# APART FROM BOATS

by Nige Dale.

People who use their hands and minds to make things for themselves or others, generally have a capability of creating things from more than one art or hand craft skill. These craft skills come in numerous forms, but put simplistically, they have a common trait of requiring an open and enquiring mind, with an underlying need to use your own hands to make something. I will also add that for some it also is a challenge to see what else they can do if they apply their mind and skills to the job, stretching the boundaries as it were.

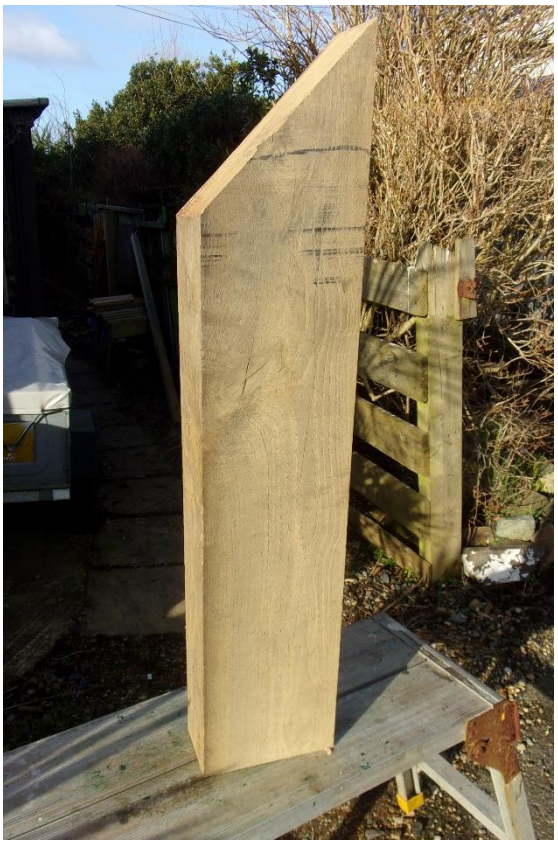
Apart from making model boats, gardening, cooking occasionally, to mention a few, I have in the past, done a little bit of carving. The chisels I use, I received from my grandfather about forty years ago, and are very nice tools to use, some of which the blades are of laminated steels. Laminated steels on tools of today are all but extinct, as modern tools rely on the various high alloys which are available today for the strength and resilience

Historically, I have done nothing that could be taken as serious, but have done some acceptable creations for friends, such as tiller handles for their narrow boat, and on one occasion a boat plank with their names and boat name carved into its surface. So last year (or was it the year before?) I decided to buy some wood and try and do something for me.

There is a Timber merchant near me that does various timbers in plank and baulk format, so I went along to see if there was anything that they had, to which I might attack in the attempt to create something that would be acceptable as a carved item.

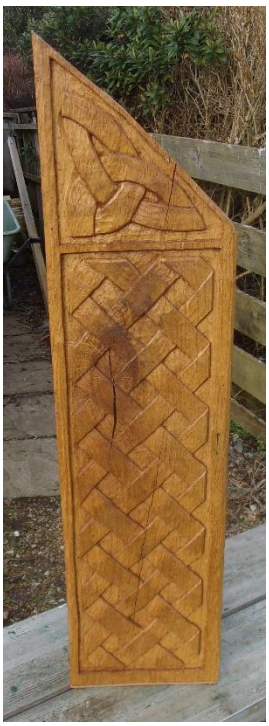
I selected a piece of oak that was 8” x 4” (200mm x 100mm) in section, and 8 foot (2400mm) long. They very kindly cut a third of it off, so that I could get it into the car in two pieces instead of one, and also be able to pick it up by hand, then move it about when I got home. When I arrived home, I cut the larger baulk into two pieces of about equal length, and put the three baulks in the shed to rest. Fig 1, shows one of the three baulks of timber that were stored in the shed for drying or resting.

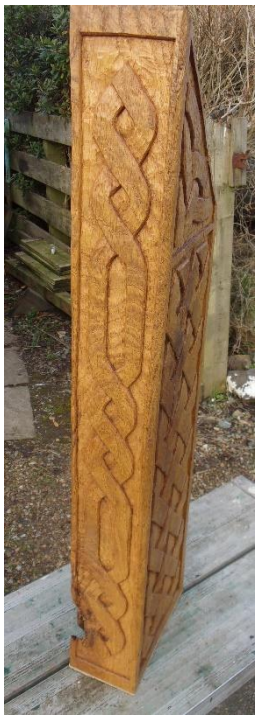
Fig 1.



The first baulk I carved was a type of Celtic pillar with Celtic Grid style panels on each face. These panels are the basic patterns seen on many manuscripts and carved into stone and wood, this allowed me to re acquaint myself with the chisels and how to guide them. The result was not too bad considering I hadn't used then in about twenty years. Not something to brag about, but a short break from something can turn out to a bit longer than a short break.
Fig 2. Is the final result of the first serious assault using chisels on a piece of wood for quite a few years.

Fig2.





Back to the present. The second baulk, I wanted something a bit more Norse than Celtic, although both peoples used the scroll and panel concepts in their ornamental designs, the Norse added animal caricatures and figures to their artworks, which were later adopted by Christian illuminators. The final result was a pseudo dragon head and a scaled reptilian breast, finished off with Celtic/ Norse grid style panels. I say pseudo dragon head, as mythology generally does not offer definitive examples. However in todays' world……..?

When I was carving this piece of wood I found a book in a second hand book shop, on carving. The book was published in 1977, as a republication of a 1911 edition by another publisher. The photographs were in black and white, with a lot of woodcut style pictures in support. Within was a section on finishing and a particular item took my attention, and that was finishing oak by fuming with Ammonia.

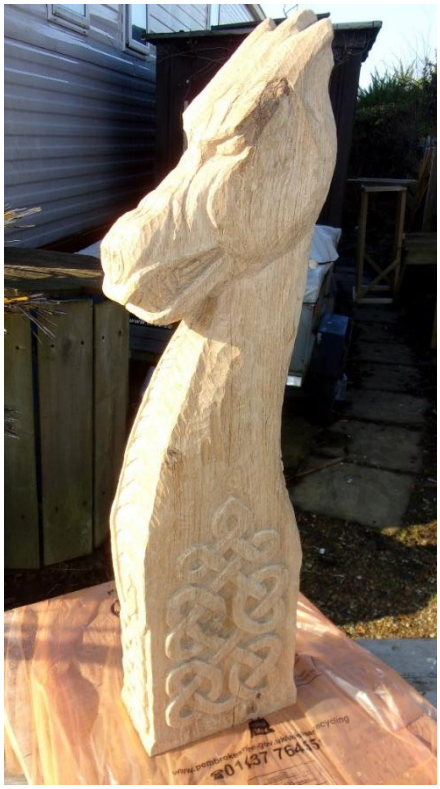
The article referred to the darkening or aging of oak by using the fumes of ammonia, whilst being constrained within a cabinet to retain the fumes. It just so happened, that I had a bit of ammonia (about 100ml, unknown concentration) sitting on the shelf in the shed from days gone by. Anyway, the process that darkens the oak is a reaction between the ammonia fumes and the natural tannin acids of the oak. The methods indicated offered time scales of 24 to 72 hours, but no mention of ammonia concentration.

Research on the internet, provided some information, all of which came from the USA. The information and guidance was very useful, but I did notice the size of the dishes they used for the ammonia were quite large, and the amounts used were equally big. But one source of information had used ammonia readily available to the public, for domestic use, which gave an indication that the concentration, volume and times of exposure, were interrelated critical factors in the final colour gained from the fuming actions. I had a limited amount of ammonia , with an unknown concentration, so the plan evolved as this; I will use what I have, and see what happens.

So back to the wood.

Fig 3, shows what I achieved, and waiting for the process of darkening.

Fig 3.



Next, I needed to construct a fume cabinet so I made a frame for the job then evaluated the job so far to check that it could work.

Below in Fig 4, is the carving within a frame works that will form the fume confinement. The frame work appears to be appropriate for the job so to finish is the covering in plastic.

Fig 4.

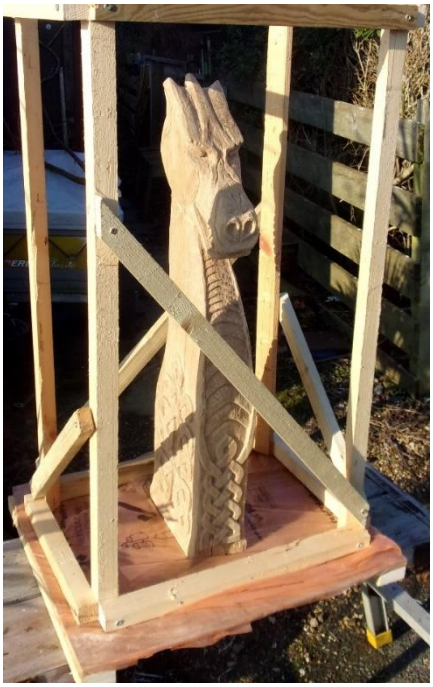
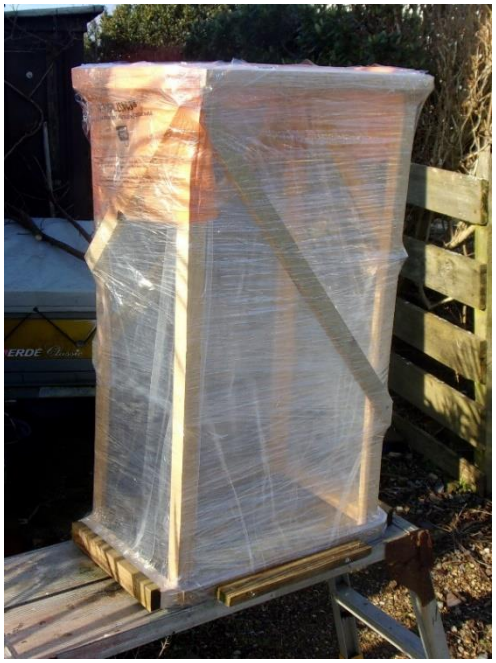


Fig 5, shows the completed fume confinement covered on Polyethylene (LDPE) and shrink wrap. Shrink wrap is usually either LDPE or PVC, both of which have a reasonable chemical resilience against the fumes of ammonia. Three days is all that I require for the plastics' durability, after which it will be scrapped. (Scrapped; destructive and unceremonious recycling, opposed to incineration which is now termed thermal recycling by the Germans)

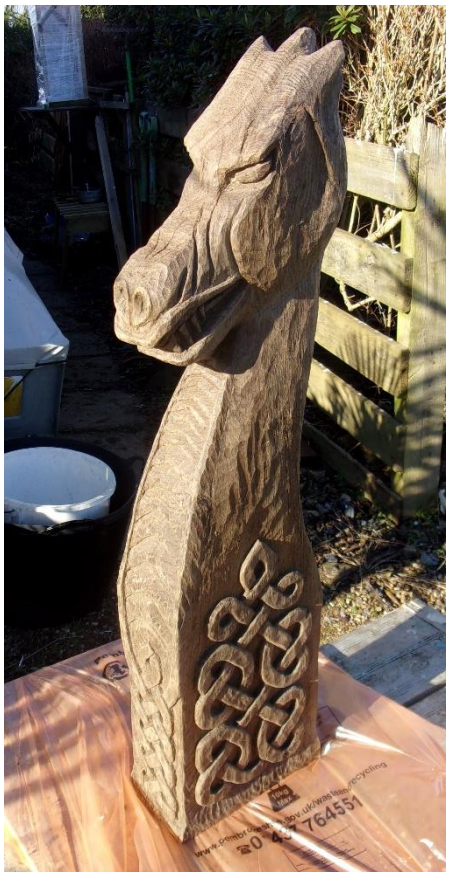
Fig 5.



The carving and the cabinet were assembled with the ammonia in two dishes, which would allow the fumes to dissipate within the cabinet. Also, the dishes were placed one either side of the carving in the hope of equal distribution. This was unknown territory for me, so a risk assessment was made and the conclusion was to go ahead and not tell the wife. There is a first time for everything, and with it all the trepidation of those first time events, thoughts of, will it work? will I enjoy it? will it hurt? Anyway, who cares? just do it.

Fig 6, shows the result of 72 hours of exposure to the ammonia fumes, and I am quite pleased with that result. After taking the cabinet away to see what was achieved, the thought came to me that; it would have been nice to have done this work years ago, and then have the time to go on and make the rest of a chess set. My mind does drift on occasion into idle muses. And no, its not an age thing as I have always done it, and the result is now I am older I have perfected the art, and do it a little more often.

Fig 6.



The penultimate part of the project as far as wood was concerned, was to make a removable plinth of sorts, to widen the footprint in an attempt to stop it falling over, rather than a decorative part of the whole. With the completion of the plinth/ stand and the application of a couple of coats of Danish Oil to both the carving and the stand were effectively finished. Allowing adequate time for the oil to cure and eager to finish the project, I assembled the two parts together. It hasn't turned out too bad for an enthusiastic amateur, so no thermal recycling necessary.