

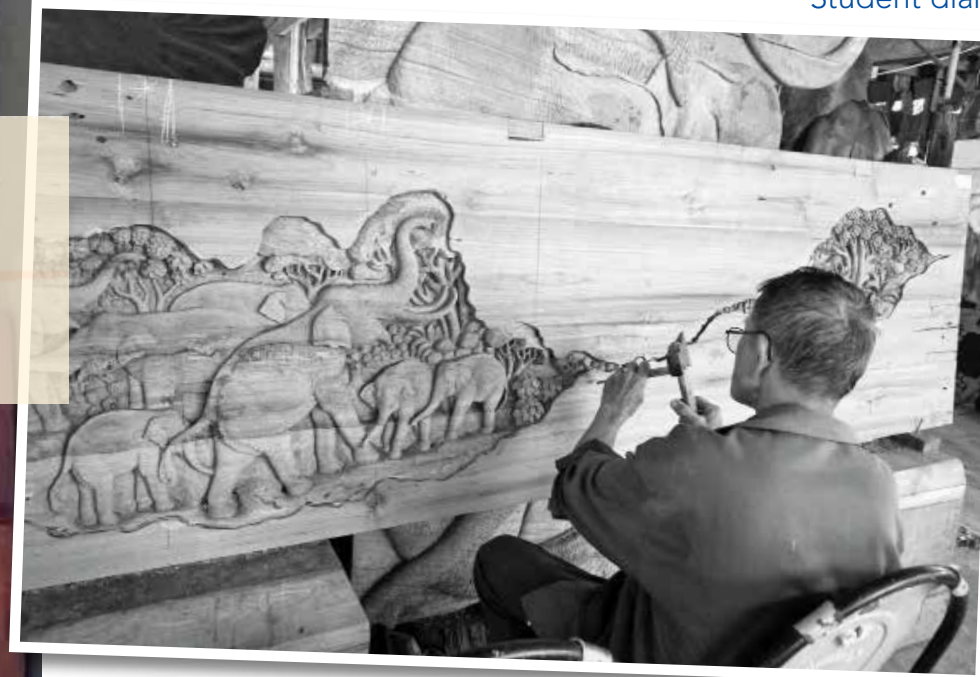
A man with light brown hair and a beard, wearing a grey t-shirt, is smiling at the camera while working on a wooden carving. He is using a hand plane to shape a piece of wood. The workshop is filled with various tools and wood shavings. The background shows wooden walls and a large tree trunk.

# The student woodcarver – part one

Join William Barsley on his endeavor to turn his passion for woodcarving into a full time profession



City&Guilds  
of London  
Art School



A woodcarver at Bang Jang Nak woodcarving workshop in Thailand

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to truly master a skill such as woodcarving? To turn a passionate hobby into a full-time career, but retain a love for the craft? In October 2015, I set out to answer these questions and began a three year Diploma in Ornamental Woodcarving and Gilding at the City and Guilds of London Art School. In this series of articles, I invite you to join me on my journey as I progress through my studies, sharing with you my experience of the course and some of the skills and techniques I learn along the way.

Carving has been an integral part of the City and Guilds of London Art School since its founding in 1879, and the Diploma in Ornamental Woodcarving and Gilding is the only one of its kind in the UK. It is a full-time course with a focus on traditional English carving and the restoration sector, and has a structure that has been carefully refined over many years to provide the perfect balance of content. Topics include not only basic and advanced carving techniques, such as sharpening, chip carving and shallow and high relief carving, but also fundamental skills such as drawing, modelling, casting, gilding and letter carving. The college prides itself in delivering the highest quality of training to its students, aiming to provide them with the full set of skills needed to become a professional



Fellow first year woodcarvers in our workshop

woodcarver in the 21st century. Many previous students have gone on to work in the heritage sector, receiving commissions from institutions such as the Houses of Parliament, Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace and St Paul's Cathedral. Many also go on to set up their own successful carving businesses. The course is closely linked with the stone-carving diploma, with combined classes such as drawing, modelling and the history of decorative styles. Class sizes are small, with only five students (including myself) in the first year of the woodcarving course, and eight in stone carving. This allows for one-to-one tutor supervision and guidance, which is essential when learning a practical craft.

Through these articles, I hope to give readers an insight into what it's like to train to be a professional woodcarver on one of the most renowned courses in the world.

### Background

My name is William Barsley and I've carved as a hobby for almost four years now. I can happily say I am obsessed with everything about the craft.

In November 2014 I decided I wanted to learn more about woodcarving around the world and set off on a journey across Asia, in part by bicycle, to document and explore the art of woodcarving in this wonderfully diverse and beautiful region of the world –

www.carvingcountries.com. The journey took me from the islands of Indonesia to the foothills of the Himalayas, meeting hundreds of woodcarvers along the way. It was fascinating to learn from each carver about their unique methods, tools and inspirations for carving, and to hear how they had been influenced by their country's history of the craft. I was amazed by the vast diversity, yet evident similarities, between each country's styles and traditions.

On my return, I had two realisations; that I knew more about woodcarving in Asia than I did about carving in my own country, and that I desperately wanted to develop my own woodcarving skills with the hope of one day becoming a professional woodcarver myself.

After seeking advice on how best to turn my passion into a career, I decided to take the structured learning approach and study on a course. Researching woodcarving courses in the UK, it was with great delight that I came across the City and Guilds Ornamental Woodcarving and Gilding diploma, which seemed to be highly regarded throughout the carving industry.

### Preparing to study

Before starting the course, I was provided with a list of the key chisels, tools and books that I would need in my first year. As many carvers will know, it is difficult to recommend a 'standard set' of chisels for a beginner, as it generally depends on what they are planning to carve. However, as the first year of the course follows a number of carefully pre-planned projects, tutors were able

to recommend 12 key chisels that would suit our needs. Before beginning the task of choosing which brand of chisel to buy, I first had to learn what the different numbers and sizes meant.

### Chisel sizes and types

One of the oldest and most common methods of classifying chisels is known as the 'Sheffield system', which classifies them based on their 'sweep', i.e. their profile and shape. The size, in millimetres, indicates the width of the cutting tip, and the number above it represents the chisel's shape and type. However, many tool companies, such as Stubai and Pfiel use slightly different numbering systems, which can be confusing for those starting out. The following table illustrates some of the sizes and types of chisel available (for example the 'F' in '3F' represents a fishtail chisel).



Trying out the traditional carving techniques of Bali



My new Pfiel chisels from the college list, lined up and ready to go!



## Which brand of chisel?

The trickiest part was deciding which brand of chisel to buy. I spent hours trawling through online forums and asking carving friends for advice. With recommendations including Pfiel, Henry Taylor, Stubai, Aurori, Two Cherries and Ashley Iles (to name but a few). I was struck by how much of an individual decision this was. It seemed that each carver I spoke to had a preference for a different brand, with some using a combination of chisels that they had accumulated over the years.

| Number | Size (in mm) |
|--------|--------------|
| 3A     | 2 or 3       |
| 3F     | 12 & 20      |
| 5F     | 12           |
| 7F     | 8            |
| 1      | 20           |
| 2      | 12 & 20      |
| 5      | 20           |
| 8      | 7            |
| 11     | 2            |
| 12     | 8            |



My Grandad's old carving chisels



The college has an onsite workshop containing heavy-duty machinery, such as a bandsaw, planer/thicknesser, lathe and chop saw



My workbench at college (raised up to the perfect height)

After talking to my course tutors and former students, I decided upon the Swiss made Pfiel chisels, which are at the higher end of the market but are said to keep a good edge. I was also fortunate to find a box of my granddad's old chisels in my parents' garage, given to him by a woodcarving friend back in 1940. They needed a good clean and oil but they quickly got their edge back, so I have now added these to my collection. It is commonly said that old chisels are some of the best, as they are made of high quality steel that keeps its edge longer. Aside from chisels, the other tools we required for the course included: Lignum mallet (lignum is an exceptionally hard wood, perfect for mallets), Set of callipers (for measuring) and leather strop (for sharpening).

## Next time...

In the next article, I will describe my first few weeks of the course, when I learnt one of the most important lessons of all: how to sharpen my chisels! Renowned woodcarver Peter Thuring teaches us some tricks of the trade, and shows us the fundamentals of chip carving and how effective it can be. ▶



My first attempt at chip carving, using Quebec pinewood

## Pre-reading

An important part of the course is the study of traditional English designs and periods of decorative style, such as the Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo periods. One day each week is dedicated to this, with frequent afternoon field trips to explore relevant sites and museums around London. To compliment this study, the school provides a list of recommended reading. I've listed above those that I have found particularly useful.



A selection of books I purchased off the reading list

## Recommended reading

*Practical Woodcarving and Gilding.* William Wheeler & Charles H. Hayward. 1973 – a very informative book. Many of the projects we carve originate from here in some shape or form. William Wheeler taught woodcarving for many years at the School and set up the Restoration Department after WWII.

*The Manual of Traditional Woodcarving.* Paul. N. Hasluck 1908 – I carried this book on my bicycle half way around Asia. It taught me a lot about woodcarving and decorate styles (but was heavy on the hills!)

*The Materials and Methods of Sculpture.* Jack C. Rich. 1947 – one of the 'go to' books on sculpture, which I've been highly recommended by countless carvers.

*Essential Woodcarving Techniques.* Dick Onians. 1997 – Dick Onians is a former student and current tutor of City and Guilds of London Art School and has written many successful books on woodcarving, including this one.

*The Story of Art.* E.H.Gombrich. 1950 – a brilliant book for those looking to learn about art. Clearly written and easy to read, I've found it invaluable.

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