

A Creative Experience in Box Turning – AWGB Workshop with Nick Agar and Les Thorne

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It is a reflection of the esteem in which both the tutors are held by UK turners that this workshop was many times oversubscribed, so that a ballot for places had to be held to pick out a lucky 12. It was hosted in Portishead by the Max Carey Woodturning Trust at the Mill, their well equipped woodturning workshop that was ideal for the occasion.

Both tutors will be well known to nearly all AWGB members. The pairing up worked very well: Les Thorne, a very experienced production woodturner and teacher demonstrated the best turning techniques for making a couple of boxes and Nick Agar, an internationally known artistic turner and teacher followed on with descriptions and demonstrations of a number of methods for applying decoration to boxes.



Les managed to source 100 x 100 mm Sycamore blanks for us. The larger size meant that there was more scope and area to decorate. Les prefers to use Ash, but Nick's preference for sycamore prevailed – mainly because sycamore is better for applying decoration and colouring.

Participants were of varying experience and ability, but we all benefitted from the turning techniques that Les demonstrated, based on his long experience of turning. In shaping the lid, Les showed how to make the most efficient cut, starting with the gouge at right angles to the lathe axis and with the handle down, then smoothly making the cut by moving the body, lifting the handle and twisting the tool, while maintaining the bevel rubbing; a cut we could all do with practicing. He also showed how to start with coarse cuts then



reduce to very light fine finishing cuts using the gouge. He emphasised that scrapers are not designed for removing wood, but should normally be used only for finishing, especially when trying to remove any tear out. Sharp tools are of course essential for obtaining a good finish. Les showed how versatile a round bar skew can be and he sells his own version of the 10mm skew.



Turners seem to have different attitudes to the need for honing woodturning tools, so it was interesting to hear Nick say that it is only in the last few years that he has been converted to honing – by carrying out quick honing to provide a superior cutting edge, he reduces his visits to the grindstone.

Having a finial or handle on the lid gives further scope for design and decoration. Les standardises with a 10mm diameter spigot for fixing into the lid. Different shapes of



finial can then be made and the most aesthetically pleasing chosen, but those not used may be used on subsequent boxes of different shapes.

We each made our first box using the method shown by Les, but to our own design and shape. For the joint, the male spigot was standardised as being on the lid. Both tutors were able to keep an eye on our progress and give useful advice about many aspects such as body position, tool angles and grinds, lathe speed and design shape.


Nick talked about shapes and designs and encouraged us to think 'outside the box' e.g. a box does not have to stand vertically or have a symmetric finial. He then moved on to decoration.

The Sorby texturing tool was demonstrated both on side grain and end grain, before colouring to reveal the detail. There are a number of different types and sizes of specific texturing tools, but texturing the surface can be done in many other ways. Burrs and bits for use in a drill come in all shapes and sizes; Nick demonstrated some, such as using a Saburr tooth ball to form a series of depressions in the surface, also

a flame shaped ruby cutter. Versatile micro-motors are useful for this, the slim handpiece only needs a thin electric flex, rather than a much thicker flexible drive shaft as used in some other tools such as a Foredom. Electric engravers are quite cheap and can be used to make various textures; Nick recommends rounding the point first.

Airbrushing is an excellent colouring method and Nick is an expert at it. You do not need to be an artist for airbrushing and there are many different stencils that can be used, either bought or handmade. Nick started with simplicity itself: cutting out a few simple shapes such as triangles, sticking them on the box and then colouring with an airbrush – see photo - before removing the stencils to expose unpainted patterns and shapes. He has teamed up with Chromacraft in the US to market a large range of self-adhesive stencils, including shapes such as maple leaves and butterflies, that can even be used on curved surfaces.

The workshop was a good mix between hands-on making and decorating boxes and the instruction and demonstrations by the two excellent tutors.

The 2 days went very quickly and most of us completed one , but ran out of time to complete the second one, so work was left to be done in our own workshops. We all enjoyed the weekend and went away with 2 boxes and plenty of food for thought.

A big thank you to the AWGB for sponsoring the event, to Stuart Bradfield and the Max Carey Woodturning Trust for hosting the event and to the 2 excellent tutors, who kept it good humoured throughout.