The origins of the barley twist date back to the earliest chronicles of recorded history. The decoration is characterised by the spiral column shape and has been used in a vast assortment of decorative applications.

An example is the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem — thought to have been destroyed more than 500 years BC — which is described as being adorned by spiral ‘Solomonic columns’. The decoration also became known as ‘barley sugar twists’ due to its similarity with the candy sweet of this era.

The twists were most commonly carved from Oak, but fine examples can be found in Walnut, depending on the period from which the piece originated.

Photo 1 shows an example of how the decoration has been used to embellish chairs.

In the late 17th century, the spiral forms became a popular feature in furniture, particularly as legs and column decorations in English, French and Dutch pieces. The decoration also became known as ‘barley sugar twists’ due to its similarity with the candy sweet of this era.

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Start by turning a long ‘rolling pin’. The diameter and length of the twist is entirely your choice.

I turned my blank to a diameter of 40mm (Photo 2). The overall length, measured from the centre of each cove at either end of the ‘rolling pin’ is 225mm.

An important consideration is that the diameter of the cove on either end of the turning should be half the diameter of the main cylinder. Therefore, in this instance, the coved areas have a 20mm diameter. (Photo 3).

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The Blank

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Marking Out

Use your toolrest to draw a line that runs down the centre of the cylinder. Then draw a second line on the opposite side so that it divides the cylinder into two equal halves (Photo.3).

With a pair of dividers mark equal divisions from the centre of the cove down the length of the line. The final division must be made precisely in the centre of the opposite cove, so adjust the dividers accordingly (Photo.4).

On the reverse side of the cylinder, repeat the process, but this time start and end with a half division (Photo.5).

The next step is to mark the spiral. Cut a narrow strip of thin card with parallel edges and wrap the card around the cylinder so that the top edge of the card makes contact with each division mark. Tape the ends to hold the card in place.

Trace the line of the card template with a pencil to mark a perfectly equal spiral that runs the full length of the cylinder (Photo.6).

Beginning the Cut

Take an old tenon saw (but one that still cuts! — Ed.) and attach two lengths of wood to the blade as shown in Photo.7. The pieces are set at the same height on either side of the blade and act as a depth stop, to help establish a consistent depth to the spiral. The depth of the cut should be the same as the depth of the coves at the end of the cylinder.

In this instance the cylinder has a 40mm dia. The coves have been turned with half of that diameter, ie. 20mm dia. Therefore the depth of the coves will be 10mm.

A cylindrical or semi-circular rasp is required for the next step (Photo.8). You can use a conventional rasp or the faster cutting Microplane version (Microplane tools are available from Carba-Tec Ph: 1800 658 111).

I used a Microplane rasp with a 15mm diameter (take extra care when using the Microplane because the cutting edges are very sharp — Ed.). Follow the spiral with the Microplane tool, ensuring that the saw cut remains in the centre of the channel. Try to work as accurately as you can, being vigilant to maintain equal divisions on the surface of the cylinder.
You can see the desired effect in the completed piece in the background of Photo.8. Note how the ends of the spiral finish where they lead into the cove. This illustrates the importance of maintaining a consistent depth in the valley of the spiral so that it flows nicely into the coved area.

In terms of holding your work securely, you can either continue with the work held in the lathe, or alternatively you can secure the work between the heads on a sash clamp. To stop the sash clamp from moving, hold it in a bench vice. If you have a T-bar sash clamp, then the head can be fixed to the workbench using screws and the bar section locked in place with a G-clamp.

Carving the Twist

This series of carving articles is based on the basic set of carving tools shown in Fig.1. You can compile your own set of tools or they can be purchased as a Record Power carving set with bonus DVD.

With carving tools #5, #6 and #11, begin to round over the edges of the divisions. The goal is to create a consistent profile on each spiral.

In Photo.9 you can see how tool #6 is held in the ‘fist position’ and the hand holding the tool is anchored to the workpiece to ensure control at all times. This is covered in the original article in this series (AWW #170 August 2013).

You can view a demonstration of the Significant Six techniques by scanning in the QR code, or by typing ‘Record Power Significant Six Techniques with Mike Davies’ into your Internet search engine.

The majority of the shaping work should be completed with the carving tools.

A handy tip for cleaning up the carved surfaces is to use the sandpaper from a belt sander, which has been cut into long strips. You can use the belts in various grades to perfect the shape of the spiral and achieve a blemish free finish (Photo.10).

Variations

In Photo.11 the barley twist in the centre of the picture has a different appearance. This example has two spirals running along its length. The blank to the right shows how this is done. It has been marked with a red line and a black line running around the length of the cylinder simultaneously.

To add greater interest, you can pierce the double spiral with a long hole borer on your lathe. This has the effect of separating the two spirals from each other.

You can also experiment with a tapered barley twist. This has a wider base and becomes thinner towards the opposite end.

For more information on the Record Power carving Tool set, scan in the QR code or view the promotional video online by typing ‘Record Power Carving by Numbers’ into your internet search engine.

The Record Power 12 piece Carving Tool Set with bonus Woodcarving Foundation Skills DVD and booklet (RRP $132.00) is available from The Australian Woodworker Mail Order Bookshop — pp.82-90, Ph: 02 4759 2844 and from Record Power stockists.