The art of lettering is a popular form of carving, due to its infinite applications. Names or house signs carved in wood can make treasured gifts, while poems and favourite catch-phrases can be documented in a way that will survive the centuries. You can use lettering to initial or date pieces of your woodworking or incorporate personal details into your own logo.

Letter carving is relatively quick and simple. However, as with all projects, the carving is a direct representation of the drawing. Therefore, a great deal of importance must be placed on marking out the letters correctly before starting to carve.

Prior to the days of computers, the art of lettering required a sound knowledge of the principles of signwriting. However, the computer has made things much easier, offering a vast selection of fonts that can be manipulated to any requirement in seconds. That said, it is worth becoming familiar with a signwriter's considerations, so that you can make informed decisions when taking the shortcuts.

**Style**

There are many styles of lettering to choose from — some plain, some fancy and many in between. It is important to make sure that the style suits the application. For example, a house sign will need to be clear for people driving by. Therefore a plain style would be the most appropriate.

Another point to consider is whether individual letters are recognisable. Initially, this may seem a strange consideration, but it is a valid point for certain styles. In Photo.2, you will see an old English letter 'J'. It could be mistaken for a letter 'T' or the letter 'I'. This style of lettering could lead to confusion when used for initials before the surname.

**Substrate**

Thought should be given to the choice of timber into which you plan to carve the letters. A highly figured piece of timber is likely to distract the eye from the lettering. Find a substrate that will complement the application and the design.

**Spacing and Definition**

If you break down words into the number of letters and then mark out equally proportioned boxes for each, you are likely to have a problem. The result when the letters are positioned will probably be irregular and non-flowing — quite unattractive. This is because few letters are of exactly the same proportions. For instance, compare the letters I and M.

The solution is to draw the letters free hand and space them to appear visually correct as opposed to mathematically correct.

The height of the letters is a slightly different matter. A standard height for upper (capital) and lower case letters should be established and maintained throughout the sign, unless of course you wish for letters of varying height to be part of the design.

Standardising the height of letters can be regulated by drawing three parallel lines onto the timber. A common scale has the lower case letters one third smaller than the upper ones, although the example shown in Photo.1 uses lower case letters that are just over half the size of the upper case.

Inevitably aesthetics play a key role. Ensure that the spacing between the lines of words is equal and that the distance between words is sufficient to avoid overcrowding.

Note that it is possible to give prominence to certain words by carving them larger than others.
Regulating the Letter Form

Study the examples of letter styles in Photo.3. Note that each letter is formed with a combination of thin and thick lines. This adds interest to your carving. However, you need to regulate the thicknesses throughout your text. For example, you could set the thin lines at 2mm and the thick lines at 5mm. Whatever your decision, it will be important to adhere to these guidelines from start to finish.

When carving incised letters (Photo.1), note that the wider the line is drawn, the deeper the cut is carved.

When carving letters in relief, the wider components are higher (Photo.13). This is explained and illustrated in greater detail as we progress.

Angle of Letters

The letters in a word can be slanted slightly if desired. If you do incorporate a slant, set the desired angle and ensure that this angle is maintained throughout the word.

Position of Words

When marking out words, remember to consider their position in relation to the borders of the sign itself. You don’t want to space the letters beautifully, only to have them form words which are off centre on the workpiece.

Accuracy

When you mark out your letters, ensure that the lines of each letter are clean and crisp, with clearly defined edges. If the drawing is unclear, then the carving is almost guaranteed to be the same.

Reference

It is useful to build collections of different styles of lettering. The use of a computer and printer makes life so much easier, as you can access a vast array of letter fonts.

Take photographs of interesting signs and study the layout and proportions.

Transferring the Lettering

One way to mark out your lettering and speed up the process is to print your words or sentences from a computer. Use double-sided carpet tape to stick the design to your timber and then simply carve through the paper into the timber below (Photo.4).

Basics of Carving

This series is based on the six carving techniques presented in the first instalment in AWW #170 August 2013. It also utilises the basic set of carving tools set out in Fig.1.

You can review the Significant Six Woodcarving Techniques video on your smartphone by scanning the QR code (Significant Six QR Code) on this page. Alternatively, type in ‘Record Power Significant Six Techniques with Mike Davies’ into your Internet search engine to view the video on your computer.

Incised Letters

Incised letter carving is a relatively quick and easy method, which is therefore ideal for the beginner to tackle first.

The level of difficulty will vary with the style of font and the combination of straight into curved lines. It may be wise to choose a simple style to begin with and move towards more ornate styles as your skills develop.

At the top and bottom of letters within certain fonts, you will notice an ornate flick. These flicks are known as serifs. Photo.5 shows two serifs at the bottom of the letter R, each of which was formed by making three cuts to carve an inverted pyramid shape.

The Letter A

We’ll carve our first letter by starting with the letter A. Mark out the letter onto the timber.

Use the flat edge of tool #11 (Fig.1) to make the first incision (Photo.6). The edges of the letter should be angled towards each other at around 45° to form a V-shaped cross-section.

Ensure that you achieve clean, straight lines as you form the walls of the letter A. It is important that the base or bottom line of the V is centred between the upper lines.

If you wish you can begin the valleys using tool #8, but always finish with the straight edge of tool #11 to ensure clean lines, especially on the surface of the timber.

In Photo.7 the letter A has been partly carved. Note that the depth of cuts forming the 45° valley must be less for thinner lines, ie. where the parallel lines marking out the letter are spaced closer together.

Reference

It is useful to build collections of different styles of lettering. The use of a computer and printer makes life so much easier, as you can access a vast array of letter fonts.

Take photographs of interesting signs and study the layout and proportions.
Use tool #1 to create an inverted pyramid effect for the serifs at the point where the valleys meet.

Wrap fine sandpaper around a sanding block to remove any pencil marks left on the surface of the timber (Photo.8). This will also help to highlight any wandering lines that need to be cleaned up.

The next step is to carve a letter that incorporates curves. The letter R is an ideal choice. Note in Photo.9 how the curve varies in thickness from wide to narrow. The thickness of the line also relates to the depth of the incised V. Remember that the centre line of the V should remain centred between the lines on the surface.

The real test is to carve the letter S (Photo.10). Form the curved lines using the various profiles in your tool kit.

Note that it is not necessary to have the exact radius or ‘sweep’ of gouge to meet the shape of your letter. You can change the radius that the carving tool produces by using the tip of the gouge and sliding the tool to vary the cut.

Relief Letters
When carving any style of letter in relief, a flat chisel (tool #11) is a useful part of your toolkit. For your first attempts and to help build confidence, it is a good idea to choose a plain letter style.

However, to demonstrate both the basics and some more advanced techniques in relief letter carving, I have chosen an old English style of lettering (Photo.11). This is considered a challenging font as each letter is decorated with fine details, around which the background must be reduced (i.e., the thickness of the timber is reduced to make the letter stand out in relief).

Mark out the profile of the letter on the surface of the timber. It may help to shade the letter to make its shape clearer (Photo.11). The next stage is to reduce the background to distinguish the letter. This can be done by hand, but it is handy to use a router set to a fixed depth to remove most of the waste. It is important to form the walls of the letter at 90° to the surface of the reduced timber. This will ensure that the edges do not change shape as they are carved lower (Photo.12).

Just as with incised letters, where the valley depth varies in accordance with the width of the outer lines, the same principle applies in relief lettering. Instead of a valley line, you need to create a high ridge line. The ridge should be lower as the line (distance between the outer lines) becomes thinner.

Once again, it is important to ensure that the ridge line is central to its outer edges. If the line is curved, carve a concave profile on the concave side and vice versa for the convex side, as illustrated in Photo.13.

In the finished letter, note how extra ‘depth’ can be added to your carving by allowing components to overlap others. An example of this is evident halfway around the crescent shape of the C section.

In this instance the reduced surface has been stamped to help define the carved letter from the background. This is especially effective when stains are used because the stain sits in the recesses of the
To make this form of stamp, you can simply file a series of V-shaped grooves into a steel bar using a fine triangular shaped file. Then file a series of grooves at 90° to the first set to form a series of pointed pyramids (Photo. 14).

For more information on the Record Power Carving Tool and DVD set used in this series, scan the QR Code on this page with your Smartphone or type 'Record Power Woodcarving by Numbers' into your Internet search engine to view the video on your computer.