

The Good Old Days?

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With the launch of the basic woodworking skills course, which will place emphasis on hand tools, this is a good time to compare traditional tools with more modern ways of working. Are hand tools today expensive compared with many years ago? Was the life of a cabinet-maker 100 years ago better? Were those the good old days?

Two Hundred Years Ago: Garret Hack quotes the following in his book “The Handplane Book” from the “The Book of Trades, or Library of the Useful Arts”, 1807:

“A Carpenter stands in need of a great variety of tools, such as saws, planes, chisels, hammers, awls, gimlets, &c. Common workmen are obliged to find their own tools, a set of which is worth from ten to twenty pounds, or even more. ...”

I don't know what a workman earned in those days, but I guess probably half a year's wages – 30 week's earnings say.

One Hundred Years Ago: I came across a detailed price list for equipping a school wood workshop from a book on woodworking instruction published in 1906. The cost for all the hand tools for a class of 20 boys was £26 15s. I wondered what a set of hand tools for a cabinet-maker would have cost then and the comparable cost now, so selected a representative set from the list and priced them in 1906 and now. I stuck to pounds sterling and converted the old pounds, shillings and pence to modern decimal coinage to make the arithmetic easier. The modern prices come from an Axminster catalogue. I am not sure what the quality of the tools was like then, in relation to the prices, so I selected good quality versions to price now. At the end of this article, you can see a table listing the tools and the old and new prices.

In 1906, this set of tools would have cost £3-70. If I recall correctly, the weekly wage was around £1-00, so neglecting taxes, 3.7 weeks work would have been needed to afford the set. The planes are wooden ones. If one were to look for better planes, such as Norris Infill planes at 25 shillings each, then you can add another £3-00 for three planes, bringing the total to £6-70 or 7 weeks work.

Today: You can see from the table that at today's prices, these tools would cost £746-. Today, a cabinet-maker in the UK earns at least £300 per week, so he or she will need to work for 2.5 weeks to replace these tools.

Are these comparisons valid? Yes, I think so, although the methods of work have changed. 100 years ago, to get going, space in a workshop with a bench and perhaps a table was needed. Some additional conveniences, such as a stove for melting hide glue would have assisted. Wood would have been purchased seasoned, but rough from the wood merchant. The wood would have been cut to size, squared, thickened and smoothed manually. Machinery was available, but was unaffordable for the individual. Handwork and hand finishing would have produced the final product. Handsaws and hand planes would have been used. In his book “The Handplane Book”, Garret Hack estimates that a journey-man could surface about 300 “surface feet” in a day – I guess this is board-feet, of which there 10 in a square meter – this is roughly 30 square meters. This sounds like really hard work to me. This is one reason why the faces of boards inside cabinets were often left rough. Nowadays, a quick pass through the thicknesser will clean up the inside face, with very little extra work.

Nowadays, a substantial number of machines would be used to save labour and reduce the time required to convert the rough wood to dimensioned pieces, before some final handwork would be done to produce the final finely finished piece. The cost of these stationary and portable machine tools is substantial, but affordable and is economical in terms of time saved

and reduced manual labour required. I guess that with a planer and thicknesser, nowadays, one could deal with the same 30 square meters in under an hour.

One can debate on the amount of handwork required today. If you subscribe to James Krenov's philosophy, machines have their place, but final finishing is a manual process, requiring the sensitive use of hand tools. Time saved by the use of machines can be used on design and finishing, leading to a better end product.

Were those the good, old days? Well, without machines, much of the work was hard, manual labour. If you were fortunate, you could use apprentices to do some of this, but still much would have to be done routinely. This eventually wears out the body, so by the time you made it to 60 years, if you could afford to retire, you would have been physically worn out from 45 years of physical work.

Nowadays, the average life expectancy in the UK is about 75 years, so you are likely to be in good health at retirement age, with the additional advantage that you will be a better physical condition to take up golf.

These numbers seem to suggest that a modern cabinet-maker needs to work less to afford tools of equal, or better quality than 100 years ago. The reason for this is that modern manufacturing is so efficient, so that good tools are in fact cheaper. We can learn from the past, but in fact we can never go back, because we cannot compete today with the technologies of 100 years ago, even in traditional crafts like cabinet making.

To answer my questions:

- I think good quality hand tools are cheaper now than they were then.
- No, those weren't the good old days – modern craftsman are more productive, and have a better quality of life than then, and can produce work of comparable quality.

This is the table listing all the tools and prices:

Description	Price in 1900	Price in 2000	Comments	Ratio of 1900 to 2000 prices
Bevel, sliding, 10"	£0.43	£8.00		19
Bits, center - set of 9	£0.19	£38.00	Not sure what original quality and design was	203
Bit, counter-sink wood	£0.02	£2.50		150
Brace, American pattern	£0.16	£30.00		189
Bradawl	£0.01	£3.50		350
Chisel, 1/8" firmer	£0.01	£18.82		1328
Chisel, 1/4" firmer	£0.01	£14.35		984
Chisel, 3/8" firmer	£0.02	£14.49		966
Chisel, 1/2" firmer	£0.02	£15.03		902
Chisel, 5/8" firmer	£0.02	£18.50		1033
Chisel, 3/4" firmer	£0.02	£16.00		853
Chisel, 1" firmer	£0.02	£17.64		730
Chisel, 1/4" Mortise	£0.04	£13.64		345
Chisel, 3/8" Mortise	£0.04	£14.17		358
Cork sanding block	£0.01	£0.60		48
Cramps, steel	£0.42	£16.00		38
File, half round 10"	£0.13	£8.80		68
File, safe edge 6"	£0.02	£3.17		152

Description	Price in 1900	Price in 2000	Comments	Ratio of 1900 to 2000 prices
Gauge, marking	£0.02	£4.00		175
Gauge, mortise marking	£0.13	£6.00		48
Gimlet	£0.01	£2.00		360
Gouges, bent 1/8", 1/4", 1/2", 3/4"	£0.19	£36.00		192
Hammer, carpenter number 2	£0.03	£10.00		308
Leather strop	£0.05	£5.00		100
Mallet, small	£0.05	£5.00		109
Marking knife	£0.01	£4.00		362
Oil can, small	£0.02	£3.87		232
Oil stone	£0.11	£7.50		67
Oil Slip stone	£0.08	£8.00		107
Pincers	£0.07	£7.00		105
Plane, wooden jack (Stanley #5 today)	£0.16	£50.00	Comparing wooden planes with iron planes today. Infill planes such as the Norris were extra.	308
Plane, wooden rebate (Stanley #78 today)	£0.08	£46.00		566
Plan, wooden smoothing (Stanley #4 today)	£0.14	£42.00		305
Plane, wooden trying (Stanley #7 today)	£0.21	£88.00		414
Punches, various	£0.05	£1.60		32
Rule, iron 2 ft	£0.05	£5.68		114
Ruler, flat 12"	£0.01	£4.47		715
Saw, bow 12"	£0.13	£34.00		272
Saw, panel, 22"	£0.11	£40.00		369
Saw, tenon, brass backed 10"	£0.12	£31.00		257
Screwdriver, cabinet	£0.04	£7.00		177
Screwdriver, small	£0.02	£4.00		175
Spokeshave, malleable iron, flat face (Stanley #150 today)	£0.05	£15.23		305
Spokeshave, malleable iron, round face (Stanley #151 today)	£0.05	£15.23		305
Try square 4"	£0.05	£4.00		80
Try square 10"	£0.09	£6.00		64
Sum totals	£3.70	£745.79		
Ratio of prices from 100 years ago until now:	201			
Wages per week	£1.00	£300.00		
How many weeks to work to buy tools	3.7	2.5		