VERITAS HAND PLANES

These two new offerings from Lee Valley – a scrub plane and a low-angle smoother – make prepping stock a joy.

BY KERRY PIERCE

IF THE JACK PLANE IS THE WORKHORSE OF THE WOODSHOP, the smoothing plane is its thoroughbred. In the tool’s most glorious incarnation – the classic English-style infill – the smoothing plane has both a refined pedigree and a perfectly sculpted body.

This instrument can produce continuous, paper-thin shavings through its narrow mouth, slicing them cleanly from the most recalcitrant woods. Any craftsman aspiring to woodworking excellence should own one of these tools.

Unfortunately, their price is proportional to their quality. An infill smoother made by Karl Holtey – widely regarded as the world’s best maker of such planes – sells for around $6,500. Even lower-priced infills sometimes go for $500 and up.

Ouch.

But the situation isn’t hopeless. Lee Valley has come to the rescue with a Veritas bevel-up, low-angle smoother that offers remarkably good performance at a very modest price.
Solid engineering
This Veritas plane traces its lineage to the Stanley No. 164, another bevel-up, low-angle smoother that never really caught on in the United States and has become a real prize for Stanley collectors.

This smoother has a low center of gravity and an impressive weight of just under 5 lbs., two characteristics that help keep the plane engaged with the surface. The body is a thick iron casting with a moderately smooth sole. The knob and the tote are shaped from bubinga. Many of the plane’s adjustment elements are machined from brass, giving this plane (and the scrub plane I’ll describe later on) a visually appealing combination of materials. One of these brass elements is a shallow cup into which the base of the knob fits, that may offer protection from the chipping that sometimes occurred at the base of the knob on the No. 164.

Like the block plane to which it is related, the Veritas smoother has an adjustable mouth that doesn’t require removing the iron and loosening the frog screws before changing the opening. The mouth is adjusted by simply turning the plane’s knob to the right to loosen a toe piece machined into the sole, and turning the mouth adjustment screw just behind the toe piece. This combination of adjustment mechanisms makes this the most easily adjustable smoothing plane I’ve used.

The depth-of-cut knob is located in the same place and works in the same way as the knobs on Stanley/Bailey planes, but there’s no lateral adjustment lever. Instead, the iron is skewed one way or the other by moving the depth-of-cut knob from side to side – an elegantly simple piece of engineering.

In order for a bench plane to perform satisfactorily, the iron must be bedded securely. In the classic Stanley/Bailey model, the iron is bedded against a cast-metal frog which, in turn, is bedded against the plane’s body. The bedding surfaces at the top and the bottom of the frog must be perfectly machined if the iron is to have the stability necessary to resist chattering. On the Stanley/Bailey, the frog usually rests on milled surfaces with a cumulative area of less than 1 sq. in. On the Veritas smoother, the milled surface where the back of the iron is bedded is a much more robust 5½ sq. in. This extra machining provides a stable platform for the iron.

Test drive
For testing purposes, I did side-by-side comparisons with two other planes in my collection: an infill-style smoother built by a friend, and a Stanley No. 4 I’ve owned for years.

First, I honed all three irons until each was thoroughly sharp. (The beefy 3/16" thick irons from the infill and the Veritas looked like slabs of stone next to the 6/64" iron on the Stanley.) Since the mouth on the infill is permanently set to a bit more than 6/64", I set the mouths on the No. 4 and the Veritas to the same width, and the depth-of-cut on each plane so that only a whiskery edge of iron protruded through the sole.

I then used each plane to take surface shavings from lengths of straight-grained white pine, black walnut, and hard curly maple. All three performed ably on the pine and the walnut, but when I got to the curly maple, there were differences in performance. As much as I like my Stanley, it lacks the weighty presence on the work to easily take continuously wide shavings from the maple. From time to time, the Stanley gave up the thin shaving as the edge broke away from the surface. In fact, I could take a continuous shaving only by lowering the iron to take thicker shavings which sometimes left behind small areas of tear-out. The infill smoother also stumbled a bit on the maple – to be fair, I should mention that there is the tiniest side-to-side imperfection in the infill’s bed, and it sometimes does give up the left side of the shaving. But the Veritas was a monster, consistently lifting continuous, full-width shavings from the maple with no need to lower the blade.

As I had expected, the Veritas outperformed the Stanley, but to my surprise, it also outperformed my infill smoother.

The real test, however, came over the next few weeks as I found myself reaching not for my infill smoother, but for the Veritas when I had something really tricky to smooth. This plane has, in fact, moved to the front of my long line of smoothers. I still drive the Stanley from time to time, and the infill plane remains my favorite smoother (because of the circumstances of its birth), but there is no doubt in my mind about the flat-out superiority of the Veritas smoother.
The brawny older brother
I also tested the new Veritas scrub plane. Like the smoother, it's a heavy tool with thick cast iron sole and sidewalls. Also like the smoother, it has a pair of set screws machined into the sidewalls to keep the iron from racking under heavy use. This is an excellent addition to a scrub plane.

The sole is a narrow 2¼"x, while the iron is 1½". This is important in a scrub plane intended to hog off thick Fritos of rough-sawn wood, as a wider iron requires more force than most of us like to use.

Like its brother, the Veritas scrub plane performed ably, although let's be honest here – not a lot can go wrong with a scrub plane. It needs only to be sturdy and solid with an iron radiused across its width.

The Veritas scrub plane features a heavy cast iron body, bubinga knob and tote, brass detailing and set screws on each side of the ¾"-thick iron. It weighs 3 lbs. and sells for $99.

Weighing just under 5 lbs., the low-angle, bevel-up smoother has the same traits as the scrub plane, plus an adjustable mouth, a 1¼" wide by ¾" thick iron, a large machined bedding surface and a high-mass, low center of gravity. It sells for $175. For information, visit leevalley.com — Kerry Pierce, author of a dozen woodworking books and more than 60 magazine articles, lives in Lancaster, Ohio.
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