

Can British chisels still compete?

Peter Sefton reports on the Ashley Iles bevel-edged chisels he recommends to his students



I bought my first set of Ashley Iles bevel edged chisels almost 10 years ago and the original Mk1s have served me very well. They have since been superseded by the Mk2 which came out with improved quality of grinding and smaller handles. The traditionally hand-forged Sheffield steel is quick and easy to sharpen and produces a very keen edge - just what I require for fine furniture making; not over brittle or over hard.

The Ashley Iles Mk2s are ground down to one of the thinnest profile chisels I have used and are ideal for dovetailing, joint cutting and paring. They are finely balanced and made with solid brass ferrules, with their tangs driven home into the bubinga handles in the traditional way. These chisels are hand-forged from Sheffield 01 high carbon steel, 0 means oil quenched and 1 means 1% carbon, all being a very good mix of steel for quality bevel-edged and paring chisels. The old W1 water-quenched steel is now rarely used as the quenching is too harsh and unpredictable because of so many impurities in our water supply.

(Sheffield) steel has always been very good but its reputation has suffered in the past, when some of the larger industrial toolmakers bought cheaper steel and pushed the boundaries of production to try to speed the process up (and some of them ruined their own reputations in the process by producing inferior quality tools). However, I am pleased to say that some of the old Sheffield independent toolmakers stuck to the time-honoured approach and are now flourishing by staying true to their principles.

Family-run business

Ashley Iles is still very much a family run business with Ray undertaking the heavy grinding in his workshops, whilst the other brothers Tony and Barry, work on the hand grinding including a unique process that produces a very slight (3-5 thou) concave chisel back which aids us when lapping the chisels. The chisels are

individually hardness tested to 590-610 Rockwell to ensure quality control. They are ground, tested and handled on the Lincolnshire farmstead, where they are produced just as Ashley intended.

I have been recommending them to students since I first discovered them and soon started to use them to demonstrate hand skills techniques; now I use them on daily basis. I don't fully understand how they have been made or the structure of the steel, but what I do know is this; they work, they take a keen edge and I haven't seen any blade or handle failures - all proving their value for money and longevity. These are the reasons why they are part of the student toolkit I have put together over the years, which is tried and tested by myself and my students. The fact they come with a lifetime guarantee from someone who makes them and also answers the phone is reassuring.

All chisel and plane blades require some fettling, commissioning or bedding in and I feel as furniture-makers we need to undertake that part of the process, in order to fully understand the tool and how it behaves. I need to get to know this extension of my hand before I put it to work on my bench and as with every tool I buy, I hope to keep it for the long term. I do have an appreciation for the workmanship that another craftsman has undertaken to provide me with a tool, but I'm a furniture-maker and they are a toolmaker and I respect their skills. That said, I usually regrind new edge tools to produce virgin steel anyway, which I feel always holds a keener edge than factory produced grinding.

Come and see these tools being demonstrated on my annual Open Day this Saturday 14th July along with other excellent Sheffield tools from Sorby, Thomas Flinn and Clifton. They are all part of the stable of what I feel are the best of British hand tools and I am proud to use them, introduce them to new woodworkers and sell them at my school. Visit peterseftonfurniture.com for more details of the Open Day.