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The care, use and tuning of your snipes-bill planes

Sharpening

The irons supplied with your planes are sharp and ready for use. We suggest that you accustom yourself to using them as supplied before sharpening or making changes to their edges.

The operative cutting edge of snipes-bill planes consist of a very small “square” tip as well as the concave portion of the profile. This allows the plane to create a very narrow entering groove and sink down into the wood on successive strokes, creating a quirk with one vertical and one convex curved shoulder. Which is why Peter Nicholson referred to these as “sinking snipe's bills.”

When sharpening becomes necessary, it is vital to keep the profile of the cutting edge as closely matched to the profile of the plane sole as possible. The honing bevel of the curved portion of the cutting edge can be maintained with appropriate slips, or abrasive cones in a flex-shaft grinder, while the honing bevel of the small square tip can be carefully maintained on your oilstones. Once you raise a uniform fine wire-edge, 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. Needless to say, honing guides will be useless for sharpening these irons.

If a time comes when the profile of the cutting edge requires significant adjustment to match the plane's sole, the bevel can be ground using a narrow wheel with a rounded edge for the concave portion of the profile. This is best done after first defining the desired shape by grinding or honing at right angles to a line scribed following the profile of the plane's sole into layout dye on the face of the iron. This requires a very light touch and a freshly dressed wheel, and the goal is to leave a hair-line flat at the desired profile which can be honed away when sharpening.

Setting

Your planes will arrive with the irons retracted up into the body with the tang resting against the right or left cheek of the wedge mortise. The iron can be advanced as needed by simply tapping the heel of the tang with a small brass or plastic mallet, after which the wedge will need to be re-set by tapping with a wooden 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

Snipes-bill planes can be used for a variety of purposes.

The most obvious is the creation of quirks, or small recesses, which are commonly used to set elements of complex mouldings apart. These cuts can be started in a gage line, along an already established shoulder, or by using a side gage (batten).

Another use is beginning to establish the shoulder of rabbets using one of the same methods to guide the first cut as just discussed. Once the shoulder is started with a few passes of the snipes-bill plane, a rabbet plane can take over by tipping it into the established groove and slowly bringing it to plumb with succeeding passes. Similarly, on sprung faces, such as cornice mouldings, defining rabbets can be started with snipes-bill planes guided by previously established gage lines.

Snipes-bill planes come in pairs due to the trade practice of sticking mouldings by working in one direction (presumably, with the grain) as much as possible. There are instances, such as astragals and cove & beads, which require defining an element on both sides, which is readily accomplished with the pair of snipes-bill planes.

Tuning

Changes in seasons and/or environmental conditions in your shop may cause the body of your planes to change shape to some extent. And, this may be accentuated by the necessary presence of the boxing (persimmon) in these planes. Though we try to minimize the effects of this through careful stock selection as well as keeping the mass of the boxing as compact as possible. If, despite these efforts, your planes distort enough to effect their functioning, they may require some careful tuning. However, due to the presence of the boxing and delicacy of the profile, we strongly urge you to contact us for advice before undertaking such a task.

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, or areas of the sole which have been tuned. After applying finish we suggest buffing with fine steel wool and waxing with a high quality product such as Tre-Wax.