



The synergy between wood and metal gives vintage tools their unique appeal.

FORGING AHEAD

RECLAIMED VINTAGE TOOLS HAVE AN APPEAL THAT GOES FAR BEYOND THEIR RUGGED DURABILITY AND STYLISH GOOD LOOKS. IAN SWAIN, SUCCESSFUL RESCUER AND RENOVATOR OF THESE ARTISANAL TREASURES, EXPLAINS WHY THEY SHOULD HAVE A PLACE IN EVERY HOME

WORDS BARBARA HOPKINS

'Vintage tools might be a niche area,' says Ian Swain, founder of The Luddite, supplier, repairer and sharpener of old tools, based in the Weald of Sussex and Surrey. 'But from being under-valued and under-appreciated, they are steadily increasing in popularity.' It's true, there are noticeable shifts in consumer attitudes and values, and Ian believes that these, along with our increasing love of period homes and storied artefacts, have resulted in the explosion of interest in reclaimed tools. There's real substance to these precious pieces, and Ian's keen to point out why they're ahead of their modern equivalents. 'Firstly,' he explains, 'it's a matter of ergonomics: an ergonomically-correct, hand-crafted tool makes the user's task easier, whether at home or in business. There are issues of recycling and sustainability too, with new (and quickly broken) tools going to landfill or for steel scrappage. There's also the sense of heritage and tradition that comes with re-handling and repairing family

items which have been handed down through several generations. Economically, the price of a refurbished tool is often comparable to a modern tool of medium quality, yet the quality of the older tool is far superior.'

Beauty

There's a distinct aesthetic appeal to vintage tools too; for Ian it lies in the fusion of wood and metal. 'Anything that has two materials or more is a compound item, often adding greatly to the aesthetic appeal and giving a complexity of balance between the two materials,' he reveals. 'This leads to a lot of subtleties in the way things are put together.' He finds a particular beauty in these artefacts, especially the original handles. 'The patina which comes with use is amazing,' he enthuses. 'To be honest, it's the sweat and grease of the ages. It's appreciated in furniture and the same thing occurs in tools.' Ian's obvious passion for reclaimed tools has generated quite a collection. 'They are a diminishing resource, but I have a weakness and end up keeping some items just because I like them so much!' ➔



(below) Ian at work and the brazier (portable pan to hold lit coals).



Ian's top 5 tools for home and garden

1 No.5 Jack Plane
Made in huge numbers by Stanley (UK/USA) and Record (UK), this is the standard tool for preliminary smoothing and sizing of wood. 'Jack' as in 'Jack of all trades': the tool can straighten, reduce and smooth timber. Great for sticking doors and cleaning up shelves and floor boards.

2 Hatchet/Small axe
Good for preparing kindling for a wood stove, from scraps of softwood or dry sticks. In the days of open fires virtually everyone would have had a chopping block and hatchet. It's also useful for garden jobs like pointing stakes.

3 1" Sheffield 'cast steel' chisel
A very common tool in every carpenter's kit, made by great companies like Marples, Sorby, Ward & Payne. Many will be approaching 100 years old. It's essential for all basic jobs including fitting locks and hinges. The quality of the steel will be hard to match with modern materials. Look out for original Boxwood handles.

4 Large cabinet pattern screwdriver
Even in these days of cross-headed, power driven screws, this is a very useful item for opening cans of paint, prying and levering, and perhaps even turning screws. Again, Boxwood handles are best.

5 Hand fork and hand trowel
Solid forged garden hand tools are stronger than modern ones pressed out of steel sheet, and the wooden handles are much kinder to your hands than moulded plastic. Just wipe over with linseed oil once in a while.

Luddite Leanings

Ian's love of vintage tools stems from a boyhood with his family who 'routinely loved fixing things.' He worked in electronic engineering, until redundancy prompted a change of focus. Agricultural college and a course in general countryside management followed, where he naturally gravitated towards using, and repairing, old tools. He decided to specialise, so set about learning the required skills for tool reclamation including blacksmithing, welding and how to use a lathe. 'Material objects should be old friends and pretty much infinitely renewable – providing the skills are there,' he says. Ian's hands-on approach is much more than working with vintage tools, though. It's a lifestyle and ethos, and he confesses to 'Luddite leanings'. Whilst not a machine-breaker, he's against 'a blind acceptance of change as being positive, when quite often the only person it's positive for is the manufacturer. I refer to it as instant landfill. Buy, break it shortly afterwards, then go and buy another so it's bought twice.' He thinks we could all be more Luddite: 'people fall for this again and again; we almost buy to throw away. We live in a finite world and you can't just keep chewing through it.'

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Form and Function

It seems that we're catching on, and today his clients range across the agriculture, horticulture, carpentry and countryside management sectors through to domestic users. He rescues and renovates hand, workshop and woodland tools; has repaired a butcher's cleaver, a horse plough and even created a tool to remove river weeds for a fisherman. Ian's part of the revival of heritage skills as we appreciate, and increasingly re-create, a time when craftspeople



There's beauty in the heritage and hard work of the hands that used vintage tools.



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Part of Ian's collection.

were in direct contact with their end-user and had a deep understanding of their needs. Tool-makers knew about the necessary function and balance. They also took great pride in the creation – it was literally a 'hands on' process using superior materials, making clear the contrasts and benefits between hand-crafted and mass-produced tools. The thickness of a tool's tang, for example, (the metal to which the handle is attached) is relevant to how much weight is put into the user's hand, affecting the balance; the rate at which the metal tapers will affect the weight distribution. Ian cites cutting-type woodland tools as an example: the most dynamic to use, perhaps the most powerful in the field and interesting both in balance and ergonomics. For users working in coppicing, hurdle-making or thatching, the weight and balance is crucial: if the tool isn't correct, the

working day is much slower and less remunerative.

Vintage tools have real integrity in their craftsmanship, along with durability and functionality, not forgetting those pleasing aesthetics. Some are being used in homes, restaurants and bars as decorative pieces to give that sought-after rustic feel, which Ian thinks is good if the tool is beyond reasonable use but still aesthetically pleasing. He does admit however to 'getting really offended by tools being treated in a cavalier manner by just sticking them on a wall with a couple of cross-head screws.' With these special, work-hard pieces, they may be beautiful but their function certainly comes first. [🔗](#)

»For more details about Ian's work, including coppicing, courses on tool maintenance and a contact form see theluddite.com