

A VERY OLD TRADE

The Coffin Maker

I SUPPOSE fifty years or so in a trade is a rather long time to look back upon. Yet it doesn't seem so very long really; the years since the war have passed so quickly, and they account for nearly twenty. Still, it is long enough to have seen some strange changes take place. Changes! I should think so; changes in custom, changes in work, changes in wages, and changes in hours. I doubt whether the present generation *could* do what we used to have to do, let alone whether they would *want* to. The hours we put in of really hard slogging work, and for a wage that would scarcely satisfy an errand boy to-day! Well that has certainly gone by (and a good job too), though just how much happier people are to-day I am not sure. So far as I can remember, we were not specially unhappy then, and things were certainly more free and easy. Still, that is neither here nor there; what I really want to speak about is the sort of work we used to do, and how we used to get through it.

As in most other trades, it was the war that seemed to make a great dividing line. People date things by it. "We used to do so and so before the war" you hear men say, and certainly, quite apart from its being a convenient period by which to date things, it was the time of great and really fundamental changes. Yet even before 1914 there had been going on a gradual process of change.

EARLY RECOLLECTIONS

I have sometimes tried to recall my earliest recollection of the coffin making business, and I think it is that of an uncle of mine carrying coffins along on his back. There used to be a workshop at the back of the house and from there the coffins ("boxes" we called them) had to be carried through to the front shop to be finished. He adopted the simple expedient of removing the lid, standing it up on its foot, and getting inside it, except for his feet. He could thus take the whole weight on his back and carry it unaided. I can still see him walking through the passage, returning with a grin the look of amused wonder that must have been on my face. I

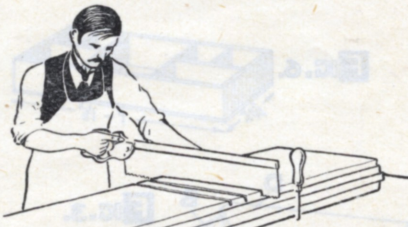


CARRYING A COFFIN ON HIS BACK

couldn't have been more than five years old at the time; possibly less, for uncle Dick had been making "boxes" in the same workshop for some twenty years, and I was born in that house.

THE WORKSHOP

The workshop was a long, narrow place with a stone floor and white-washed walls. It must have been built considerably later than the house itself, for I remember that there was a coal hole with its lid in the middle of the floor, and a cellar beneath facing the basement rooms. Some time or other there was probably a street or yard, long before the workshop was built. We used to throw all the odds and ends of waste down the hole whenever we had an odd minute (and there weren't many).

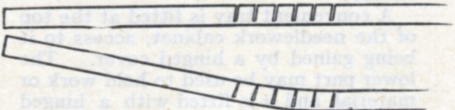


A WHOLE DAY DOING NOTHING BUT KERFING

There was no means of heating the shop, and you can imagine what it was like on a cold day, with its stone floor and the draught sweeping beneath the ill-fitting doors. Yet I have been sweating all over on a cold winter's day before nine o'clock in the morning. There is nothing like ripping out a few 1½ in. oak tops to make you warm! For lighting at night time there were the old gas fishtail burners, poor at best, but invariably out of order. The gas men used to come round occasionally and blow out the pipes with a pump, but I am afraid that all that happened was that the obstruction merely shifted from one part of the pipe to another. It was like on a cold day, with its stone floor and the draught sweeping beneath the ill-fitting doors. Yet I have been sweating all over on a cold winter's day before nine o'clock in the morning. There is nothing like ripping out a few 1½ in. oak tops to make you warm! For lighting at night time there were the old gas fishtail burners, poor at best, but invariably out of order. The gas men used to come round occasionally and blow out the pipes with a pump, but I am afraid that all that happened was that the obstruction merely shifted from one part of the pipe to another. It

Well, there was some hard work done in that shop. How long would you expect to take over making a coffin from the rough? You would have the wood supplied just as cut from the saw, and you would have to rip it out, plane it, kerf the sides, knock it together, clean

up, and mitre round the mouldings. Could you make three—or even four at a pinch—in a day? That was the average I used to turn out, sometimes varying it with a little bearing work. I have made a box first thing in the



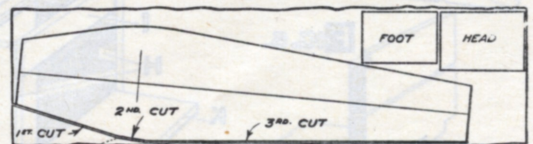
EACH SIDE HAD SIX KERFS

morning, have made a hurried change to do a bearing job, have been out again in the afternoon, and have come back and made another box and started a third many a day. It really was heavy going. Elm isn't one of the softest of woods, and some varieties were full of grit and sand that soon took the edge from a plane. Oak, too, was the very d—, for it was invariably hard English stuff, though we were certainly allowed a little extra time for this.

SAWING THE KERFS

It is surprising what one can do, however, by a little system. When a load of timber came in I used to spend a whole day doing nothing but kerfing the sides. I had a saw specially made for this. It was like a long tenon saw, 2 ft. long in the blade and with a heavy back so that its own weight carried it through the wood. Each coffin side had six kerfs, and, with a large awl spiked into the bench to hold the wood still, I used to work my way through pile after pile of sides. At the top (this was kept forwards) the kerf went through to within about ¼ in. of the thickness. At the bottom it all but ran right through. Sometimes oak was rather brittle, but a kettle of boiling water poured over the kerfs enabled it to bend easily enough.

Ripping out the tops and bottoms was one of the hardest jobs, and it was always an advantage to cut them when the wood first came in and was wet. We used to keep half templates of the shapes for marking out, there being three or



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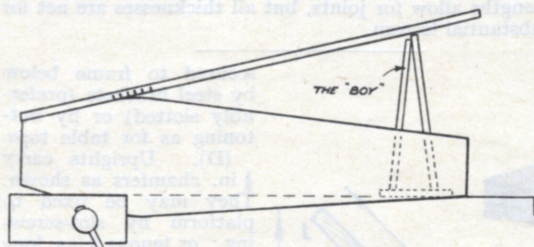
four different sizes. The first cut was at the side by the head, the second took off the corner, and the third was along the side towards the foot. By keeping the latter parallel with the edge of the

ANOTHER OF THE OLD SCHOOL RECALLS HIS EARLY DAYS

board the head and foot could be cut out of the waste. The foot end was sawn at an angle to allow for the slope of the foot.

ASSEMBLING

For assembling, $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. french nails were used. First the head and foot were nailed on, and the bottom then fixed in the vice so that one side could be added. We used to keep a "boy" to support the side whilst it was being nailed on. It was a crude enough affair consisting of two pieces of elm nailed to a base and tapering towards the top. A nail was driven into the latter, the head nipped off, and filed to a point so that the side



KEPT A "BOY" TO SUPPORT THE SIDE

would not shift about. This supported the foot end of the side whilst the head was being nailed on. As the sides were bent they formed a series of flat faces between the kerfs, and these had next to be smoothed down so that there was a clean, unbroken curve.

The last job was mitreing round the mouldings, and cutting these quickly and accurately was a knack one rapidly acquired. No mitre block was ever used.

We used to nail on the sides with an overhang at each end, and cut the mitres afterwards. To do this a spare piece of moulding was held beneath that already fixed to enable the length to be judged, and the cut made purely by judgment. Remember that none of the cuts was at 45 degrees owing to the sloping sides, whilst the foot mitre sloped in its width also because of the drop of the foot. But there, it was just a case of practice making perfect.

A CURIOUS COLLECTION

I am afraid that we were a rather mixed lot in that shop. In addition to Uncle Dick there was an odd job man, old Bill, who, amongst other jobs, used to polish and fit out the boxes. I have a strong impression that he had been originally a dyer, though how he found his way into undertaking I cannot imagine, unless some confusion of the name of his trade suggested the change. He used to lighten his labours by repeated visits to a local public house, and one day he left his wet

polishing rubber in the middle of a lid whilst he went to refresh himself. The result on his return scarcely needs enlargement.

Then there was Taffy, an extraordinary man who used to hang about the shop without having the slightest connection with it. So far as I know he never did a day's work, but somehow or other managed to exist. He would talk endlessly about any subject that

occurred to him, sitting down on a trestle when one was available, or leaning against the door when no more comfortable means of rest presented itself. He lived obscurely in a small turning nearby, and one morning left the house in carpet slippers, apparently with his usual object of lounging his way through the day, but was never seen again. What became of him no one could discover.

There was a whole collection of people who used to turn up at odd times. Sometimes they would arrive in jerseys and mufflers to give a hand at ripping out stuff when we bought a couple of whole logs. At other times they appeared in frock coats of doubtful origin and tall collars to go out bearing. When a quick change was needed, it required merely a white front pinned over the jersey to effect the transformation. I have known a cuff to be suspended beneath the collar when a front was not to hand. What these men did when not required I have no idea.

TO-DAY

What of to-day? Well, a few people still make coffins entirely by hand, but for the greater part machinery has stepped in. Some undertakers buy them complete from wholesale firms; others have installed their own machinery; whilst others obtain them in "sets," in which the sides are already planed and kerfed, and the tops planed on one side.

For my part I should not care to go back to the old days—I am long past turning out three a day—but it was an apprenticeship well worth having, one which enables me to appreciate how the machine has come to lighten our labours.

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TIMBER

An Outline of the Structure, Properties, and Utilization of Timber

The publication of this interesting booklet coincided with the opening of the Exhibition of Timber Research and Utilization at the Science Museum, South Kensington. To run briefly through its contents there is the composition of wood, its structure, seasoning, mechanical properties (including tests such as bending, cleavage, compression, etc.), conversion, durability, diseases, insect attack, and preservation. It is written by B. Alwyn Jay, M.A. (Cantab.), and is published at 6d. net by His Majesty's Stationery Office, Adastral House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2.

The exhibition itself opened on December 17th of last year, and closes on the 6th of the present month. It includes a wide range of exhibits dealing with the subjects given above, and they are very convincing in the practical way they demonstrate the various matters. A section in which we were specially interested was that dealing with moisture content of timber. One exhibit consisted of two identical frames and panels in oak, one made with timber having a

moisture content of 20 %, and the other 12 %. In a normally heated room the former shrank considerably, the mitres opening about $\frac{1}{8}$ in. and the panel shrinking about $\frac{1}{4}$ in. in 12 ins.

"Moisture content" is a term which has come into considerable use recently. For the benefit of readers not familiar with its meaning, we may note that it refers to the weight of moisture in timber expressed as a percentage of the dry weight of that timber. Thus, to find the moisture content of a piece of timber a sample is cut off (not a dry end) and weighed to find the initial weight. The sample is then put into an oven and dried at a temperature equal to boiling point until no further loss of weight occurs. Its weight is then the "dry weight," and this is subtracted from the initial weight, so giving the weight of water dried out. It is then just a matter of finding the percentage. An example shows the calculation clearly.

Initial weight 53.75 grms.
Dry weight 47.35 "

$$\frac{6.40}{47.35} \times 100 \% = 13.5 \%$$

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A READER'S MEMORIES

Dear Editor,

I am writing to say how much I appreciated the article under the heading "The Old School" in the January WOODWORKER. I should imagine the writer is fully qualified to wear the old school tie; and if there is not one, then there ought to be one.

Memories of my youthful days in the cabinet-making shops were stirred. I remember the enthusiastic proselytising Bill who always had a religious tract on him and Joe at the adjoining bench a big, hefty fellow who sang songs and handled wardrobe carcasses like match boxes. Alas! many of them I cannot remember by name and many, if not all, have been ferried across the Styx to other Wycombes and Baths. But the article brought back many a picture and incident of my apprenticeship days.

I daresay you receive, as Editor, many grumbles so I should like, for once, to convey a word of praise and thanks for an article with a real "woody" flavour.

S. R. H. (157)

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