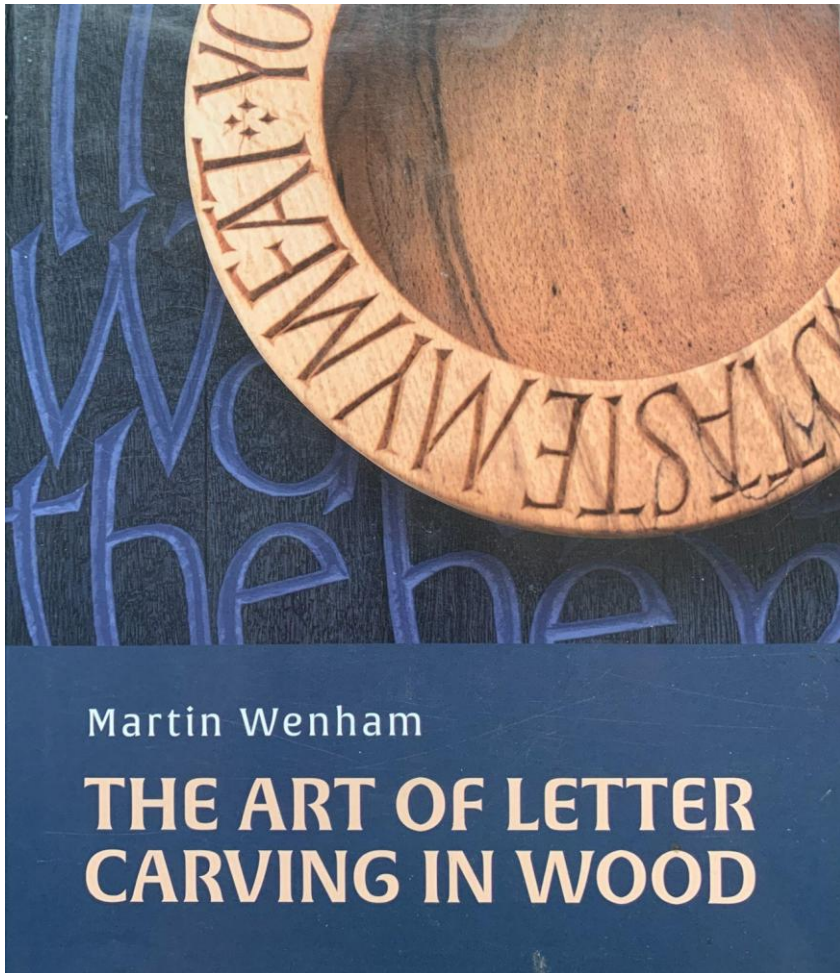


LETTER CARVING



By Ashley Francis 12th February 2025

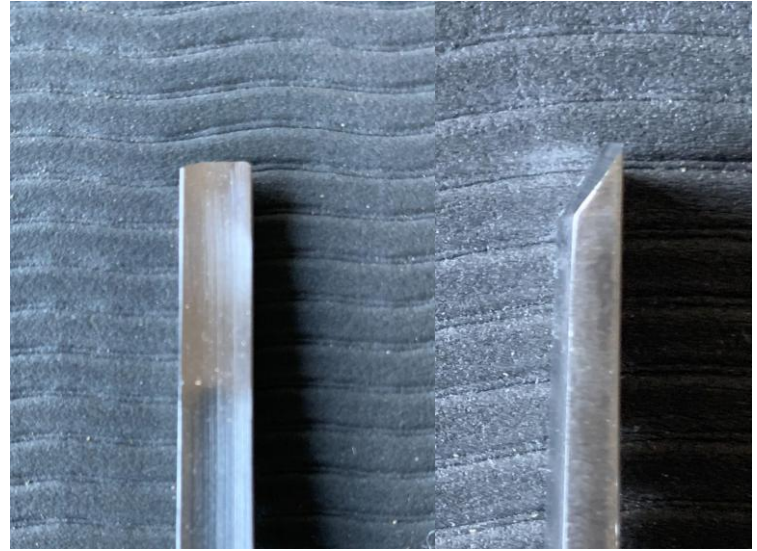
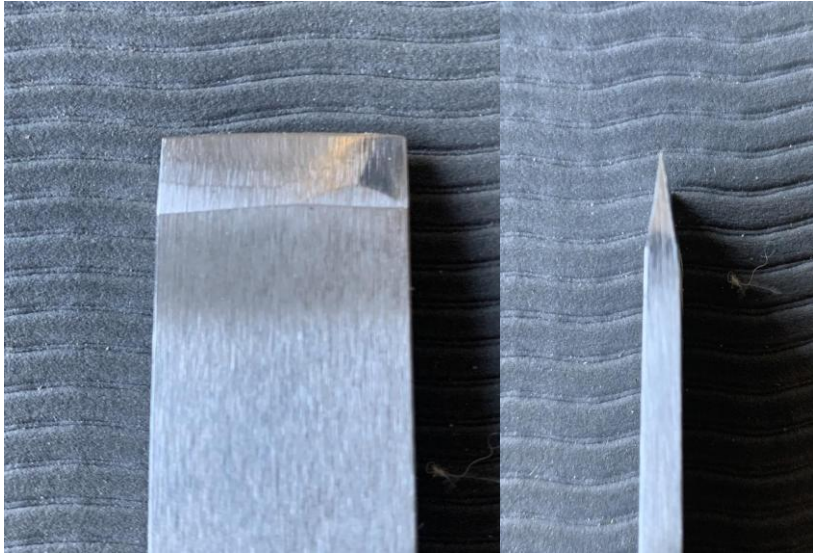


Martin Wenham

THE ART OF LETTER CARVING IN WOOD

This is where it all began, Tess (a person who loves paper, calligraphy and book making) got this book from the library, then seeing my interest, bought me the book. Later she made contact with the author and now we correspond regularly, especially when we have a unique piece that one of us has completed.

The tools



Straight chisels and gouges. New chisels need to be ground and then further honed to give a razor finish. I use a water stone and then a leather strop.

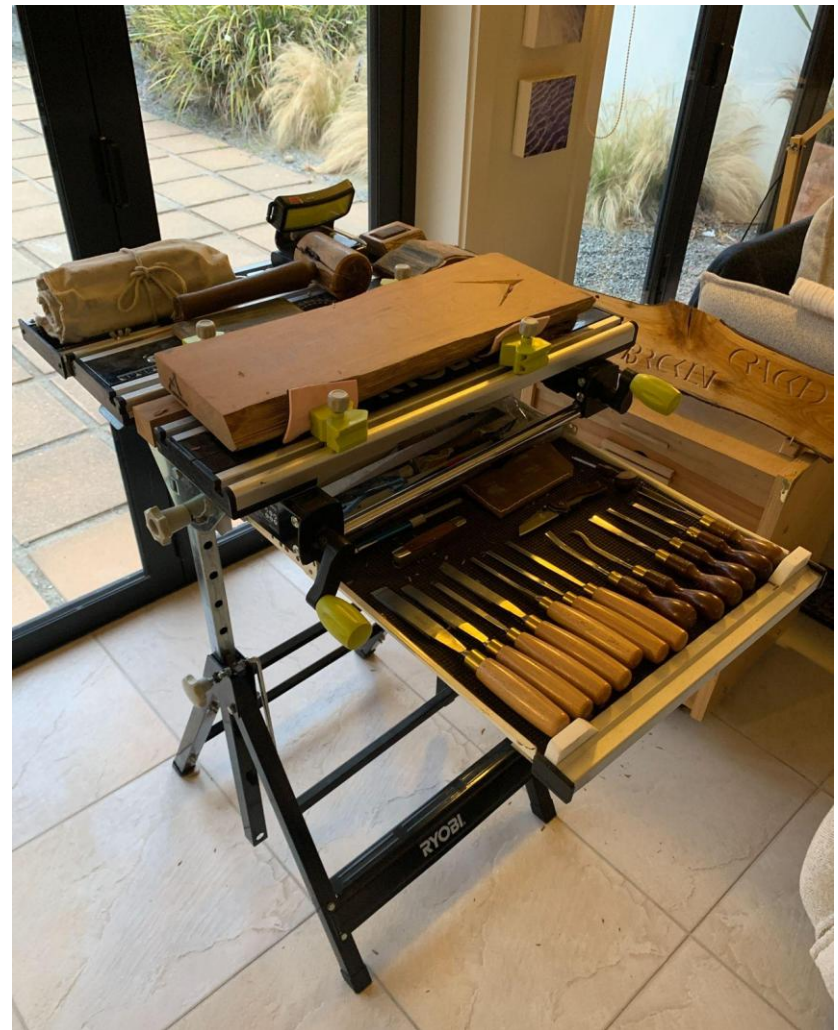
The chisels

I never realised when I ordered the chisels that they were not off the shelf, each one was produced from a blank on order. They took 3 months to deliver. They are a high carbon steel.



The workbench

It's in our lounge... Tess didn't want me to be carving in a cold garage and besides she considers the workbench an artwork. It is always a conversation starter.



Extras

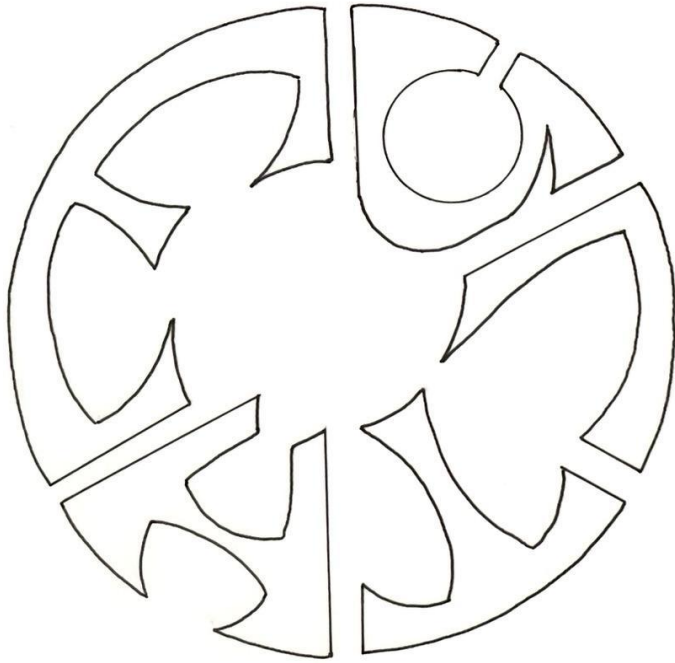
For fine work.



From 2mm wide. All reshaped and reground. Sometimes the main chisels are just too big. They are SKS7 Carbon Steel.

I have also made some special chisels when the need arises. I used high speed steel, difficult to sharpen but holds its edge.

The idea, then the stencil



Earth.
Part of a 4 piece set.



Prior to sanding

I had one piece of wood from which I had to get 4 pieces. The wood was given to me by someone in the club, sorry I cannot remember who gave it to me. When I sanded it it was full of woodworm but I felt that that just added to its character but it did present some challenges with the lettering.



Carving

3 of the
4 pieces.



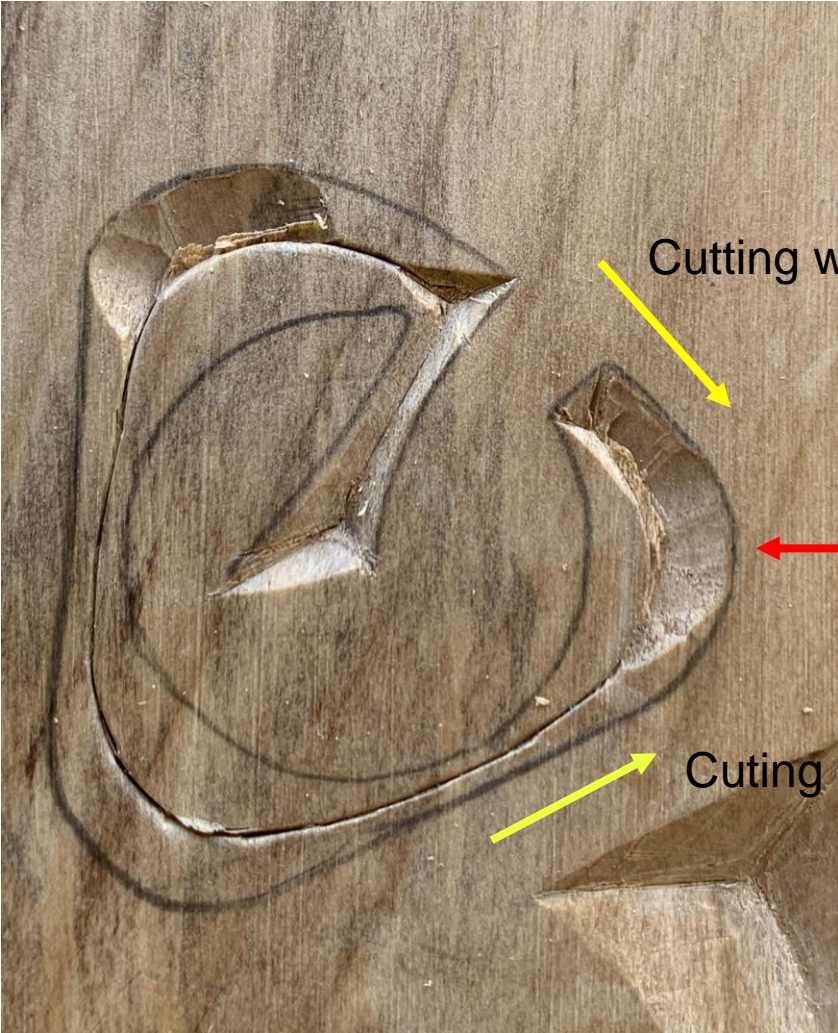
Cut the centre then the ends

You must watch the grain
of the wood at all times
and only cut when the
chisel is sliding with the
grain.



Rough cut

The whole intent is to avoid splitting the timber, so the first cut is always the gouge cut.



Cutting with the grain.

Gouge cut
1st cut

Cuting with the grain

Painting



One of the real challenges is consistency of letter form. Most letter carvers develop a letter form they like but I much prefer to choose a letter form that I think suits the piece.

Painted



Painted prior to using resin

In this case I used a Copper Micaceous paint.
NEVER use it unless you are going to resin the
letters it is far too reflective and can ruin a
piece.



Resin



The resin is self levelling. The sanding is terrifying. The letter widths are so critical. Removing only a little extra from an area will ruin the whole piece. Using resin is a real challenge but I like the end result.

The final centre piece

What I like most is developing a unique piece. Most of the time it is meditative, thinking about what to say, then how to present it. Does the wood lend itself to a specific piece and then seeing it come to fruition.

Although reading the words may be a challenge I believe it makes the piece and the message more memorable.



Repeat 3X

A piece where the wood dictated the words.

I had to re-carve the piece 3x.

Sanding ruined the letter widths, so I had to cut out the resin and then recut the letters. Learnings..

I am still learning and probably as long as i am carving there will be still more to learn..



The challenge

I had a call through the club that a biodynamic vineyard in the Wairarapa wanted a sign carved.



The wood was 1600 long by 700 high. Several times I recommended that they should do it using a CNC machine, but they were insistent that they wanted it hand carved. I really tried hard to get them to do it by machine.

I did a small sample piece to satisfy myself that I could do it and to show them that there had to be knife marks in the final piece. Then when I considered the width of the piece, I realised that I would break my back carving the centre unless I crawled on top of it and did the carving kneeling so I told them I could not do it. They continued to say they wanted it done if it was possible.

Test piece

My small sample piece to satisfy myself that I could do it and to show them that there had to be knife marks in the final piece.



The
stencil



The rocker



This is how I managed to carve the centre. I could rock the piece from one side to the other.



Finished

The final piece. We had agreed that if I did the piece that would pay \$1000 to a charity my wife's sister runs for deaf children in Vietnam. When they picked up the piece they were delighted and told me that they would make that \$1500 which has now been transferred to the charity Hearing and Beyond in Vietnam.



Overall, it took me about 40 hours including making the stencils (3 pieces), setting up and carving. This wasn't the meditative process I enjoy but it was a fascinating challenge.