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The care, use and tuning of your rabbet plane

Sharpening

The iron supplied with your rabbet plane is sharp and ready for use. We suggest that you accustom yourself to using it as supplied before sharpening or making changes to its edge.

The bit, or working end, of the iron of your rabbet plane is slightly wider than the body of the plane, which is designed to allow the plane to create a shoulder (on either side) and allow the body of the plane to follow the iron down while creating rabbets. This is facilitated by maintaining a slight relief angle on the sides of the iron. Though it is important these sides don't become cutting edges, as this will allow the plane to "drift" side-ways into the shoulder as the cut progresses.

When sharpening rabbet plane irons, it is essential to maintain a straight cutting edge without any rounding of the corners. This allows the plane to take uniform and manageable shavings and also helps keep the floor of the rabbet flat/horizontal.

We suggest you learn to hone your irons without resorting to guides. The skill for this can be readily acquired, especially if the bevel is hollow ground and your honing bevel is quite narrow. Besides, if your rabbet plane has a skewed iron, the honing guide will be superfluous in any event. Once you can feel a fine, uniform, wire edge while stoning the honing bevel, it and any wear bevel on the face of the iron can be removed by honing the face on your oilstones. If you keep your oilstones flat and fresh using a diamond stone, you can attain the same pattern of abrasive signatures from stone to stone and help maintain your irons in a way which expedites future sharpening.

If the honing bevel becomes too wide or if the cutting edge is damaged or needs to be altered to better correspond to the sole of the plane, it will be time to grind your iron. Using layout dye on the face of the iron, center your iron up in your plane, advance it to expose the edge, then scribe off the sole of the plane. This is particularly helpful with skew irons. Then, grind, or hone, at right angles to define the new cutting edge to the scribe line. Finally, using a freshly dressed grinding wheel and a light touch, grind the new bevel until the flat at the edge is a uniform hairline. This can readily be eliminated when re-establishing the honing bevel.

Setting

Your plane will arrive with the iron retracted up into the body. Check to see that the tang is relatively well centered in the wedge mortise and the bit is centered in the body (and slightly proud of the cheeks), then advance the iron by tapping on the heel of the tang with a small brass or plastic mallet. Make any lateral adjustment necessary by checking the uniformity of the projection of the cutting edge from the sole. Re-set the wedge with a wood or plastic mallet. When you need to remove the iron for sharpening, simply tap it down as already described and it will release due to being tapered. Similarly, if you need to set the iron for a lighter cut, it is best to drive it down to release it, then set it in a retracted position and advance in the manner already described.

Use

Since rabbet planes are not top escapement planes used to flatten and smooth wood surfaces and have conical escapements to allow shavings to clear over centered tangs and wedges, they are neither bench planes nor side escapement planes. For this reason, they are often classified as “joinery” planes. While this can be a useful classification, it doesn't include all of their uses. Not only can they be used to create rabbets into which other elements fit (joinery), but they are vital in creating defining rabbets when sticking mouldings, especially when using hollows and rounds.

Since rabbet planes are without fences to guide them in the first cuts in creating rabbets, it can be something of a mystery as to how to get rabbets started. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. One is to follow a moving fillister which is set to stop short of the gage lines of both the shoulder and the floor of the rabbet. In this case, the rabbet plane is a finishing plane and used to bring the rabbet just to the gage lines in both planes. Another is to start the rabbet plane against a shoulder first established with a snipes-bill plane (following a gage line) or a plow plane. Yet another is to use a side gage (batten). And, finally, especially for narrow rabbets, one can use one's fingers as a fence, starting with short cuts at the far end of the piece being worked. In this instance, it is best to work short of the shoulder gage line then clean up to it after the rabbet is sunk. Square rabbet planes work best for this type of usage.

Tuning

Changes in seasons and/or environmental conditions in your shop may cause the body of your plane to change shape to some extent. And, this can be exacerbated by the fact that the conical escapement pierces the entire width of the plane body, leaving the toe and heel able to move somewhat independently of each other. For this reason, your rabbet plane may need tuned from time to time, not just to straighten the sole but to straighten the cheeks of the plane as well. If the latter occurs, attempt to keep it to a minimum, and it may require some grinding of the sides of the bit of the iron. Please contact us if you have any significant issues with this. Incidentally, the presence of corner boxing would tend to make this issue even more significant, so we don't recommend it.

Maintenance

The finish on your planes is Min-wax “Antique Oil Finish” applied as a wiping varnish. It should be compatible with other high quality finishing oils. It is a good idea to add fresh coats to any worn areas, from time to time, as well as to the sole after it has been tuned.. After applying finish we suggest buffing with fine steel wool and waxing with a high quality product such as Tre-Wax.