

Woodcarving Workshops.tv

Chris Pye



Notes to accompany

A Beginner's Course in Traditional Woodcarving

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A Beginner's Course in Woodcarving

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1 Introduction

Welcome!

Thanks for sharing your time and undertaking this beginner's course in woodcarving with me.

Woodcarving is a big river, as I'm sure you know, and entering it can seem a little daunting: so many tools, so many woods, so many things and ways to carve. I've designed this beginner's course to be as uncomplicated an introduction to woodcarving as possible: just a few tools, a specific piece of wood and a simple, step by step project that's a ready fish to catch.

Woodcarving Workshops has many projects and lots of advice for beginners. I've made some suggestions below (7.1) and when you have completed the lessons in this course, you'll be able to paddle over to the main site and catch a lot more fish!

This is really important: Even though what we are doing seems to be very basic, I'll be teaching you underlying woodcarving skills, by which I mean efficient grips and a range of cutting techniques to use continually in the future.

Suggestion:

- Get yourself comfortable and watch the whole course first, so you know the layout and have an overall sense of what we are doing
- Set yourself up (3.0) to begin work
- Dedicate a chunk of time to working through the lessons
- Don't rush to get through this course. Don't 'end gain'. Chew and digest well!

The Download:

I strongly suggest you print this download out, take it to your bench. Read and absorb the additional thoughts, points to watch and must-know information along with each lesson.

You'll also find cross-references to other backup or illustrative lessons on the Woodcarving Workshops main website.

Please: It may be tempting to print out this document for a friend but I'd ask you not to. Rather, get your friends to join Woodcarving Workshops, support our efforts and download their own copy.

Follow up Lessons:

This beginner's course is self-contained but there are other lessons in Woodcarving Workshops that overlap and fill out what we are doing, and worth watching. I'll point some out as we go along.

When you have completed this beginner's course, in the weeks that follow: don't stop! Go back over the material here, and start exploring Woodcarving Workshops main site

2.0 Key Ideas

Right at the start, I want to take you to a deeper core of woodcarving and give you some crucial concepts that have taken me many years to realise, and even longer to express: valuable nuggets to carry through this beginner's course and into your new life as a carver.

If you just want to get stuck into the woodcarving, you can skip this section and move on to [3.0].

But do come back! This section and not mean very much to you now, but it will.

Suggestion:

Come back periodically to these key ideas. Absorb them. See if you can make them your own. As a woodcarver, they are quite priceless.

2.1 Transferable Skills

Here's a big secret: When I'm carving, I only use a handful of tool grips and cuts.

I'm not being disingenuous when I say that. The fact is, there are not that many things I do as a woodcarver. However, I do them very well and here's the thing - I am happily able to apply them to a huge range of circumstances.

In this beginner's course, I'll be showing you a big proportion of the cuts and tool grips that I use.

As you progress as a carver, I want you to look out for these repeating cuts and the way I transfer them for one situation to the next throughout the varied projects in Woodcarving Workshops.

Golden Rule:

Learn these fundamental skills right at the start.

Really work at holding the tools correctly and making the different cuts well. Make them your own and with experience and familiarity you'll merge everything together and just carve.

2.2 Straight from the Tool

The traditional 'European' style of carving that I was taught leaves the wood directly with the impression of the carving tools. In other words, the gouges have the last word.

This way of working has many advantages:

- It's quick and efficient. There isn't another stage such as rasping or sanding (the other common way of finishing carvings). I can just walk away when I'm done.
- Surfaces left from the tool are more individual and expressive, like the marks from a painter's brush. Sanding tends to remove sharp edges and make things look similar.
- I love to carve this way! It's wonderful: the feel of the carving tools, the sound of shavings unzipping from the wood. And I don't enjoy sanding!

So, leaving the surface 'straight from the tool' is how I will be teaching you. But please let me be clear: there is nothing 'wrong' with sanding. Sanding a surface is at the end of the day just a choice of finish. It's one I don't often make, though in some circumstances sanding is exactly right for what I want to achieve.

Golden Rules:

1. Your gouges and other carving tools do need to be properly sharp and handled correctly to work like this, so you cut cleanly without digging in or otherwise tearing the wood.
2. 'Police the area': Cut as cleanly as possible at all times and don't move on thinking you'll come back and tidy up later. More than likely you won't. So always clean up as you go along.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Techniques > Cuts that Count](#)

2.3 'The Tool is the Carving'

My mentor said these exact words to me some 40 years ago when I started carving. It sounds a little esoteric, so what does it mean? Well, two things:

Firstly, it follows from above (2.2). If you are leaving your carving straight from the tool, then of course the shape of the tool's cutting edge is what has the final impact.

Secondly, everything focuses on that cutting edge. Think about it a moment: On one side of the cutting edge is the wood, untouched as yet. On the other is the tool, the blade, the handle; your hand, arm, body, legs; how you are standing, what you are seeing, imagining and feeling; the room with its sounds and lighting. The edge is a sort of interface. And when you get deeply into your carving, 'the zone', this edge seems to disappear and there is 'just carving'. It's like a violinist lost in their music. The violin is the music.

Why do I pull this experience out for special notice? After all you probably experience this sort of thing in many areas of life, from reading to driving a car.

It's this:

Golden Rule:

For the tool to disappear like this, for you not to notice it, you need it to be properly sharpened. Nothing will interfere so readily with your enjoyment or immersion in woodcarving as a dull or incorrectly sharpened carving tool.

(As I say later (7.2), my intention in this beginner's course is to get you into cutting wood as soon as possible. However, I've never taken that approach before! I've always had students learn to sharpen their own tools first, just as I was originally taught. So what I'm trying here is a little experimental.)

Sharpening is something you'll have no choice but to deal with at some point. It's a skill not a mystery, more straightforward than carving. I'll be talking about it later.

2.4 Wood Matters

There are 3 elements to any craft: the tools (and techniques), the materials, and the design. Our material is wood. Ex-tree. It's a beautiful material: the feel, the smell, the individual history... But I suspect you know that already!

Trees differ, woods differ, and thus the sort of carving for which they are suitable differs. It's fun looking at trees and exploring the qualities of timber. When I started carving, I collected sawdust in jam jars and learned to recognise different species by their smells. Even now, I can walk into someone else's workshop and recognise they've been working in, say, Ash or Limewood.

In the end, you'll probably settle for working in just a few woods, ones with which you feel comfortable and suit your style of carving.

- If you know nothing about wood, look at the lessons on Woodcarving Workshops see below
- Whenever you see a carving, find out the wood it is made of and try and work out why the carver or sculptor might have chosen it.

Golden Rule:

You need to understand wood, this stuff with which we work.

You need to know how to 'cut wood the way it likes to be cut'. How will you do that? In the main, by cutting it. However, a bit of research into trees and wood as a material will be a great help. There's a lot of information to be had online at least.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Carving Matters > Introducing Wood](#)

2.5 The 'Wedge Effect'

You take that new carving tool out of it's packing. 'Ooh', you say, because it's a gorgeous thing. Only

Not meaning to deflate your experience but, bottom line, it's just a glorified wedge of metal!

What's the effect of a wedge? You'll find out the hard way if you don't keep this idea at the back of your mind as you carve. Sometimes we can use the 'wedge effect' to our advantage; most often we need to be on guard against it, as we will see.

Golden Rule:

Think edge. Think wedge.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Techniques > Cutting to the Chase > The Wedge Effect](#)

2.6 Surfaces, Lines & Junctions

These 3 words form a sort of checklist. Technically, in all carvings, you are only dealing with these 3 aspects:

1. Surfaces: Every solid object has a surface! It's where an object meets the air. A surface can be smooth, textured, coloured etc. and as the carver you will always be making choices about surfaces. Ideally they should be conscious ones, part of your desire for the carving outcome.
2. Lines: From outlines to sudden changes in plane. From the ridges between tool facets to actual lines drawn with a fine gouge on the surface. Lots of lines. Everywhere. And you are in charge of 'tuning' them.
3. Junctions: Where 2 surface planes meet - really another sort of line and needs to be cleanly cut as everything else.

We are not talking the 'artistic' side of carving here, more the vehicle in which your artistry rides. You can choose to have rough lines and unfinished surfaces whatever you'll not be able to avoid them and having this checklist in your head will help you make conscious decisions.

Suggestion:

Print out, large, and stick above where you are working:

Surfaces, Lines & Junctions

As you carve, take care of these things. And when you think you have finished, change the lighting and have another look.

2.7 Practice

'Practice' has such an uninspiring image that I almost called this section, 'That P-word'!

The very idea that they might have to actually practise something to get good at it puts many people off trying it.

But, hang in here. Practising means 2 things:

- Actually doing something rather than just thinking about it, and
- Setting yourself exercises to improve your skill.

Doing it:

Woodcarving is a skill, and that means it's learnable to a greater or lesser extent.

It's also true that we are all wired in different ways: we come to woodcarving (or everything else for that matter) with different capacities and different amounts of 'natural talent'. There's not much to be done about that. But unless you practise in the sense of actually working at something, you'll never really find out how much talent you really had for it...

So, give woodcarving a really good go! I've seen students shocked by finding a talent for woodcarving that they didn't know they had. And I've yet to come across a student who hasn't enough talent to get a lot of enjoyment and satisfaction out of carving. There will be carvings that take your breath away; comparing your own skills and talents can be frankly disheartening.

Other than to be inspired and motivated, don't compare. Focus on your personal best, simply enjoying what you are doing and what you can do.

The more you enjoy your carving, the more motivated you'll be to do it.

Exercises:

In this course I'll start with skill-building exercises, then we'll apply them. And you'll keep applying them as you progress as a woodcarver. You'll probably never need to separate out these exercises again - though an occasional refresher might bring to mind things you've forgotten.

Don't be afraid to repeat things. Repetition is the to build up muscles, co-ordination and confidence.

If there is some aspect of a carving you find difficult, pull it out, mock it up. Practise it; exercise, before committing to the 'real thing'.

As you move on, keep in the idea of trying to do each thing the best you can and you'll be practising without knowing it.

Golden Rules:

1. Don't let the idea that you are 'untalented' or inartistic' put you off.

Consistent practising - consistently and regularly just doing it - will take whatever talent and artistry you have a long way.

2. Enjoy the journey.

It may be a cliché but nevertheless there's great joy to be had in the moment-to-moment challenges of woodcarving. Create a good environment for yourself. Relish the smells and sounds, the dance between gouge and wood [2.3]. I've heard many carvers describe woodcarving as 'therapeutic'.

3. The best way to 'practice' any skill is by learning the way your brain likes to learn: Small bites, repeated regularly and often; and increasing your challenges incrementally rather than by huge leaps.

3 Setting up

To carve, we need 3 things: a carving tool, a piece of wood and an idea/design. In this beginner's course I'm making these choices for you. In the future, you'll make your own choices.

When you do, you might have these questions:

Where do I get stuff?

These days, it's easy: search online. There are a lot of carving tool and carving wood distributors out there. You can also get lots of information from woodcarving magazines, national carving associations and local carving clubs.

Tools?

- Always buy well-established, reputable makes of carving tools - suggestions in 3.1.
- Buy carving tools a few at a time. Build up your kit slowly. Become very familiar with these tools: what they can do; what they can't.
- Cost: Although good carving tools seem expensive, they will last a lifetime and as we will see you can do a lot with just a few. Carving, compared with most any other wood craft is actually quite inexpensive! How much is a lathe? Hand planes? Power machinery?
- Never be tempted to buy 'cheap' tools to save money. You will save money but you'll lose your temper. Cheap tools dumped on us from abroad are a sure way to a miserable experience.
- You will need to sharpen your carving tools. To get you into wood ASAP I'll be asking you to carve with tools 'out of the box'. These tools are factory-sharpened-but-not-'forever-sharpened'. They will get dull, and they can be given a more efficient cutting shape. But more about that later. But, for now, bear in mind you will need equipment with which to sharpen your tools in the future.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Tools > Choices](#)

Wood?

- For us carvers, a little wood can go a long way. Off cuts from joinery and woodworkers shops will often do.
- There are specialist suppliers of carving woods
- Never stint on carving wood. You'll spend a long time on a carving and the wood will be a small percentage of the cost. So, no wood from the log pile.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Carving Matters > Selecting Wood](#)

Design?

'I'm not artistic.' Is that you? Don't worry about it. Just get stuck in! My experience is that as you explore carving you'll find you are a lot more artistic than you thought.

In this beginners course you'll carve a low relief design that I've made up to fit the few tools we start with but there are many other projects you can copy to begin with. You can adapt or tweak to make a design your own and, eventually, as you feel confident, you'll begin generating your own ideas.

Do watch the suggested video below.

Follow up lessons:

[WW.tv > Videos > Carving Matters > What Shall I Carve?](#)

3.1 A Few Tools

There are lots of carving tools. For this course I'm choosing three, with an optional fourth.

Why these 3? Because they fit the low relief carving design. In fact I've made the design with these tools in mind, not the other way round. Having said that, these are also very useful. I find constantly on my bench and you'll not regret having them as you continue to carve.

Get yourself:

1. Medium gouge: #6 (Pfeil cut 7) x 1/2in (14mm)
2. Very flat gouge: #3 (Pfeil cut 2) x 1/2in (14mm)
3. V tool: 60° degrees x 3/8in. X 1/8in. (10mm)

Additional tools - optional:

4. Skew Chisel: #2 (Pfeil 1S) x 3/8in. X 1/8in. (10mm)
You can substitute a knife with a sharp corner.
5. Carver's brush: A washable scrub brush for clear shavings and keep the carving clean
6. Carver's Mallet: Cylindrical, about 20oz (550g) really useful when the wood is hard.

Notes:

- The '#' designation is from the so-called Sheffield List which most tool manufacturers use to specify a tool. Pfeil carving tools use a different system for the same tool.
- V tools like 2 chisels joined together along one edge - come in different angles. 60° is the most generally useful.
- The width of a carving tool is taken corner to corner.

Important!

These tools must be 'factory-sharpened', 'ready to go' or 'out of the box'.

To be clear: 'Factory Sharpened' is not 'Carver sharpened'. Sharpening will be a vital skill to learn and an integral part of your life as a woodcarver but one that I am choosing to put to one side for this let's-just-get-stuck-in course.

Firms, which supply tools, like this:

- Auriou
- Ashley Iles
- Pfeil

Sources:

Searching online for a distributor is the easiest option.

If your tools are not 'factory-sharpened':

You must go to the 'No Fear Sharpening' section on the WW.tv and 'commission' your tools. You cannot carve with blunt tools.

Follow up lessons:

[WW.tv > Videos > Tools > Sheffield List](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Sharpening > No Fear Sharpening](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Sharpening > Pye-Cosman DVD](#)

3.2 A Piece of Wood

If you haven't read: [2.4], please do...

You'll actually need 2 pieces of wood, one for the sample board and another for the low relief carving.

I've basing my design on A4 printer paper. You can readily adapt the designs to other dimensions of wood but to follow what I'm doing exactly and use the tools I'm using, you'll need:

Get yourself 2 pieces:

- Length (along the grain) 11¾in. (300mm)
- Width (across the grain) 8¼in. (210mm)
- Thickness: 1in. (25mm)

This is the size of an A4 piece of paper.

Additionally you'll need some wood to practice

Species:

The sort of carving woods traditional European carvers use is cuts readily with gouges and has an open grain (some air between fibres) that allows shavings to fall away:

- Basswood (USA), Limewood (EU, UK),
- Jelutong
- Brazilian Mahogany

Tight-grained woods (no space between wood fibres) like Maple, Cherry or Beech and very hard and more suitable for sculpture and sanded finishes. I don't recommend them for what we are doing here.

Sources:

Woodcarving Workshops has members worldwide and we can't advise about wood sources where you live.

When you are starting up, finding decent carving wood can be a bit of a hurdle. You have to see it as a right of passage and may take a little effort to begin with.

When you do find a source, you want to get extra so you build up a little stock.

1. Search the Internet: It's by far the best starting point these days. For example, if you put "limewood blanks for carving UK" into Google, quite a lot of sources turn up, including eBay. Dimensions vary, as does whether the wood is air (preferable) or kiln dried. Don't hesitate to phone them asking for something specific. You may have to be a bit creative in how you search so keep at it.

2. Other carvers where you are. What are they using? From where do they get it?

3. Also look for and ask: carving clubs, carving supplies, woodworkers, woodcarving and woodworking magazines.

4. The other thing to learn is gluing up to the size you want. I generally use single pieces because I buy my wood in big old boards and get through quite a lot. But joining wood is a well-established thing for carvers to do and an option if the dimensions of the wood you find lack the width. It's quite easy and you'll find online ways of clamping boards using fences and wedges without having to buy sash clamps.

3.3 A Way of Holding

In the traditional European style, carving tools are held with both hands. There is no spare hand to hold the wood so the work. Your carving is held absolutely still by some other means; only your hands move.

There are lots, and sometimes expensive, ways to hold your work; ones that allow you to change the position of your carving. Luckily, there are many cheap options too. In the lesson we'll hold our sampler and project wood to a backing board with a simple system of 'fences' (or fences and wedges). This in turn sits on your table or bench.

- Make sure the surrounding fence is lower than the surface of the wood you are carving
- A good angle for a wedge is 5-10°
- I used a piece of sticky carpet underlay (no-slip rug underlay) under the backing board to stop it moving. A 'router mat' from woodworking supplies is ideal but more expensive
- You need to work on a sturdy table or bench. Ideally you should stand to work as you put your body behind your carving. If the table is too low to stand comfortably, you may need to sit
- A carving bench is higher than woodworking benches to allow you to stand without backache.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Tools & Equipment > Holding Work](#)

Check list

Tools

1. Medium gouge: #6 (Pfeil cut 7) x 1/2in (14mm)
2. Very flat gouge: #3 (Pfeil cut 2) x 1/2in (14mm)
3. V tool: 60 degrees x 3/8in. X 1/8in. (10mm)

(Optional)

4. Skew Chisel: #2 (Pfeil 1S) x 3/8in. X 1/8in. (10mm)
Or knife with a sharp corner.
5. Brush
6. Mallet

Wood

2 pieces: Limewood (EU, UK), Basswood (USA), Jelutong, Brazilian Mahogany

Dimensions:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Length (along the grain): | 11 ³ / ₄ in. (300mm) |
| Width: | 8 ¹ / ₄ in. (210mm) |
| Thickness: | 1in. (25mm) |

Holding

- Plywood or similar
- Fence and/or wedges
- Non-stick underlay

4 First Cuts

I've talked about fundamental transferable skills and we are going to start with these: a really good way to hold a carving tool and a core way of cutting.

We'll follow that with more sorts of cuts and another way of holding the tools, all of which you will be using again and again whatever you carve in the future.

Follow up lessons for this whole section:

[WW.tv > Videos > Techniques > Grip Series](#)

4.1 Low Angle Grip

Use this powerful grip when the tool handle is low to the wood surface.

Points to watch (checklist):

- Both hands are on the carving tool.
- Front hand wraps around the blade; wrist and forearm rest on the wood.
- Rear hands grips the handle
- Rear hand pushes. Front hand resists.
- In the balance of these 2 forces lies the control.
- Keep your pushing elbow in. Use your body. ('Carve from the floor.')
- Practise swapping hands.

4.2 Running Cuts

This is a good exercise for practising the low angle grip.

Points to watch:

- In. Along. Out.
- Do not lever the tool by dropping the handle suddenly when the edge is buried in the wood. You can damage the cutting edge.
- Notice how a diagonal cut gives you a clean side of the trench and a torn side - how badly will depend on the nature of your wood. We'll

Exercises:

- Parallel, straight lines across the grain. Try to match the lines each time this shows you are in control!
- Wavy lines
- Curves to the left and right
- Undulating cuts
- Tapering cuts. Actually, of course, I mean 'expanding'. I could have said 'reverse tapering' I suppose. I use 'tapering' because once the cut is done you can't tell which end you started from: you can make the cuts thin to thick, of thick to thin. Try both ways?
- Try writing your name. What does that tell you about the V tool and the curves it will cut?

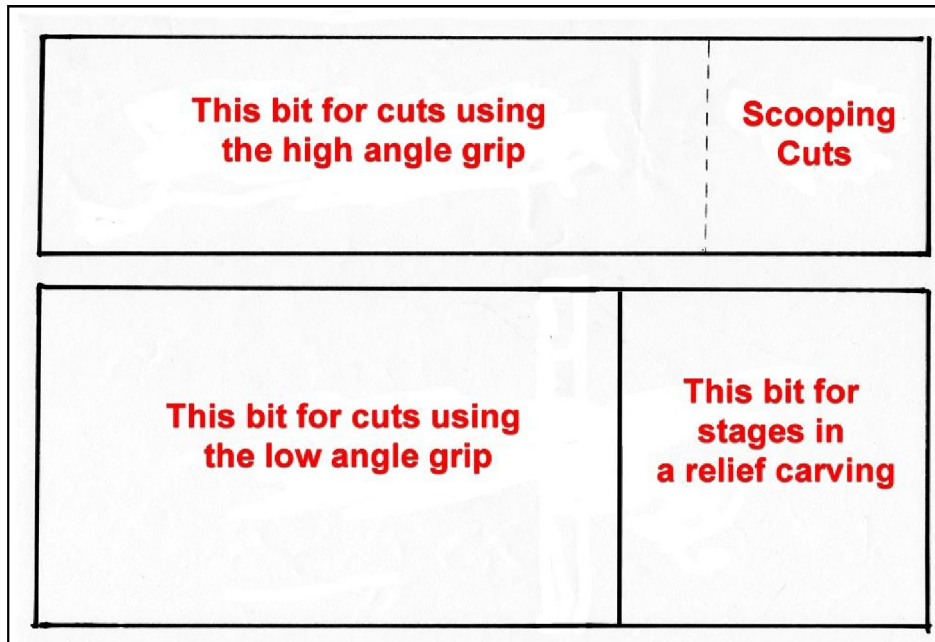
4.3 Sampler

The sampler, or sample board, will hold examples of the various cuts we make as a reference for the future, rather like those cross-stitch samplers you see framed in bedrooms.

Wood measurements:

See [3.2](#) above.

Layout:



At the end of this section I'll add a scan of the completed sample board.

4.4 Rocking Cuts

'Rocking' a carving tool through its cut means rotating the handle as you push it along. This introduces a degree of slicing into the cut, which is something we'll be exploring more and more. Slicing is so important that I've called the 'cut of the carver'.

When you feel comfortable with these rocking cuts, you can add them to the sample board in the square area we left to one side.

Points to watch:

- Make short, scooping cuts. (In. Along. Out.)
- Keep the corners clear at the beginning and the end of the cut. The cut happens along the blade, between the corners.
- Feel the 'sweep' (the curvature) of the bevel as it rests on the wood. You are not levering, or wiggling the handle, but making a smooth rotation. It's quite a lovely action that will soon become second nature.
- Rock (rotate) clockwise as well as anticlockwise.
- Swap hands – it's the low angle grip.
- If you dig the corners in, you'll tear the wood. Clean up by over-carving the torn area as you go along.
- Practise making heavy cuts, light cuts and grading between the two.
- With more curved gouges, you'll rotate the tool more; with flatter tools, less.

4.5 High Angle Grip

Here is our second grip. This and the high angle grip cover most of the ways you'll need to hold the carving tools. It's an amazingly adaptable grip and as you explore the rest of Woodcarving Workshops you'll see me using it in all sorts of ways.

Stab cuts:

Happen when the tool is driven straight in and out of the wood, leaving the impression of the cutting edge. Stab cuts can be used for emphasis or simply as decoration.

Stop Cuts:

As stab cuts that have a particular function, controlling the grain and preventing fibres from tearing. You needn't think much about it now but you find stop cuts come into their own in lettering and mouldings

Points to watch:

- The high angle grip is two-handed. You don't need to swap hands but both play synergistic roles.
- The fingers (at least) of the blade hand rest on the wood for control.
- The way you hold the blade and the handle is variable, depending on the tool coming from the left or the right.
- Keep your elbows in. Move your body with the cut.
- Use your shoulder and body for added pressure.
- Do not wobble or lever to one side when you push the cutting edge into the wood! You'll very likely snap off a corner. Always remove the edge by levering along the edge, towards the corner.

Exercises:

- Stab cuts, reversing the tool, going along and across the grain. (Notice how much more effort is needed to stab in across the grain. This is where a mallet can come in handy.)
- Stab with the corners in the same way.
- Join cuts up, trying to copy and repeat movements.

4.6 Slicing Cuts

We come now to some great carving techniques. Slicing is so useful that I would hazard to say I slice my cuts 95% of the time. If it's not a running or straight stab cut, then I'm slicing along the cutting edge in some fashion.

Slicing takes that cutting edge and runs with it.

Points to watch:

- As you offer the tool to the wood at an angle, so you'll have to adapt both fingers and hands on your high angle grip, one direction to another. It's quite an individual thing and you'll find one side more natural, and stronger, than the other.
- It's an odd grip in some ways but just keep at it and you'll find your muscles and coordination will develop so the grip will eventually seem very natural.
- Use your thumb to push the blade as you rotate the handle.

Exercises:

- Circles with the medium gouge #6. Remember to keep the lead corners clear.
- From the circle, rotate the handle so the slice has a tighter radius.
- Try a bigger radius. (It's not you! It's not possible to cut a wider arc than the sweep of a gouge while using any amount of the cutting edge. It's the nature of the beast.)

However, being able to cut tighter arcs is extremely useful in letter carving and 'setting in', which we will come to later.)

- Slicing with the flat gouge #3
- Angle cuts

Follow up lessons:

[WW.tv > Lettercarving > Choosing Gouges for Circles](#)

[WW.tv > Lettercarving > Slip Sliding Away](#)

Sampler:

When you're ready, add these cuts to the sample board.

You'll see in the video that I had a bit of fun making up a flower-like pattern. Before going to the sample board, work a design out on your practice wood. I'd suggest you don't actually draw it out on the sample board. Rather allow the tools to draw the design.

The Punch:

I made what we can genuinely call a woodcarver's punch from a biggish nail.

The tip of a nail is usually nipped off and not shaped the way we want. However, because a nail is quite soft metal, you can rub and shape the tip into a neat cone on more-or-less any stone. Square off the very tip rather than have a sharp point. Tap the punch vertically into the wood with your mallet or a hammer.

Woodcarvers complement carving tools with punches in order to add accents or textures. See the links below for more examples.

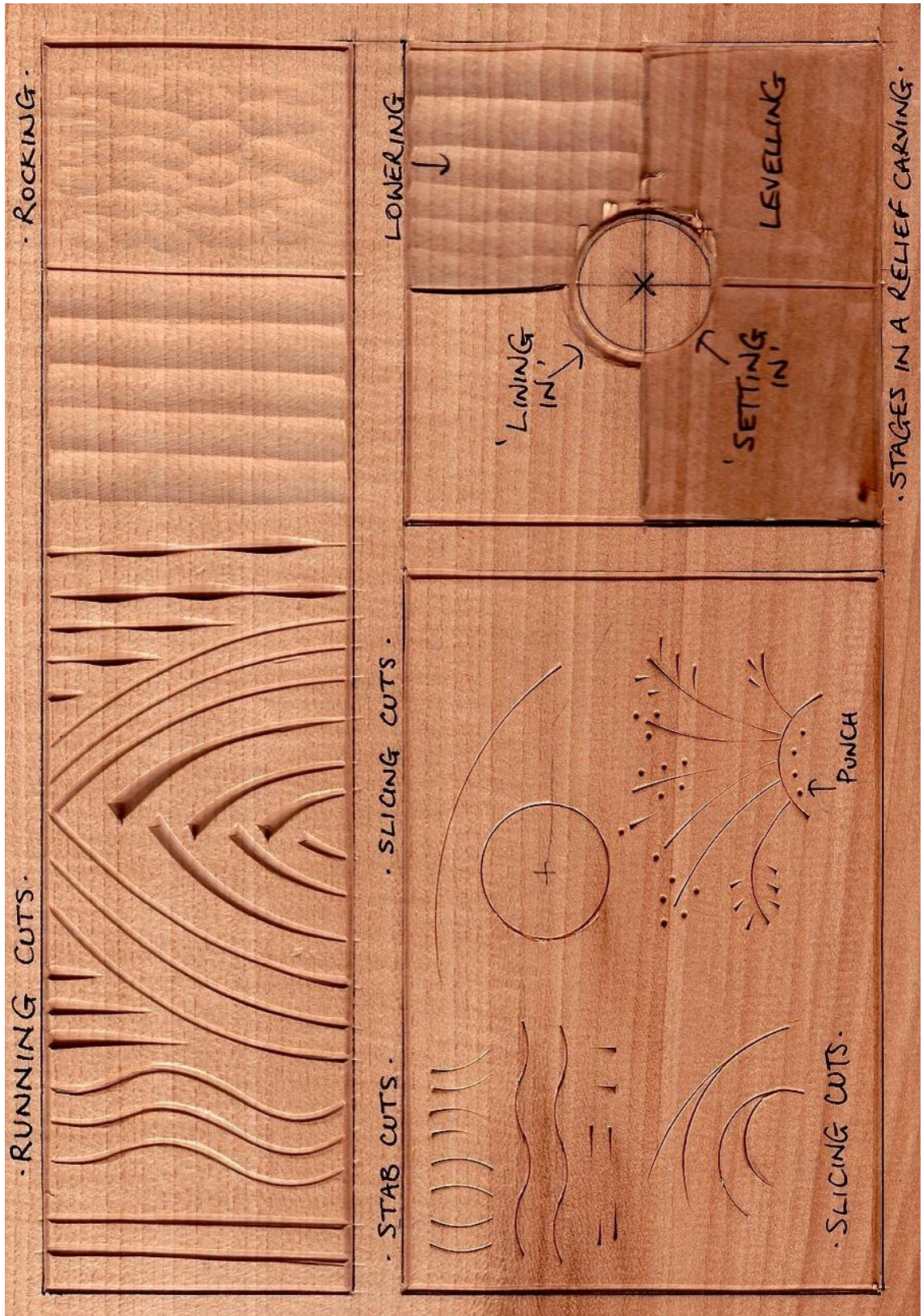


Follow up lessons:

[WW.tv > Videos > Relief Projects > Snail > 10 Surface Detail](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Ornamental > Rosette > 5 Details](#)

Next page: my completed sample board,
which includes the stages [5] in a relief carving.



· STAGES IN A RELIEF CARVING ·

5 Stages in Relief Carving

If you've been following and practising with me so far, you'll have a repertoire of carving techniques: good ways of holding the carving tools with a range of different cuts. Our low relief carving project will bring all these together: we'll use the same cuts in a particular context.

To arrive at the finished relief carving you'll usually work through a series of distinct stages, each laying the foundation for the next. We'll take a look at these first, aiming at another sample board.

Something to think about:

There really only is relief carving

If you look at your shirt, sweater or jacket cuff, you are in effect seeing a relief: the cuff is 'relieved' from your arm, which is the background. It's just that the whole thing is wrapped 3-dimensionally!

So this simple relief carving and the stages we are looking at here reaches far further than you might first suppose...

5.1 Lining in

'Lining in' is the carver's term for outlining and separating the subject from the surrounding wood. It's about protecting your design.

But why not just stab in around the outline? Well, unless you make your cuts very shallow, the 'wedge effect' of the bevels [2.5] is likely to fracture delicate parts of the carving, which you won't notice until they fall off. Lining in stops this happening.

Points to watch:

- Low angle grip. Running cuts.
- An alternative to the V tool is a narrow deep gouge ('U'-shaped and called a 'flute').
- Go around the subject on the waste side of your drawn line
- Notice the clean side and torn side of the V groove. Put the clean side to the subject.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Relief Projects > 3 Simple Leaves > 1 Relief Basics](#)

5.2 Lowering

A relief carving sticks out from the background, but it's rather like saying the sun rises. The truth is that it's the background that has been lowered around the carving. I'm going to show you an efficient way of doing this; the same approach I use to carve away a lot of wood in many other circumstances.

Points to watch:

- Low angle grip. Running cuts
- Work across the grain across the wood fibres. This way the wood shavings fall away with little fight.
- Carve your grooves evenly, depth and width.
- Pay attention to the bottom of the grooves, not the ridges. This is close to the wood you'll be leaving. The ridges will be cleared away. See [7.4](#).
- Our #6 medium gouge doesn't run a very deep cut before the corners dig in. To be even more efficient, and especially if you are going deeper, you need a 'quicker' or deeper gouge one with more curve, even semi-circular in cross section (#9).

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Relief Projects > Low Relief Church > 2 Lowering & Levelling](#)

5.3 Levelling

Having lowered the background, we want to flatten it. I've called this 'levelling'. Essentially we skim off the ridges to a finished surface. I hope you can see that the more precise we are with the lowering, the quicker we can arrive at our finished surface.

And it will be a finished surface. In the style of carving I'm showing you, we won't be doing anything else.

For levelling we need a special way of slicing with a very flat gouge.

Points to watch:

- Work across the grain, slicing left or right.
- You can't rock or rotate a flat gouge because the corners will immediately dig in, but you can 'drift' the cutting edge across the wood fibres
- You can of course work along the grain, and if you are carving with it, you always leave the cleanest cut. But that's not always possible, Working across the grain with
- You will need a properly sharpened tool for the best result.

Golden Rule:

Whenever you are finding grain tearing up and you wonder, what to do about it, the answer is always: a slicing cut across the grain.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Letter Carving > House Number > 5 Levelling](#)

5.4 Setting In

'Setting in' is the term carvers give to and defining the outline of something, anything from a flower or a leaf to a strand of hair or the collar of a shirt.

There are 2 main ways of setting in, what I call:

- 'Setting in by matching' and
- 'Setting in by slicing'.

I look at them separately in the lesson and I tend to approach work in this order. However, in the hustle and bustle of carving these techniques do get mixed together according to what needs to be done and when.

Points to watch:

- High angle grip
- It may take a while to get a sense of where the background is and you don't want to cut into it, so set in lightly first. It's OK to repeat the cut.
- Matching tends to use 'quicker' (more curved) gouges; slicing works best with flatter gouges.
- You aim to join all the setting in cuts, both matching and slicing together in one unbroken line.

Setting in by Matching:

- Match the sweep of the gouge to the edge you want to define.
- Stab cuts. Join together either with stab cuts or by slicing along.
- Pick one gouge, use it where you can in the carving. Swap to the next until you've exhausted the possibilities.

Setting in by Slicing:

- Slice the cutting edge of the tool along where you want to define.
- Keep leading corner of the gouge clear of the wood
- Remember you can tighten the curve if necessary.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Letter Carving > House Number > 6 Setting in by Matching](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Letter Carving > House Number > 7 Setting in by Slicing](#)

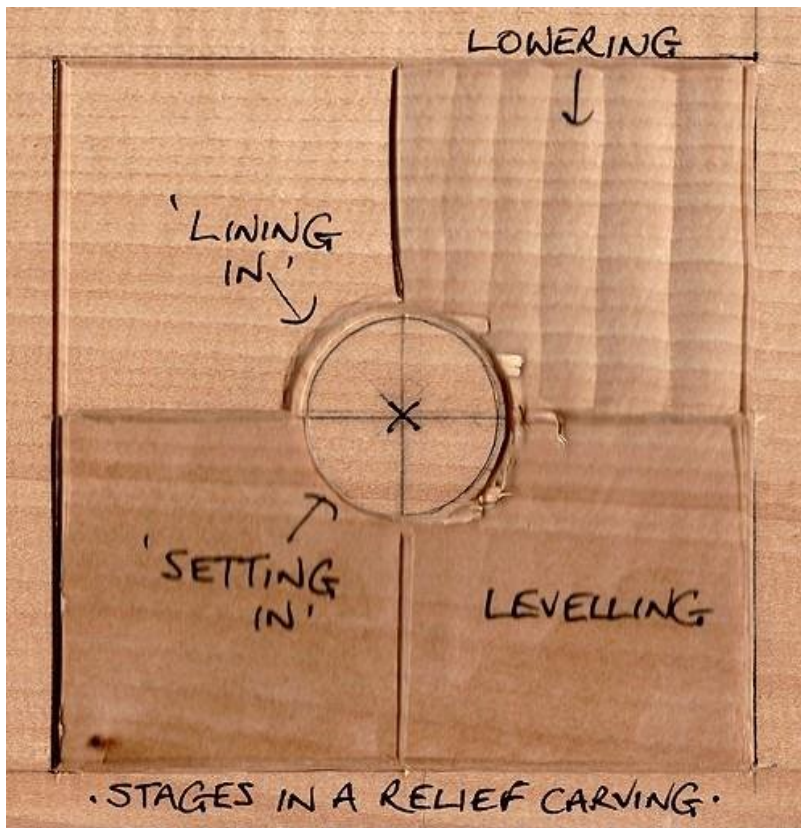
5.5 Sampler

There's a lot to take in!

Essentially, however, this is how 'relieving' a carving of its background works, and you've learned the cuts you need to make it happen.

I divided the bottom right corner of our sample board into 4, and use the medium gouge #6 to draw a circle in the centre. Then I worked clockwise through the stages:

Detail scan of the (sample board) stages in a relief carving:



If you've been following and practising everything so far you now should have a repertoire of carving cuts and techniques, and a good idea of how to tackle a simple relief carving.

So, let's carve one!

6 Simple Low Relief Flower Project

I don't want to repeat what I say about the stages in a relief carving above so do revise the points in section 5 in as we go through the carving.

6.1 Drawing Out

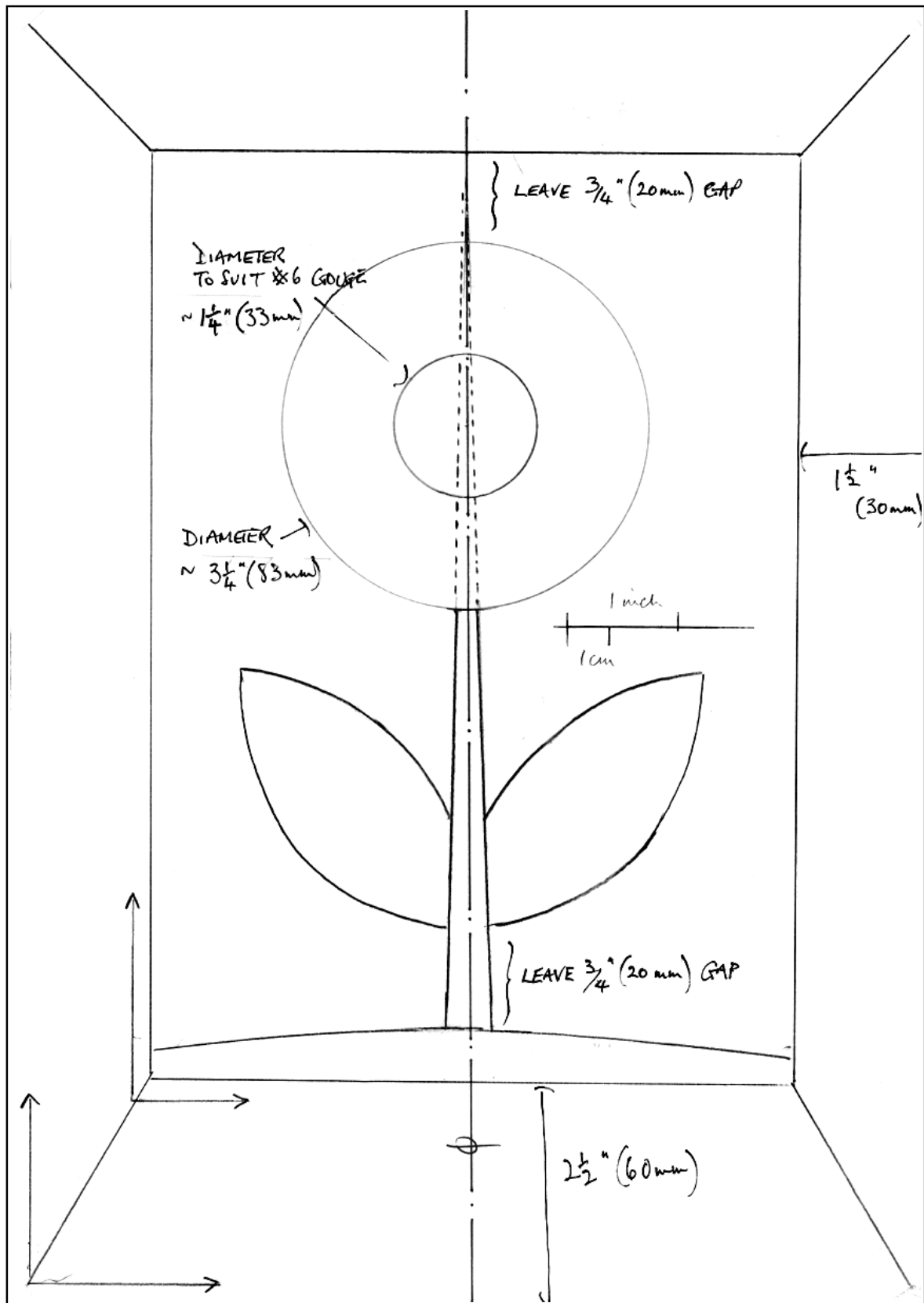
This flower panel can be used as a key or necklace holder; or you could leave out the bottom bit and enjoy the flower as a stand-alone panel.

To follow exactly what I am doing, with the tools I am using, you need to draw out the flower using the drawing on the next page. The drawing should fit nicely on A4 paper.

Next Page: Working drawing for the low relief flower carving.

Points to watch:

- I designed the carving to fit the tools we have. Remember this principle!
- Use a soft pencil (2B+) to draw on the wood. A harder pencil will score the wood itself and after erasing the marked surface will still be visible.



6.2 Lining In

Points to watch:

- Low angle grip. Running cuts. V tool.
- The depth of the background will be about 1/8in. (3-4mm).
- Run your V groove a little shallower than the final depth and the same depth all around.
- As you line in the frame, tilt the V tool into the carving so one 'chisel' cuts a vertical wall and run right up to the line.
- Clean side of any diagonal cut to the subject; torn side to the waste.
- Ignore details in the design. Even everything out a bit. This is an early stage; we'll have a chance to deal with awkward sections later.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Relief Projects > Low Relief Church > 2 Lowering & Levelling](#)

6.3 Lowering

Points to watch:

- Low angle grip. Running cuts. Medium gouge.
- Work evenly and methodically. Time spent at this stage saves time in the next.
- The result will look like what I've sometimes call 'ploughing'
- Visualise your final surface. Eye through a flat plane under the subject
- Place the bottom of your running cuts just above this level.
- Look at the bottom of the grooves rather than the ridges.
- You may need to rock the running cut right at its end, as you come up against the lining in, or into a corner.
- Turn the board around to get at both sides comfortably.

Follow up lesson:

- [The Leaving of Wood \[7.4\]](#)

6.4 Levelling

Points to watch:

- Low angle grip. Slicing cuts with flat gouge.
- Work methodically; cut cleanly; police the area and remove all traces of the previous 'ploughing'.
- Keep feeling for that final flat surface.
- As you arrive at the flower or leaves you'll likely find the finished surface a little deeper than the groove of the lining in. This results in shaving sticking around the subject. You can leave these for now. We'll cut them off when we set in.
- Also leave tight junctions for the setting in stage.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Relief Projects > Low Relief Church > 5 Levelling](#)

6.5 Setting in

Points to watch:

- The outline is very important in telling the viewer what they are looking at.

Golden Rule:

In general, you want to make the change of plane which is your outline stronger than the changes of plane within the carving itself.

- Set in by matching first, then slicing with the high angle grip.
- Finish off the background with flat gouge, low angle grip. Use the skew chisel (or knife tip) to clean into the tight leaf-stalk junctions.
- You are aiming for a neat, crisp junction between the background and the wall-like edge of the flower
- As you finish off up to the junction, it's easy to sink the background deeper around the subject. Try to avoid this but if it happens make the slope to the dip shallower by removing wood from further out in the background. The background just has to look flat, it doesn't have to be engineeringly flat.

Follow up lessons:

[WW.tv > Videos > Letter Carving > House Number > 6 Setting in by Matching](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Letter Carving > House Number > 6 Setting in by Slicing](#)

6.6 Modelling

'Modelling' is what I call establishing the final underlying forms or shapes of whatever we are carving.

Here's a question that arises from my definition above: 'Underlying' what, exactly?

Underlying the details. The details are the light surface carving that goes in last of all, on the 'modelled' surface, which might be hair, feathers, leaf veins, for example. If you put the details in then have to re-carve the surface, you've put the details in too early.

Note:

You can also use the term 'modelling' to mean working in clay, making a model. That's sometimes a useful thing before embarking on a complicated woodcarving.

Points to watch:

- Practise the centre flower boss on another board first.
- Don't make the centre flower boss too deep. The logic of a relief carving is that parts within the design cannot be deeper than the background.
- We are trying to create what interest we can. In a low relief carving, there's little wood to remove, but what we can remove will make a big difference to how light and shadow falls across the flower.

6.7 Details

At the end of the modelling stage, a carving usually looks a bit 'naked'. The details are like surface clothing and a fun part to do. You are in the very last stages and you're about to give your carving a bit of panache!

Points to watch:

- The punch: made from a nail in [4.6](#)
- Details add extra interest. The 'birds' fill in what might be an uninteresting empty space around the flower. The skew chisel and punch give the 'ground' below the flower some texture.

Golden Rule:

Less is more.

6.8 The Frame

The decoration we are carving here is essentially a 'moulding': a repeating pattern in a strip. Over the centuries carvers have created huge numbers of these, decorating anything from fireplaces to picture frames. This one is a very old pattern, cut simply with the V tool.

Notice how the effect comes from the wood we leave untouched, rather than the wood we cut.

Points to watch:

- It's the uniform repetition that really makes a moulding work, so take care with your initial layout.
- Because of the exactness needed to cut mouldings, they make great practice exercise.
- Take care to mirror the direction of cuts from one side to the other.
- Corners, where mouldings change direction, usually don't 'work' and have to be dealt with separately, making a feature of them.

Follow up lesson:

[WW.tv > Videos > Surface Decoration > Introducing Mouldings](#)

7 More Things You Need to Know

You've finished the frame? Congratulations!

And, since you've completed your first carving, call yourself a woodcarver!

So...

7.1 What to do next?

Repeating:

- Feel free now to repeat any of this beginners course, especially the first cuts section. You'll do it better and quicker the second time round.
- And, as you move on with your carving, come back to these lessons for a 'refresher.'
- Section 1: [Key Ideas](#) is very important, but may seem a little esoteric. Keep coming back to these thoughts and try and take them with you into your carving future. Trust me, they will make an enormous difference to both your success and your satisfaction as a carver.
- Section 7: [More Things You Need to Know](#) - below - more

Use the Woodcarving Workshops.tv website!

- The rest of Woodcarving Workshops.tv is your oyster. I've noted some lessons to try at the end of this section. Remember: gently increasing challenges
- At the same time, do browse through other, more challenging, lessons. Putting aside the actual subject, look for similarities between what I'm doing there and what you've been learning in this course. Transferable skills! You should recognise so much.
- You can adapt any of the projects – in fact, I'd encourage you to do so. There are plenty of ideas 'out there' to copy and, eventually, you'll start generating ideas of your own.

Follow up lessons on Woodcarving Workshops.tv:

Technical on Grips and Cuts:

[WW.tv > Videos > Techniques > The Grip Series](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Techniques > Cutting to the Chase > Cut of the Carver](#)

Next Projects:

[WW.tv > Videos > Relief Projects > 3 Simple Leaves](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > Surface Decoration > Thumbnail Carving](#)

[WW.tv > Videos > In the Round Projects > Apple Exercise](#)

Tools:

- Yes, you will need more of these, It's a bit like a piano: the more notes you have, the more tunes you can play.
- But don't just buy tools at random. Each project on the Woodcarving Workshops website has a tool list, and all the tools I use here are ones I regularly use, not just for the projects but in my other commissioned work. I suggest you work with these tool lists.
- Don't buy more than a few tools at a time. Get to know them well.

Enjoy your Carving!

Bottom line, woodcarving is a simple craft: a piece of wood; a couple of gouges. At the same time it can fully engage you as a human being.

I love the feel of wood; the sounds and the smells when I'm carving; the way shavings unzip with a sharp blade. I love the challenge of working out a design. You can get very focussed. Indeed students often describe woodcarving as meditative, even therapeutic, so different from their ordinary work.

So, relax. If it doesn't go right, do it again and enjoy the doing. It's just a piece of wood.

Another piece of advice: 'End gaining'. Don't do it! I see carvings and sculptures that take my breath away and I find myself negatively comparing my own skills and talents. If I don't catch myself, the realisation that I can never reach that level of 'perfection' can be, frankly, disheartening. But my personal best is my reality and I return to focusing on this and enjoying what I am are doing.

7.2 Sharpening

I've deliberately left sharpening out of this beginner's course. I've never done this before! I've always insisted that students learn to sharpen before putting tool to wood to me it's that important.

Why the change?

I wanted you to get into the wood straight away; to get some sort of feel for carving and see whether you like it, whether it's for you. So I've asked you to buy factory-sharpened tools. And I sincerely hope you did like carving wood and found that woodcarving is something you'd like to pursue.

However, let me be really clear:

Tools that come directly from the makers are, to my mind, not sharpened correctly.

They are not even sharpened by woodcarvers! It's not just about the cutting edge being sharp - that's rarely an issue; they give you a sharp cutting edge to get you going. It's the whole 'wedge'-shaped, cross-section of the bevels.

On Woodcarving Workshops there's lot's of instruction in how to sharpen your carving tools correctly.

Follow up lessons on sharpening:

[Woodcarving Workshops > Videos > Sharpening > No Fear Sharpening](#)

[Woodcarving Workshops > Videos > Sharpening > Pye-Cosman DVD](#)

Key points:

- To enjoy your carving, and carve easily and fluently, you'll need to be able to sharpen your carving tools. Sharpening gives you freedom.
- You shouldn't notice correctly sharpened carving tools, any more than you notice the gear (shift) lever in a car you just drive. You just carve. If you even think the tools are dull, they probably are and you need to do something about it. In the first instance this will be stropping.
- As challenging or frustrating as sharpening might be, carving with dull or incorrectly sharpened tools is much more frustrating. So, you need to learn how to sharpen your carving tools properly and keep them sharp.

Golden Rule:

Sharpening tools - it's what carvers do and have always done. It has the same meaning as musicians tuning their instruments.

7.3 The Leaving of Wood

Here's one of the most important woodcarving ideas I have to give you. In fact I'd even call this notion profound. It underlies both what I call the carving process [7.4] as well as the very way I carve:

You carve.

You remove wood.

But it's what you leave that matters.

Carving is different from modelling, where you build up, and it requires a certain mental leap.

Beginners usually focus on the tools, the cutting, shavings coming away, removing wood, but...

Golden Rule:

Even as you are carving away wood: focus on what you are leaving.

We've seen this in the lowering of the background [5.2] where I asked you to pay attention to the bottom of the grooves, which lie just over the finished surface. You'll see the idea again and again in other videos on the Woodcarving Workshops website.

7.4 The Carving Process

You start with a solid block of wood and end up with a finished carving. What we normally see is the finished carving, not the process the carver went through to arrive at it. Here's what you need to grasp: There is a process, with a series of steps between the start and finish.

As I write, my last commission was a snail climbing up a newel post, all from one piece of wood. I've never carved such a thing before. But when asked to do it, I said yes. I fully understood this process; the steps I would have to take. It's this sense of a sequence of events that is really what confidence is about. And this will soon come with experience.

It's not so easy to see the process in this simple project but you will see it again and again throughout Woodcarving Workshops. Do look out for the common features that might be called 'steps', or a 'process' in different carvings.

Key elements of the carving process:

- Right at the start you would identify places on the surface of your block or board that touch your finished carving. You'd leave these alone and working from them into the wood. These starting points are what I call 'high spots'. High spots, are places from where you are not going to take wood.
- Keep identifying high spots as you go along, working from one to another, mostly 'downhill'.
- You can use models and measurements to locate high spots let's call them reference points.
- You start taking big chunks of wood away (bigger gouges, saws even). As you approach the final surface, the chips of wood get smaller and smaller. As you reach that surface you'll be taking away fine shavings and tiny pieces of wood.
- Proper preparation [7.5] is hugely important.

7.5 The 3 P's

Preparation, Practice, Persistence

1 Preparation!

Ask me to carve a snail and I'd have to start researching snails.

Here's the thing: I recognise a snail when I see one, but I can't remember the details, certainly not enough to make a convincing carving.

You'll see all sorts of carving around Woodcarving Workshops, from lettering to carving 'in the round'. One thing they all have in common is that before I laid chisel to wood, I prepared: research, drawing models etc. Gathering information.

Golden Rule:

You can't have too much preparation, but you can have too little. In which case you'll end up disappointed.

Key points:

- Preparation is essential.
- The more complicated the carving the more you need to prepare.
- Preparation can take longer than the carving itself.

BTW:

If you'd like to see my snail climbing up a newel post, it's on my own website, here:

www.chrispye-woodcarving.com/gallery/view/sculpture

2 Practice!

I've said this before [2.7] but it's absolutely worth saying again: Woodcarving is a skill. It's learnable to a greater or lesser extent. You get better by working at it.

We come to woodcarving (or everything else for that matter) with different 'wiring', different capacities. Let's call it 'talent'. You will have some talent for woodcarving. Absolutely. But unless you practise - work at - you'll not know how much.

And bear in mind that there are no highly talented people, in any field, who don't practice their skills a huge amount, even if that's only by doing it.

Talent to one side now...

Key Points:

- See [2.7](#)
- Remember, the brain like small bites, repeated often.
- The more you enjoy your carving, the more you'll want to do it. And 'practice' means 'doing it'.

3 Persistence!

If I were asked the qualities that make up a good carver, high among them would be persistence. Grit. Just keeping at it. In the video I call persistence the 'little dog of carving'. The one that won't let go of your ankle.

The piece of wood with which I start a carving very often doesn't look anything like what I have in mind and it doesn't, and won't, for a long time. It might even look worse! The beginning of a carving often feels like climbing a hill, sometimes a very big hill, and beginners can find this daunting, even puts them off carving.

There really is nothing for it but to keep going, keep working and trust the carving process. At some point you'll crest the hill and start to see where you are travelling. It's what I call the point of recognition and from here on the carving gets easier - more fun even. You feel that the carving is in 'the bag' and, unless you make a big mistake, you'll succeed.

Key Points:

- If it's hard going to begin with, realise that that's normal!
- Keep going.

That's it!

I hope you've enjoyed this beginner's course in woodcarving. It's just a start, but I know it's a really good one and I hope you feel confident pursuing the craft further.

And, when you do, don't forget to add your work to the Members Gallery!

Joy and success to your carving!

Chris Pye

