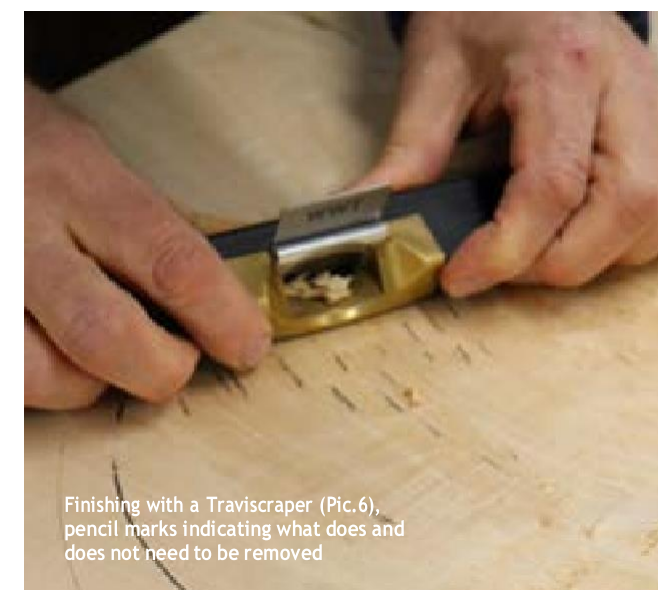
As the maker of two models of Travisher and the creator of the Traviscraper, James Mursell is well placed to demonstrate the first stages of hollowing a chair seat. It’s all a question of swapping grain directions, step by step. He starts by drawing parallel lines across the seat blank, shaded as one might to indicate waste (Pic.1). Having also drawn concentric marks he puts the blank on the floor and starts chopping down the track with an adze (Pic.2) across the grain. This shallow ‘trench’ acts as a target for adzing with the grain from either side (Pic.3) so the edge doesn’t tear or get stuck, as well as guiding the depth of cut from both sides (Pic.4). Clamped to a bench you can then use a travisher across the grain (mostly) to widen the hollow and smooth the surface (Pic.5), before you finish with a cabinet scraper or a Traviscraper (Pic.6) with the grain (mostly)



Chopping down towards the target trench (Pic.3, above), which is then done from the other side, until the adze removes the waste (Pic.4, right)



Travishing away the adze marks, working across the grain (Pic.5)



Finishing with a Traviscraper (Pic.6), pencil marks indicating what does and does not need to be removed



Spokescrapers & Traviscrapers ready for students

Marking up the blank (Pic.1, left), and adzing across the grain along the 'trench' (Pic.2,

