

Chisel Review

By David S Wright

INTRODUCTION

Believing that there were better chisels out there than Marples Blue Chips, and not wanting to go through set after set on a never-ending journey, I decided that some research would be in order this time. I spent a couple hours in the Neanderthal Haven Archives. I reviewed information and opinion from articles in FWW, Wood, and Popular Woodworking. I carefully read passages in books by Garrett Hack and Leonard Lee on hand tools and sharpening. Some more time was spent in general Internet surfing. All good information, to be sure, but with conclusions both few and conflicting. The confusion seemed mostly due to each reviewer's different methods and perspective. I decided that the only way to get information relevant to my shop and me would be to undertake my own chisel test.

LAST THINGS FIRST: THE WINNERS

Performance: The Stanley 750 and Two Cherries tied for first place. The Sandvik, Sorby, and Ashley Isles scored together in a significantly worse group. The Henry Taylor and Stanley 900 took up the rear.

Value (if anyone cares) listed from best to worst: Stanley 900, Sandvik, Ashley Isles, Two Cherries, Stanley 750, Sorby, and Henry Taylor.

The Stanley 750 has my heart, but my money will go toward Two Cherries - or the Hirsch set that is identical except for a handle I like better.

HOW I WORK

Since the results depend somewhat on how one works, I start with some notes on how I work – at least as of this writing. Most of my pieces are in Cherry. My general-purpose bevel edge firmer chisels are used to chop and pare joinery as well as clean glue squeezings.

All of my sharpening is done with a side-clamping guide. The bevels are roughly shaped to 25 degrees with 80 or 120 grit PSA paper on a marble slab, and refined with an extra-course diamond stone. After switching to 27 degrees, I hone with 600 and 1200 grit diamond stones, and finish up the bevel and back with 2000 paper.

I almost always hold chisels with their tips in my left hand. When chopping, that's the only place I hold them since I only have 2 hands. When paring, I also hold and drive the handle with my right hand. I only hold chisels one-handed by their handles when doing very rough work.

THE CHISELS

Below are the chisels I chose along with some notes. They represent a range of styles and countries of origin.



Ashley Isles: English tang chisel with a barrel shaped beech handle and single brass ferrule. Though elegantly simple and well finished, this chisel's weight became tiresome.



Henry Taylor: This chisel is difficult to categorize. It has paring chisel length, bevel edge firmer chisel blade thickness, and timber framing chisel construction. From the tip of its gorgeously finished blade to the leather end of its shapely ash handle, this is one beautiful and inspiring tool. Though the pick of the litter for two-handed paring, the Henry Taylor was disappointing as a general-purpose bevel edge firmer. The edge chipped horribly, and the weight makes tip-held mallet driven work exhausting and imprecise. Made in England.



Sandvik: Tang chisel with a tapered beech handle and two steel ferrules. This chisel got into the test because James Krenov uses its parents and I wanted some Swedish steel. The apple fell pretty far from the tree. Though its steel and handling are good, the finish and packaging says "utility chisel". The edge is so slightly beveled that there may be clearance problems in dovetail work.



Sorby: I chose the London pattern boxwood handled version of this venerable English tang chisel with two brass ferrules and a leather bumper between the handle and tang seat. This is to many woodworkers the classic quality chisel. The blade takes a wonderfully fine edge, but doesn't keep it for long in heavy use, and that gorgeous handle is a tad heavy for tip-held work.



Stanley 750: Inspired by the Henry Taylor's design, but wanting a smaller version, and wanting to put at least one old chisel in the mix, I picked up one of these from Patrick Leach. The design is elegant, the American steel was tougher than any other in my test lot, and this chisel handles like an extension of my hand. It has my heart. Unfortunately, I can't bring myself to invest the time and money it would take to assemble a full set when the Two Cherries performed as well.



Stanley 900: This is the classic modern plastic handled tang chisel with a metal hammer cap on top. Its lowlights include a shaft straight from the roughing bit, heavy handling, and a blade that Stanley didn't bother to degauss. Decent steel, made in England, makes this chisel the value leader. Beginners would be well served, as might experienced

woodworkers looking for an odd size that won't see much use.



Two Cherries: German tang chisel with a thin section mirror polished blade, thickly lacquered hornbeam handle, and double steel ferrules. I didn't like this chisel until I used it. Maybe I'm odd, but the light wood and thick lacquer strike me as even less attractive than plastic, and it's strange to hold a blade that is more polished than the tip. One's tools shouldn't be flashier than one's work. All that changed when I prepared and used the chisel. Its back came flatter than any other. The thin section blade grinds quickly. The polishing that annoys me aesthetically makes the chisel comfortable between my fingers. Other than the Stanley 750, this chisel is the lightest and easiest to handle. That's more than a muscle strain concern – work went better with the Two Cherries and Stanley 750 because they were easier to place accurately.

TEST CRITERIA & RANKING NOTES

Refer to the table at the bottom of this message for test results. Notes on the criteria and other table columns are listed below. The weight listed right below each criteria item represents how important each item is to me, and was used to compile the scores.

- **Design:** I expect readers to question and disagree with me more here than on any other criteria. In use I couldn't discern any functional difference between the different designs. My eye happens to prefer sockets over tangs, natural finish wood handles over plastic, and smoothly ground blades over mirror polished.
- **Handling:** This was the easiest criteria to grade. With several hundred chops through 3/4" Cherry behind me (see Toughness/Chopping below), and my wrists tiring fast, I simply ranked each chisel on whether or not I wanted to pick it up again. This is tip-held work for me. The chisels with light handles and smooth blades did best. All of the chisels felt fine in two-handed paring. The Henry Taylor is an exceptionally comfortable and confident paring chisel, but did poorly overall on handling because of agonizing and inaccurate chopping performance.
- **Quality Control:** I really should have visited each factory to assess quality control, but didn't have the time or magazine backing, and this is my test anyway. Detail-oriented readers will note that I didn't give this criteria item much weight. I ranked the chisels on individual hardness testing, blade straightness (fortunately none had convex backs), whether actual and listed widths matched (muddied by metric conversion), and apparent sloppy fabrication.
- **Finish:** The best chisels in this category got credit for well-finished blades, smooth handles, and complete removal of burrs from metal edges.
- **Flattening & Sharpening:** Though the chisels came in a range of widths, I was able to develop opinions on how easy they were to flatten initially and sharpen on an ongoing basis.

Flattening was done with sandpaper on a marble slab, starting at 80 and finishing at 2000. Each chisel was held at an angle. Each new grit was run in a mirror image orientation relative to the previous, which allowed me to clearly tell when the previous grit marks had been fully removed. Sharpening was as described in the “How I Work” section above.

- **Toughness/Chopping:** After being well sharpened, each chisel was used to chop through 3/4” Cherry 80 times. To make sure that this was a fair and even challenge to each blade, I took care to take off the same amount with each chop (about 1/32”) and tried to strike hard enough to go through each board in the same number of mallet strokes (about 4). Afterward, each blade was clearly well worn. There was no apparent folding, but each blade had very small chips across its entire tip. The Henry Taylor and Sorby were clearly damaged more than the others. To better judge remaining sharpness, I marked a 3/8” thick Makore scrap every 32nd of an inch along its thin long grain edge. With the scrap held securely in my vise, I took careful horizontal paring strokes through the end grain, taking note of the force required and the condition of the resulting pared surface. After a while I remarked the Makore every 16th of an inch and repeated the test. Makore is an excellent wood for this test. Its buttery texture really makes differences in blade sharpness stand out.
- **Sharpness/Paring:** Knowing how sharp each chisel would be after abuse, I wanted to test how well they would perform when freshly sharpened. I’m no metallurgist, but am of the understanding that variations in alloy and fabrication can affect sharpenability. Each chisel was freshly ground and honed. I took care to make the microbevel width and level of polish consistent. I then repeated the Makore paring exercise.
- **Score:** This is the sum of each criteria score times the criteria weight. The two winners’ results working out to exactly 100 was truly a coincidence.
- **Rank:** Order of overall performance. 1 = best.
- **Value:** Order of value calculated as rank/cost. 1 = best.

THE CHISELS’ FATE

I enjoyed working with all of these chisels. Each one deserves a place in my woodworking shop. I plan to pick up a set of Two Cherries or the equivalent Hirsch – unless there is truth to the rumor that Lie-Nielsen is coming out with chisels. Maybe then more testing would be in order. My Marples Blue Chips, which probably would have scored midpack in performance and high in value, will be shifted to rough site use. The Stanley 900 will join them. The Henry Taylor and Sorby will be reground and honed for paring use. The rest of the lot will serve as backups, be reground to either paring or mortising use, or be given away. I hope this review has been of some help to people who may be contemplating their chisel stock and options.

CHISEL COMPARISON TABLE

Chisel	Size Tested	Approx. Cost	Criteria & Ranking Weight							Score	Rank	Value
			Design	Handling	Quality Control	Finish	Flattening & Sharpening	Toughness/ Chopping	Sharpness/ Paring			
			2	4	2	3	4	5	5			
Ashley Isles	3/8"	\$15	4	3	4	4	3	4	4	81	4	3
Henry Taylor	1 1/2"	\$40	5	2	5	5	2	3	5	76	6	7
Sandvik	1"	\$15	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	82	3	2
Sorby	3/4"	\$25	4	3	4	4	4	3	5	81	4	6
Stanley 750	1"	\$25	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	100	1	5
Stanley 900	3/4"	\$10	2	3	3	2	4	4	4	73	7	1
Two Cherries	5/8"	\$20	3	5	5	5	5	4	4	100	1	4