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Slicing, and the Value of the Inside Bevel
with the
Chris Pye #2½ Finishing Gouges
from Ashley Iles

by Chris Pye



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Slicing, and the Value of the Inside Bevel with the Chris Pye #2½ Finishing Gouges from Ashley Iles

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1. How these tools came about.

If you have read any of my articles and books, you will no doubt know that for the most time my style is to finish off my carvings 'straight from the chisel' - for which mostly read, 'flat gouge'. It's how I learned my carving and the way I love to work.

'Carving smooth' as opposed to 'sanding smooth' is not a matter of 'right' or 'wrong' as many carvers would have it, but more a *choice* that depends on what a carver has in mind. The worst thing is to be sanding smooth because you haven't the skill to do anything different.

I see final surface tool cuts as having something of the brush strokes of a painter, which may be very smooth, or textured, or quite vigorous depending on the subject. Finishing from the tools gives me a level of subtlety and individuality of expression that is not available to me when I sand. (And it's also a lot quicker! As is sanding if you start with a smoothed surface.)

Finishing from the chisel usually involves flat gouges – the no.3 sweeps in the Sheffield list – particularly on simple, broad surfaces. The background of a relief carving, or a face, would be examples.



I have to use the flattest sweep possible to carve the background very smooth while leaving it subtly 'tooled'; a gouge just flat enough not to be a straight chisel.

I'll show you how I do this in a moment, but the point of this merest sweep (curvature *across* the blade) is it allows me *to keep my corners clear*.

Now, in the work of students I was often seeing backgrounds that were more tooled than they could be. I had always thought this was a matter of technique until I started critically looking at flat gouges. And it seems to me that many no. 3 gouges made today are both *thicker* in the blade and not as *flat* in the sweep as they could be.

Supporting this: one of my (to me, priceless) carving tools is an old 1" no. 3 gouge made by Herring Bros. This tool is both thinner and flatter than any of those I've acquired over the last 25 years made by contemporary manufacturers. This flattest of gouges works so well for smoothing and finishing off any surface—it is a real joy and I use it all the time.

It was no wonder students couldn't match my smooth, lightly textured surface, without borrowing my gouge (or trying to!). Their own, flattest gouges were not as flat as mine, and certainly not flat enough for what was wanted.

I felt there was a definite need for a flatter gouge than currently available – if only because I myself wanted to extend the range of what I had. With this in mind I approached Barry Iles from Ashley Iles, a well-established family firm, who still able to respond to the needs of carvers and make 'specials'.

Drawings and samples went back and forth and I was very pleased with the way that Barry worked to get exactly what I wanted, even making jigs and tooling to forge and grind the shapes accurately) and I was quite fussy).



The result is a small range of very flat gouges – flatter even than Iles' own no.3's, and what they are now number "2 ½".

Thin, and very flat:



The precedent of this flatness doesn't make these tools 'new', but they have another added feature not found on any tool that I know of offered to carver today: an inner bevel.

I have asked for some bevel to be added to the inside of the gouges:

I'll explain the use of this in a moment.



It is these 3 features: the *thinness* of blade, *flatness* of sweep, and *inner bevel* that make these tools unique, and so useful for finishing surfaces.

2. What, then, are the real benefits of these new 2½ finishing gouges to you and me as carvers?

1. The Range

There is a principle in carving: 'always use the biggest tool possible for the job'. One upshot of this is that I am always seem to be thinking 'downwards': I work with the widest possible gouge until space won't permit entry then move down to a narrower one.

There are 6 finishing gouges in the range: ¼, ½, ¾, 1", 1¼" and 1½", which pretty much covers every possibility:

The 2 wider tools are allongee – splaying from the shoulder – making them lighter to work with than regular gouges.



2. Thinness

You have done all the heavy work, modelled towards the finish with quicker gouges and are moving to the finishing stages: it is here that these tools come into their own, finishing off to a smooth, delicately faceted surface.

The blades are thin and designed to be used by hand, with not more than light work with the mallet. This means that the amount of metal that has to be pushed through the cut – the 'wedge' of the bevels – is reduced to the least amount. Again, less effort.

3. Outer Bevel

Ashley Iles have set the outer bevel at 20°, flat (ie without secondary or micro bevels to raise the cutting angle).

This really is the *maximum* it wants to be, dealing with the tougher range of normal carving woods.

If anything, *you can lengthen this bevel* by reducing the cutting angle (between where the blade starts to nick a flat board of wood, and the board itself) *towards 15°*. Less and you'll find it difficult to wrap your knuckles around the handle!

4. Inner Bevel

The inner bevel is also around 20°, but *shorter*. This means that the cutting edge is tougher: it is thrown towards the middle – buttressed, as it were, on both sides - and has a greater overall bevel angle. However, the shortness of the inner bevel counters a lot of the overall wedge effect of the metal as it enters the wood, which you would have if the bevels were equal on both sides.

Again, you can lengthen this if it suits you to have a lower cutting.

Besides toughening the cutting edge, there are other benefits from the inner bevel. I explain these in some detail in my [Woodcarving Tools, Materials & Equipment, Vol. 1](#) (GMC 2002) so let me pick just the greatest advantage – using the tools 'upside down.

My argument for the presence of an inner bevel becomes convincing if you:

- **Do this experiment first:**

You'll need a sharp woodworker's, or carpenter's, chisel - flat on one side, bevel on the other - and a scrap of carveable waste wood, held in a vice.

1. **Use the chisel in the normal' way: push the edge of the chisel, flat side down, straight into the edge of the wood.**

Notice the self-jigging action: the chisel rests on the initial flat face of its cut and uses this to guide itself further.

The result is a true flat surface – and what you.

2. **Repeat but, instead of cutting a flat surface, try to take a scoop out from the edge of the wood.**

See how the chisel judders as you try to rise from the cut, leaving strong ridges.

The results of using a carpenter's chisel to take a 'scoop' out of the corner of a piece of wood.



It is impossible to do this: the chisel continually wants to self-jig in a straight line as before.

3. **Turn the chisel upside down (bevel to the wood) and repeat what you just did (3).**

You should find that you can get the chisel to rise out of the scoop and give a smooth cut.

Look at the smooth 'scoop' that is possible when you turn the tool bevel down and pivot on the heel.



The result will depend on the shortness of the bevel, the thickness of the blade and whether the heel (the angle between bevel and blade) is rounded or not.

Not necessarily perfect, or very deep, but definitely much easier that when you first used the chisel flat side down – yes?

4. Try this step of the exercise (3) again. Observe carefully how it is the *heel* that allows the bevel and thus the cutting edge to pivot and rise to the surface.

This effect is what we want the carving chisel or gouge to do: *rise to the surface taking out a scoop or facet of wood.*

And—here's the crunch:

Because woodcarvers use gouges in both a 'normal' and 'upside down' orientation to shape wood, we need this effect to happen either way.

So, we need bevels both outside and inside.

Try the exercise - try carving! - with any new gouge as it comes, without an inside bevel. You'll find that using it upside down is like trying to control an unwilling horse.

However, add some inner bevel—even 1-2mm—and compare. Freedom to go where you wish!

One proviso here is that if you want carve a marked convex surface with the inside of the gouge to the wood then you would find a *lack* of inner bevel helps *because your cutting angle will be quite high as it is*.

Also, if I *do* want to cut a dead flat face, then it's the single bevelled woodworker's chisel for me every time: this is what it does best.

If you don't use a gouge 'upside down'—and we all work, or have been taught, or learned, differently—then I'm suggesting that you are only using half its possibilities.

The inner bevel on a carving gouge allows it to scoop facets from wood when used upside down, shaping convex surfaces for example.



I am so convinced of the usefulness of this inner bevel on flat gouges that, rather than let the carver have to put one on, as is the case with all other makes of carving tools, that I asked Ashley Iles to include it in these new flat gouges.

3. Flatness and Finishing

Back at the #2½ finishing gouges they, let me demonstrate the best way of using them.

The trick is in the 'slice':

**The slicing cut is *the* cut of the carver:
The cutting edge slides across at the same time as
the blade cuts forward.**

The result is a very smooth surface.

Slicing is a superb way of working anyway. If the sweep is pronounced then the tool must be rotated or 'rocked' as it is pushed.

However, tools as flat as these smoothing gouges are not really 'rocked' at all.

The flatter the gouge the less you can rock, because you don't want to bury the corners in the wood and tear the grain—it's more a 'drift' to the side, a paring action.

You can smooth a surface with the flat gouges you have, it's just that you would find it difficult to match the smoothness produced by these 2½ gouges unless yours are as flat.

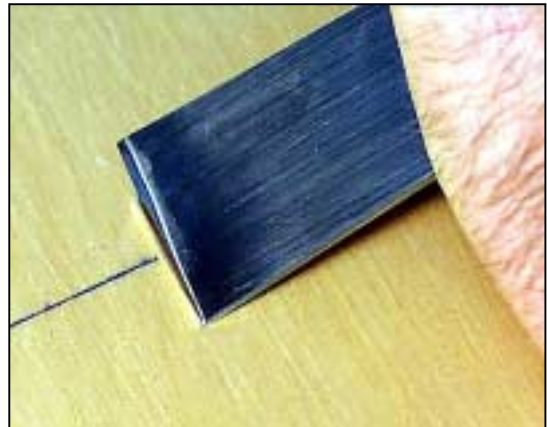
4. Slicing—how to do it...

Use the fingers and leading hand to pull the blade to the side as you make a short, forward stroke and you'll find a thin shaving peel away.

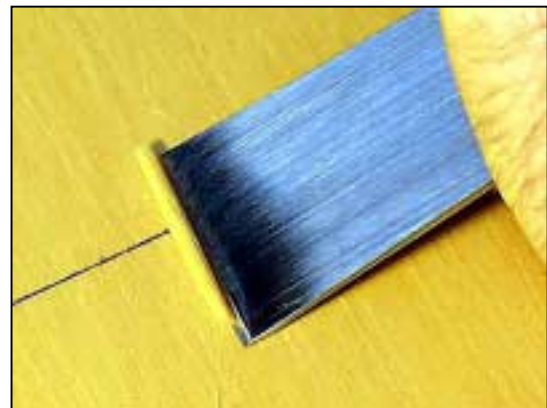
You can make the slice to the left or the right and, of course, swap hands. This gives you 4 ways of working.

Here is a sequence of photographs showing you how the flat slice works:

The Slicing Cut starts towards one corner. The blade is pushed forward and the edge not so much rotated as 'drifted' across...

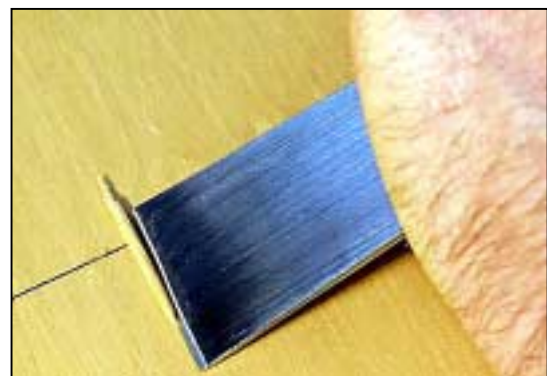


and the shaving is pared by the middle of the blade...



and the slice finished with the shaving released just short of the opposite corner.

Take care not to dig in the corner. The flatness of the sweep produces a very fine shaving and a desirably smooth, lightly tooled to the surface.



5. Slicing—*here's the real beauty of it:*

If you work *across* the grain, it follows that the edge must slice along, the grain, in the direction of the fibres—yes?

This means that, depending how it lies, you can slice *with* or *against* the grain as you choose—yes?

And it follows that *if you use these flat, finishing gouges in this manner, there is no grain you cannot clean up*. I mean that: there is no knot, anywhere, which cannot be cleaned up by slicing in this manner.

Why?

Because, *approaching from across* the grain, if I slice the edge to the left and it cutting *against* the grain and tearing it, then I just slice to the right and I *must* be working with the grain. A clean cut is always available to me...

So:

1. Use short strokes with these finishing gouges,
2. work from across the grain while...
3. drifting (slicing) to the left or the right.

You can even slice with these thin tools *against* the grain - takes my breath away!

6. Sharpening

Sharpen as normal:

- Keep the corners and the edge straight as you can.
- Keep the bevel flat and at the correct cutting angle 15-20°
- Maintain and lengthen the inner bevel.

Ashley Iles have set the bevels at the maximum angles a carver would really want. You may want to lengthen both the outer and inner bevels a *little* and so lower the cutting angles; you can only really assess this when you begin to use them.

You can find full details of how to sharpen woodcarving tools in my [Woodcarving Tools, Materials & Equipment, Vol. 1](#) (GMC 2002)

Make sure the cutting edge itself is immaculate: no scratches—after all, the result of cutting with these gouges will be your finished surface.

Strop well, making sure the heel (only) is slightly rounded or softened.

7. The Iles Guarantee

All reputable manufacturers unconditionally guarantee their carving tools: the steel, tempering, forging and so on. You should never buy from a firm offering less.



Ashley Iles go one step further: they will re-grind or re-sharpen any of their gouges returned to the factory (with return postage). So if you break the edge or can't keep your corners, they will help.



8. Where to buy the Ashley Iles, Chris Pye #2½ Finishing Gouges ...

● UK

▪ Ashley Iles (Edge tools) Ltd

Website: <http://www.ashleyiles.co.uk>

Email: sales@ashleyiles.co.uk

Address: Ashley Iles (Edge tools) Ltd
East Kirkby
Spilsby
Lincolnshire PE23 4DD
England

Tel: 01790 763372

Fax: 01790 763 610

▪ John Boddy's Fine Wood & Tool Store Ltd

Website: not available

Email: not available

Address: Riverside Sawmills
Boroughbridge
N. Yorks YO5 9LI
England

Tel: 01434 322370

Fax: 01432 323810

● USA

▪ Tools for Working Wood

Website: www.toolsforworkingwood.com

Email: sales@toolsforworkingwood.com

Address: Tools for Working Wood

Suite 507

27 West 20th Street

New York

NY 10011

USA

(Hours: m-f 10:30 - 6:00 EST)

Tel: 800-426-4613 (toll free within USA) or

212-604-9535

Fax: 212-604-9533