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[008 The Craftsman, His Trade and Tools, Vic Woods interviewed by Dr Burton](#)

**Recorded with Dr Maurice Burton at Heathmead in Little London
26 October 1977**

31 minutes.

Script of interview between MR VIC WOODS and DR M BURTON, in October 1977, typed from a tape-recording. The tape was relayed over at a meeting of the Albury History Society on October 26, in the village Hall, under the title "The Craftsman, his trade and tools."

I have quite a few tools down in the shed in the carpentry line especially, in every branch of the building trade really. I went to school until I was fifteen at Guildford, I had to cycle to Guildford and then I went into business with my father and my brother. My father started the business in 1895 or 96. My brother went in with him and then I went in with him down until, well, I gave up in 1959. It is a little bit varied because the local village carpenter was a Jack of all trades as you will probably know. We had all sorts of jobs from putting in a square of glass in, to thawing pipes, to generally helping out. No Trade Unions in those days. You did not worry who bored the hole and who did not.

I have a list of tools that we used. We have got planes, chisels and guages, saws, there are seven planes that we used to use, hand planes, wooden planes and six or seven saws spoke shaves etc, but they are not used nowadays naturally.. We used to start work in the summer at six to eight o'clock with an hour for breakfast and then go until one o'clock with an hour for dinner and finish at half past five, and work to one o'clock on Saturdays, 56½ hours a week. But nowadays it is all different of course.

How is it different?

Well, they don't work those hours at all today, naturally, there is so much bulk material today which we used to make, same as timber and the widest timber that we used to get was 11-inch wide, which was the widest. Now there is all this pre-fabricated material, you can get it up to any widths. There is no lack of what you can get, but then the wood had to be planed up, glued and jointed to make it wider. We used to reckon that a good day's work for a carpenter was an ordinary bit of 9 inch by 2 inch deal to make a panel door and you had to panel separately. You used to rip it down by hand into four styles, and you had to plane it up by hand from rough timber, do the mortising and tenoning, and do all the ploughing out of the rebates to put a panel in, joint your panel, although it was very seldom that you had a middle(member?) as we called it, down the centre. You could do it in two panels, two 11-inch digiss, because they were only about 2' 4" or 2' 6" overall. It was a hard days work to do that : to turn out a panel door, cleaned and ready for hanging in ten and a half hours. Today they are all machined made, and of course plywood for lining, but in the olden days it was far more heavy work and half of the oak doors used to be chestnut which is one of the finest timbers to use as you probably know. That is sweet chestnut and very lovely timber it was.

Was sycamore used much?

Not a lot, it was good for draining boards and anything in that way, it would stand the wetting and drying. Very good, sycamore was, but it is nice wood to work, a lovely white wood. Ash is another wood, used quite a bit in wheelwright work more than carpentry. There is so many imported woods now that a lot of the old timber is not used as it should be, I think. The pines are not used as they should be, and as regards to plaster, well, the first thing that came in was Blue Lime, it was really the forerunner of cement. It was really chalk burnt and slaked that was used, and it used to be as hard as anything, a grey dirty colour, it was used for concrete and all that sort of thing. But in those days we used to have a knock it all up by hand, mix it twice dry and once wet. But the building today, you get (pre-fabricated?) roofs all come together, just fling them straight up. In the old days you had to cut up a roof from ordinary 4" by 2" or 4" by 1½", very frail stuff. Another thing that has advanced tremendously is plastering: we used to have just ordinary lime and sand and it used to be three-coat work for plastering. You had a rendering coat first to level and square it up, then a (second?) coat to get ready for the finish. Then the second coat, as they called it was a skin of neat lime, but it used to take pretty well a fortnight before it was hard enough to do anything with because it was a soft texture.; These new plasters came in from the Thames area, which is very hard and runny. That is what makes a lot of the houses not very good acoustics for anything. The old lime was very pliable.

There used to be beautiful iron work made, especially Church work, made by the blacksmiths.

What about locks?

Well, they were being made then, but there were plenty of the old fashion bolts. The first lock that I ever saw was the old fashion butt lock on the old parish Church. You had to have a woodern case for it, and there was not much in it. Hand made, it was just a key to turn it over the catch the old fashion steel spring was made, that was hand made.

How did a locksmith work in with this.? Did the blacksmith make the lock?

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The locksmith used to make the spring, that was the main thing and the key also to turn the levers. But it was a specialized job the hand-made lock. Now you do have a certain amount of carving in wood. Yes, my father carved this, he used to take carving classes. All the carving class made a section each of that and he fitted it all together. He used to do a lot of carving. He made those cupboards..He used to put them in a chest of ammonia to tone them down and that was fumed oak. It used to penetrate into the wood.

Now, what is the point of that?

Now they have stains you see, but it was to impregnate it and you would never get any worm in it or anything like that. So the ammonia was purely to preserve it. Yes, and also the longer you kept it the darker you could get it. But that was the reason why it was used a lot. In the olden days I have heard it said that a lot of antiques used to be put into the stables and horse manure chucked over it, and the ammonia was got that way. This was the faked stuff.

And for the wood carving he had a special set of tools. Yes, all different chisels, spoons and all sorts of things, but there used to be a lot of it done around here. Peaslake is where he used to take the carvings, Mrs Eidleman the German people, she used to be a wonderful carver. She taught my father, then he used to take the classes and then make all the stuff for the classes and fit it together for them.

Do you make a distinction between a carpenter and a joiner?

Oh yes, a carpenter is one who really does the structural work on a roof or the floor and all that sort of thing and a joiner makes any of the fittings, although they do combine carpenter and joiner together nowadays, but it used to be distinctly carpenter as one and joiner. A carpenter would do fencing but nothing elaborate.

Now, I am not very clear about the ammonia. That would have been put in a chest. Yes, in a big chest before it was fixed together and the ammonia was put into saucers and the fumes of the ammonia would penetrate, and that makes it wormproof.. Yet worm does get in in due course, so it is not really wormproof but you will never find woodworm going into the heart of the wood only the sap (wood) that it goes into. It is the outside of the wood that it attacks, that is why pinewood is very prone to woodworm. Some of the cheaper pine is just riddled with it.

That does not go for death watch does it?

No, that works from inside and eats right through. n We used to get a lot of our timber from Reading, comes up by rail and we would pick it up with the horse and van.

Of course your planks were all cut up in the saw pit weren't they.

Yes, there used to be one down the park, you see. We used to make a tremendous amount of ladders, ordinary long ladders some 60 or 70 in length..We used to make all our own ladders. That used to be a good Scots pole and you used to line it, you could do it with a burnt wood, and then you would saw down by hand and set out your rungs nine inches apart, centre to centre, and you bore your holes, half over one way from one side and go

around and bore the others, rungs made out of oak about $1\frac{3}{4}$ " square, $\frac{3}{8}$ dubbed off by a plane; and you had a reamer to finish, to ream the holes, and you used to set them all out and pin point them with a bradawl as far as they were going into the hole, and then just split them at the end, and then drive a wedge in. You never put a nail in a ladder, but there was plenty put in, I know.

4 Of course, we used to make quite a lot of coffins but now I think that they are all bought. I helped make a good many coffins. But you used to get a good variety of work during your lifetime, and you always looked forward to going to work the next day, used to enjoy your job and get thoroughly interested in it so that you looked forward to going to work the next day. Which I don't think is very common today.

Materials used are very similar to that used today: metal work has improved tremendously, locks and that sort of thing. But it used to be a pretty good job to build a house in so many weeks. Time was no object in the building trade, not so much (as now) an hour or two here did not make any difference. Nowadays, it is all money. The bricks we used were what was made locally; really all the materials we used when building was what was made locally. In this area there was a tremendous amount of bricks out of Sherbourne brickyard, wonderful bricks they were, too, and the sand you had locally..That is a funny stone you have up there: the harder it is the longer it is left above ground; first off it is very soft, that is the time that you want to do stonework. Getting corner stones,

chisel them while it's green; after a while it hardens with weather.

What stone is that? What does it look like?

It is not a limestone, it is the same as at Pitch Hill and Leith Hill, chert, and when it was green you could dress it as easily as you liked.

Is it the same with flint?

No.

I just wondered whether your flint was also green.

No, I do not think so. Flint is the same stone all the way through and they were not all that big, not as big as a stone, a stone you used to get off in layers.

Another thing that used to be done around here was well-digging. Nearly everywhere had wells around here. There is one down the road now that has only got a stone slab over it, that used to supply those cottages down below here.

Now, how did they get the water up?

Winched on an ordinary winch, chain and 3 gallon bucket.