

TURNER OF THE CENTURY



The purpose of this article is to introduce readers to a remarkable 91-year-old gentleman, Arthur Lowe. He retired as master woodturner in 1976, but he still practices turning as a hobby, five or more days a week. Such mastercraftsmen of the 'old school' are rare. Arthur's knowledge of turning, and his current experience, skill, and speed supersede most from the ensuing generations.

Each weekday morning he embarks on his 10-minute walk from his house to his lathe. The lathe is located in the shed behind his daughter and son-in-law's house. Arthur spends four or five hours working away at various projects, before walking home again in the afternoon. Taking note of Arthur's approach gives an appreciation of how to live a happy and fulfilling life. He is good at what he does, and he enjoys it. He takes great pride in doing a job well. Not only must it be correct but it also must be done in good time.

He derives great satisfaction from doing difficult jobs within strict time limits. Some of the more challenging pieces include turning perfectly round, wooden game balls; fine, shaped wine glasses; tapered Jacobean barley twists and perfectly matching, individually hand turned legs. Arthur believes it is of no use to anyone to do a beautiful job but to have taken so long doing it that none can afford to pay for it. Most of Arthur's working life was spent in commercial turneries where quality and efficiency were equally prized. These skills and values are ingrained in him.

Life is not all about 'work' though for Arthur who enjoys his retirement time and includes several holidays each year to visit friends and family, both in Australia and overseas. At last count, he has 16 grandchildren.

Arthur began turning in 1925, just after his 14th birthday when he started an apprenticeship at the Mount Eden Turnery in Auckland. He remembers learning his trade while working on furniture and commercial industrial projects. In particular, he recollects turning projects for the two new theatres in Auckland.

When Arthur joined the firm, he was placed with an intractable English tradesman. The teaching role was soon taken over by a New Zealander called Frank Matthews, who was in the same workshop. Frank, seeing value in young Arthur, said he was a much better teacher, and so, with the approval from the boss, Frank became the new tutor. Arthur concedes in retrospect that Frank was the better teacher, and they got on well, both professionally and socially.

The early lathes at Mount Eden Turnery were driven off large flat belts. The belts to each lathe ran off one single shaft, which in turn was driven by one large electric motor. These would be considered dangerous today because they had big open pulleys and drive shafts. In later years the lathes were v-belt driven and each lathe was run independently off its own motor.

Arthur contends that modern tradesmen aren't 'a patch' on the old school tradesmen. He recounts a story to explain. Around the time of the Great Depression, the profit margins for businesses were incredibly low, and the competition for each job was very high. So in order to make money as a business operator, or to remain employed, it was necessary to work skilfully, safely and quickly – to an extent which just isn't seen today.

The lathes they worked on took time to wind up and wind down, and so stopping was kept to a minimum. When several legs needed to be turned in the one job lot, a significant amount of time could be saved if the change from one

leg to the next was made, without having to turn the lathe on and off each time. To achieve this, the turner would hold the timber in place, and then he would do up the tail stock. The tail stock is the 'dead centre' end, and is at the opposite end of the piece of timber to the head stock. The head stock is the end which is connected to the shaft, which drives the whole lathe. Once the timber was connected to the tail

unscrewed each time the tool rest or the tail stock is to be moved. This takes considerable time to do.

To move the tail stock in an old style lathe, the turner would use a hammer to give one hit to the side of the wedge which held it locked into place. The hit breaks the friction hold so the tail stock could manually be moved to a position to take the different length of timber.



TOP: Jacobean table leg completed ABOVE: Arthur hand turning four identical oak Jacobean table legs which feature urns, tapering and square sections

stock, the timber would start spinning around. The turner would then chisel the leg, with the chisel on the tool rest. After the leg was turned, the turner would undo the tail stock and the leg just would fly out at great speed. The turner would quickly catch it, and then put it down, before grabbing the next piece of timber for turning.

One should also note that the tool rest (where the turner would 'rest' the tool as he guided it to cut into the turning timber) and the tail stock both used a wedge system to move them up or down the bed of the lathe. Lathes, nowadays, have a nut that is screwed and

With just one hit on the end of the wedge, the tail stock would again be locked into place. So with just two hits of a hammer, the tail stock could be adjusted. The wedge system meant there was no need to waste time turning the lathe on and off when getting a new piece of timber, or when moving the tool rest to a new working position.

Square turning is where the leg ends up having square sections as well as turned sections along it. Tapered square legs were also achieved off a square turning lathe. These lathes had huge drums, which could take up to forty three four-by-four inch table

legs at a time, or two hundred chair legs (1 inch = 25.4 mm; 1 foot = 305 mm). This all happened before copy lathes were invented and represents a remarkable achievement.

The timber for the legs would be placed longitudinally on the drum lathe. Then the drum would turn at very high speed in front of the turner. So with one turn of the drum, and the chisel in place on the tool rest, 200 chair legs would be worked on simultaneously. Once one 'side' of each leg was done, each one would be turned 90 degrees so the next side could be done, and then the next, and then the fourth side. If you check with a level, you will see that square turned legs are never perfectly square. They have a very slight round curve, due to the fact that they were hand turned on a drum.

When Arthur finished his apprenticeship, the impact of The Great Depression was being felt everywhere. Arthur decided to leave the turnery for work with the New Zealand Railway, first in Wellington and then back in Auckland. He shunted passenger trains for ten years. He did not enjoy his new occupation and kept himself happy doing turning after hours. He was 18 when he bought his first lathe. He recalls buying the peddle-driven lathe for ten shillings. On this lathe he could turn pieces up to two feet long.

Arthur married his childhood sweetheart in 1935. They had been great friends ever since she was seven years old. Prior to the wedding she was still living with her family, who at that time owned a hotel in Melbourne. Though Arthur's wife had grown up in Auckland, her family had moved and worked in various other places. Over these years she had maintained close ties with her Auckland friends. She had gone back to Auckland to celebrate her 21st birthday with her friends. It was only ten months after this visit that they got married.

By 1942 Arthur was well and truly fed up with working for the railways, and he returned to the Mount Eden Turnery. He was surprised to find that the old foreman was still working there. Frank Matthews approached Arthur in 1948 to announce that he wanted to leave Mount Eden Turnery so he could start his own turnery. Arthur told Frank that he wouldn't mind starting up his own turnery too. Together they decided to form a partnership known as the Matloe Turnery.

The Matloe Turnery did commercial and industrial woodturning and made small items of furniture such as occasional tables, standard lamps, wine tables, Jacobean barley twist furniture and palm stands. They also did the turning for various New Zealand furniture makers. A memorable contract involved the turning aspects of full-scale model aircraft during World War II. The models were to go to airfields to trick the enemy into bombing them, rather than the real aircraft, which were hidden elsewhere. They made the outside of the aeroplane wings by turning timber, which was initially 12 inches square and eight feet long. The wheels were turned from four inch wide and 12-inch diameter laminated pieces of timber.

Another wartime contract involved turning rudders for American landing craft. For strength and convenience, they were told to turn the rudders from three-dimensional 'L-shaped' pieces of timber, the long part of the 'L' being the shaft and the bottom part of the 'L' being the broad part of the rudder. The shaft section was five inches square, and the flat rudder section was initially twelve inch square. This on its own would have been out of balance



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on the lathe. They then had to attach another 12-inch square block on the opposite side to the first one, making a very broad topped 'T' shape which provided the necessary symmetry enabling balance on the lathe. The turner had to work with two feet of five-inch thick timber whizzing around at great speed, just near his shoulder. Once the shaft and rudder were made they would cut the excess 'balance' piece off. On a more modest scale, Arthur recalls turning 12-inch bread boards, which sold for one and three pence each.

Frank's two sons had fought in the Second World War, and upon their return they were invited to join Matloe Turnery. One son became proficient in the office, the other as a turner. After a few more years Frank retired and his two sons took over his share of the partnership. Together, Arthur and the two sons of Frank built the firm up to more than 21 employees. They each made over NZ\$10,000 a year which, in those days, was a considerable sum and thought themselves quite well off.

In 1976, Arthur and his wife came to Australia to retire and be closer to their children and grandchildren. Arthur brought his favourite industrial lathe with him, and did a few little jobs to keep him happy and busy. To the best of his knowledge there was only one other hand turner operating in Brisbane at this time. The commercial turneries were all using copy lathes and were not interested in custom one-off projects.

While living in Australia Arthur has mainly done one-off turning for antique restoration and custom fine furniture. He makes castor cups, rails, supports, finials, legs, barley twists and more. His skills readily adapted to the antique restoration requirements, and he simply copied what was previously there. It has become a fascinating hobby for him, and keeps his body fit and his mind sharp.

When asked about the future, Arthur cannot see much hope for those requiring commercial one-off turnings. Arthur trained five apprentices during his career, and to the best of his knowledge, only one still works as a full time turner. Arthur concludes by saying, 'There don't seem to be any turners who have been commercially trained these days. Very few have a real appreciation of shape and design in their work either. Most hobbyists say it is not possible to do exact copies

by hand. Those who are able to accurately do the work, usually take so long that it is not affordable. It would be a shame to see people forced into compromising to shapes and forms off modern copy lathes. It would be a greater shame to have antiques, which cannot be authentically restored.' ■

LEFT: Close up of completed mahogany column on reproduction George III Gothic style bookcase

BELOW: Arthur Lowe with chisel against the tool rest. Note the wedges under the bed

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