



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK HARRELL

The saw doctor will see you now

In the third part of this series, Mark Harrell looks at restoring the wooden handle on your vintage saw

Now it's time to restore Grandpa's hopelessly rusted, chipped, paint-spattered Spear & Jackson backsaw handle, which has gathered dust in the workshop for the past 20 years. The horns look like they've survived countless jumps off the workbench and there are more s-rolls along the toothline than a paratrooper's static line before the drop into Operation Market Garden. Believe it or not, this is not a hopeless mission, though now – slipping into our uniquely American patois – this is one butt-ugly saw handle. Let's start by giving this worn-out vet a fresh uniform.



Start by scraping off the paint

Step 1

Scrape off the paint, dead skin cells and other accumulated grime from the past 75 years. An X-Acto knife or safety razor is good for that. You may want to – very – lightly sand down the wood as well with a 3M pad, just to release the accumulated surface compost prior to treating the wood later. Be gentle – you don't want to wipe out the many years of character Grandpa bestowed on this old guy.



Cinch your handle in a wooden clamp and cut a 90° notch along the damage



Trace out the horn outline on your graft wood and cut the squares proud of the trace for length, thickness and width



Secure your handle onto a bench hook or clamp and literally saw off the big chunks to rough form



The restored handle

Step 2

Now cinch your handle in a wooden clamp and cut a 90° notch along the damage. Is it easier to simply lop it off with one clean cut? Sure, if you think end grain alone will keep a glue joint intact. Rather, take the time to make a notch cut, so you'll have both the long grain and end grain securing the graft wood you'll glue on later. Note how we line our wooden clamps with leather. You'll find that leather adds cushioning and friction to the equation and won't mark the handle.

Step 3

Next, trace out the horn outline on your graft wood and cut the squares proud of the trace for length, thickness and width – you'll trim the graft wood to size momentarily. For now, simply cut oversized blocks and match them to the notches. Finesse the blocks to fit as tightly as possible to achieve a practically seamless glue joint. Many fine old English saws were made with elm (*Ulmus procera*), which will take a stain and blend nicely with a vintage handle, so that's a good choice. When you're satisfied with how the grain lines up, glue the graft wood into place. Rubber bands make great clamps for the asymmetrical glue-up. Gently clean and buff the fasteners while the glue is curing, but remember: the intent here is to make your fasteners and handle look like a very well-preserved antique and not to promote the dazzling brilliance for which only a Sergeant Major from the first Airborne would approve. It's time to call it a night and support your neighbourhood pub while the glue dries.

Step 4

Back at it now in your workshop after a hard day massaging a computer and you're ready for some quality 'self' time: secure your handle onto a bench hook or clamp and literally saw off the big chunks to rough form. Follow up with some paring chisel work and then a rasp to shape your horns into the elegantly figured curves Grandpa's saw had when he bought it new. Think of it as a coarse, medium, fine approach – thank you, Chris Schwarz. A Dremel will work too, but like any corded tool, it's easy to overdo it and mar the piece. As the old adage stipulates – you can always take away, but you can never put back. I prefer the control a quality rasp provides. You can also saw a slit on a dowel and anchor a section of abrasive wrapped around the dowel for shaping the contour along the underside of the horns. Periodically grip the handle to assess how it feels and you'll know how much more to take away at this point.

Step 5

We're ready for finishing, so you can blend the look of the grafted wood with the original handle wood. Try experimenting first with various darker stains on a separate piece of graft wood to find a combination that works for your handle. We most often use a stain marking pen in dark walnut mixed with red oak; the combination frequently does the trick for how we finish vintage saw handle restorations. Sand, stain again, assess and repeat until the handle looks the way you want. Now treat the wood with boiled linseed oil or oil treatment of your preference. You might even buff on some carnauba wax if you really want the old paratrooper to pop like the parade ground veteran he is, now standing proud after generations of neglect.

Step 6

And you're done! If you've taken your time with the cutting, clamping, shaping and finishing, you will now have a handle with a pretty close approximation of its original look and feel. Moreover, whenever you use the saw, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that it was you that brought it back to proper form and that Grandpa is toasting your efforts from above. Cheers! *F&C*



Using a stain marking pen to blend in the grafted wood with the original wood