
COURTESY MARC FISH

Plane sailing

No stranger to metal dovetails, Marc Fish reviews the A13 Smoother self build kit from Gerd Fritsche

It's great when birthdays and Christmas comes around and for me there's always a vast array of tools for the gift list. It's even better when it's a special birthday i.e. 40th. When asked by loved ones what I wanted for such a milestone birthday thoughts of an Altendorf table saw or a Holtey Plane sprung into my mind, but these come with one too many noughts. Instead it's a hand plane kit, a few hours and a finished plane that Holtey would be proud of. I have to say at this stage that Karl Holtey doesn't make kits, but there are various plane kits on the market, most of them based on classic British planes such as Spiers or Norris.

My kit came from Gerd Fritsche, a German plane maker, available at www.traditional-handplanes.com. The model I went for was the A13.

Gathering materials

I ordered a special bespoke kit. It was to have no markings on the blade or lever cap, brass sides to get the contrast on the dovetails and a steeper bedding angle for the blade at 50°. I found Gerd very accommodating to my requests and the turn around time for the kit was less than three weeks.

The kit comes with instructions and all the components necessary to make the plane. In addition you will need a surface or glass plate, abrasive paper, a punch, hammer, plywood for a peening block, a hacksaw and a metalworking drill bit set.

A lot of the work on this kit has already been completed for you. The mouth has been machined out, the dovetail shape has been laser cut in the sides, the throat plate has been pre-riveted for you, but there's still plenty left to do.

Metal dovetails are different to the familiar wooden variety. The sides are angled resulting in a double flared dovetail, which is necessary as no glue is used to join the components, therefore a mechanical fixing is required. The brass sides come with

I chose to soften the edges of the brass lever cap

The handles are supplied ready shaped but with plenty of scope to allow for modeling to your own spec. I asked for olive blanks to be used instead of the standard rosewood

After polishing, the last thing to do was fit the lever cap

laser cut dovetails, but you have to file the compound angle in them.

After the brass sides are filed the components should fit together. However I did have to do a little work on the mushroom rivets as they fouled up with the throat plate resulting in the sides not fitting the sole, these help keep the blade aligned. Controlled filing soon cleared this up.

Process

The process of fitting the side to the sole is very labour intensive. The pictures in the instructions are not that clear and if you've not done it before it's very daunting. The basic principal is to make the metal flow into the voids by cold chiseling. A hammer and cold chisel is used at an angle to get the metal from the sole to flow into the void created on the brass side. The actual process is called peening and is tricky because the metal moves quite easily but not always into the voids. On some of the dovetails the outside filled up before the inside, which meant that the void could not be closed. This does however get closed up with the brass dovetail on the sole but it doesn't keep the defined shape, cosmetic I know but annoying nonetheless.

Peening

To do the peening you'll need to make a peening block. This can be made out of layers of plywood joined together and planed very accurately to size. The instructions come with a diagram but the dimensions are not conclusive. I worked out the dimensions of my own block by measuring the spacing on the sole where the dovetailed sides would bed into.

The instructions are also not that clear regarding the peening process with a picture of three chisels and no explanation when to use them or where to put them on the metal to get the flow required. All the wooden components come in rough shape but require planing, filing, sanding and polishing. A choice of woods are available through Gerd, and I am sure he would do bespoke if you wanted something specific. The woodwork is relatively easy with the instructions being adequate.

The kit comes with a very thick blade measuring 5.5mm. This has to be one of the thickest blades I've seen. It should result in less vibration and chatter but a much longer time at the grindstone.

Timing

I'd never made a plane before but do have a basic understanding of metalwork. My timings came out at around 60 hours. I spent some extra time on polishing things like the lever cap, chip breaker and inside the mouth opening. I think some of the extra time was spent not understanding the instructions and diagrams. Many of the images are taken too far away and are not noted with the correct text that relates to the picture. There's also a 'lost in translation' issue. *F&C*

The timings advised are:

Metalwork 5 – 6 hours
Woodwork 4 – 6 hours
Finishing 5 – 7 hours
Total 14 – 20 hours

F&C Verdict

A very good kit but unfortunately poor instructions, diagrams and photos despite being 35 pages long. It's not a cheap way of getting a usable plane. A Lie Nielsen will set you back just as much as one of these kits, but it's a nice indulgence if you want to build your own tools and more importantly have the time to do so.

Pros
Components are all great quality
Good after-sales service

Cons
Unrealistic timings quoted for a novice plane maker
Unclear instructions

The Numbers
The A13 Smoother
Weight approx. 2.59 kg
Length of sole 224mm
Length in total 255mm
Width 67mm with 2 1/4in blade

From www.traditional-handplanes.com
Price €375