

New Chisels

Excited to have three new sets of chisels in the workshop, Peter Sefton compares British and Canadian hand tools



It's always good to have some new chisels to test and this time around it was the new offerings from Sheffield's own Sorby and the Canadian made Veritas' first venture into bevel-edged chisels. Sorby are one of the oldest chisels makers in the world, still offering the largest range of woodworker's chisels with 20 variations at my last count including bevel-edged, skew, registered, sash mortise, paring, corner and timber framing slicks. But not one to be left standing, their latest range is the 'eco-friendly' Sheaf River (named after the river that runs behind the factory where the chisels are made by hand, and shipped in a biodegradable box).

The new Sorby chisels come in four alternatives: traditional English style bolster and brass ferrule with a leather washer and the more American-style tapered bolster and ferrule, both with American ash handles. Both are available in either standard English-length handles of 120mm and 155mm, or the shorter 90mm versions of the shorter blade version butt chisel in the American style.

The steel blades are made from high carbon steel which has been drop stamped and is reported to be capable of sharpening to 0.5 micron and are diamond hardness tested in line with their other chisels. I found the grinding of the blades to be accurate and relatively clean, apart from the bevel-edged chisel grinding being slightly off centre on one chisel. To put it into context I have seen the same issue to a smaller degree on a Lie-Nielsen in my workshop this week, but I don't believe that it necessarily affects its working.

The Sorby backs took about 15 minutes to flatten and lap to a good polish. I started the backs on 40 micron abrasive



Choice Peter Sefton (left) has been testing the new Sorby and Veritas bevel-edged chisels. The Sheaf River Sorby series are named after the river that runs behind the Sorby workshops in Sheffield



paper and brought them down to 3 micron. The bevels come pre-ground to 25° in readiness for softwood, and I honed them to 30° to test them on hardwood using my Veritas MK2 honing guide on some new scary sharpening films I have been testing. I usually regrind my new chisels but thought I would not go that far in this test as both makes are said to be ready from the box. I found the Sorby comfortable in the hand and the butt chisels reassuringly sturdy and sure footed.

I have always shied away from butt chisels as I feel you get more for your money with a full length blade and handle to match, but found the butt a very comfortable fit in the hand. Both Sorbys came with plastic blade guards and the chisel sizes etched in metric and imperial on the top flat surface.

The handles have been seated onto the tangs with the grain matched to give the annual rings oval shapes down the top face of the chisel, showing the attention to detail you would expect from a

company with such heritage in wood turning and tool making.

Both Sorby chisels I tested were the tapered bolster and ferrule style, which blends the blade to handle seamlessly. The butt handle is turned with three fine grip rings cut into the ash to aid grip and add interest. The longer bevel-edged chisel's blade is taper ground starting at about 0.7mm on its edge at its thinnest point near the tip. The butt starts at about 1.25mm wide which means neither could give a really crisp corner if used for 1:8 dovetailing but should give more strength for general bench work.

Veritas

The Veritas is a new contender to the chisel market and interestingly has been launched with O1 steel, which has always been the English (and my preferred) steel choice for chisels. But not being one to copy English traditions, Veritas have their own take on handle shape, blade profile and tang detailing.

when using them for chopping out waste for lap dovetails or small mortises. The blade's tang and stainless steel ferrule interaction seems a little clumsy to me as there are gaps front and back as it enters the handle, but I think this tells the tale of how they are made and lapped to such fine tolerances as I presume they are ground and machine lapped over their entire length thus not thickening at the tang. In use this does not detract from their strength or ability to bite into the wood when struck with my lignum mallet. The handles are well shaped for both hand paring and mallet work but did show slight signs of bruising after my tests. They come in a plastic storage box with rust inhibitor squares (the same as their plane iron boxes) and the blade's tip comes with wax dipped ends for protection in carriage.

Veritas have opted to grind blades of 1/2in and less, to 30° and micro bevel of 32°, the wider chisels are ground to 25° with micro bevels of 27°. The thinking behind this is that the force taken on a narrow chisel's edge when hit with a mallet is concentrated on a small area, and therefore requires more strength behind the edge. The only problem with such clever thinking is that their MKII honing guide does not have a 27° setting, although this can be overcome by using the following technique. Set the honing guide to 17° on the green back bevels setting, whilst also having the blade carrier roller assembly set on the No.2 yellow standard angles. Sorry if I have lost those who do not use this honing guide - you must give it a go if you chase razor edges.

Verdict

Well less chatter, more chopping; how did they perform and hold their edge? I decided to use some 15mm maple to chop into and then try paring some end-grain sweet chestnut to see how the edges held up. I marked 20 knife lines at 1mm intervals and chopped into it with three good mallet blows giving 60 chops in all on the three chisels on test (which were two 10mm Sorbys and a 3/8in Veritas).

The answer is (as always!) varied in that the longest chisel in the test, being the Sorby bevel-edged, started to lose its edge after the first 10 mallet blows but did not noticeably break down any more after that initial loss of the crisp edge. The steel did continue to chop the maple but did then leave torn fibres when paring.

This may have stood up better to the beating if I had reground the initial chisel's edge and changed the grind to a full 30° angle and honed a secondary bevel of 35°, giving the edge more strength. The extra length of the bevel-edged chisel was of benefit when paring to assist in keeping things plum and square.

The stout Sorby butt chisel felt a little more sure-footed and its edge lasted longer taking 12 strong blows before degrading to the same level as its big brother but again it did stay the course and pared the chestnut with minor end grain scratching, again a steeper regrind may resolve the steel's performance.

The new Veritas took and held a very keen edge lasting the whole 60 mallet blows without showing any signs of weakness in the steel and left the chestnut with the cleanest end-grain fibres (but the handle did show signs of bruising). In this test the steel performed the best, although you would expect this as the chisel costs about twice the price of the other models on the bench.

Whilst I was doing this test I decided to see for myself how my old faithful Ashley Iles bevel-edged chisel performed, and I wasn't disappointed. Its edge did start to deteriorate after approximately 50 blows and remained capable of paring the end grain to a lesser but similar quality as the Canadian contender.

So, if you like ash handles and English hand-made craftsmanship at reasonable prices, go for the Sorby but be ready to re-sharpen. They cost between £20.15 for a 6mm bevel-edged butt with the leather washer and £31.49 for the 25mm tapered bolster chisel.

If you prefer the contemporary styling and don't find the variation in handle colour off-putting, you won't be disappointed by the Veritas steel or quality of lapping. They cost £47.44 for the 1/4in and £59.50 for the 1in.

As for the Ashley Iles chisel, the edge held its own and does have the largest range of sizes available ranging from 1.5-50mm at an average price of about £20.00 for the standard sizes. The Sorby and Veritas are currently only available in five sizes from 6-25mm.

Details All the above chisels and more are used extensively on our long and short furniture making courses in Worcestershire (peterseftonfurnitureschool.com).