

Chris Tribe
FURNITURE
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How to Get into Woodwork as a Hobby

By

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How to Get into Woodwork as a Hobby

Part 1: Introduction

Hardwood is a beautiful material to work with and working it with hand tools gives a particular satisfaction. I discovered this when I first took up woodwork over 35 years ago and it's why I am still making.

I first started in woodwork when I was in my twenties, about 1975. I worked in various sheds, air raid shelters, spare rooms, and cellars as we moved around. Over the years I slowly built up my tools, skills and experience until in 1990 I turned my hobby into my profession. Go to www.christribe.co.uk to see some of the things I have made recently.

I learned a lot in those years and also made plenty of mistakes along the way. I have come to love working in wood and cannot imagine not having something to make, I get a huge sense of fulfillment from the craft and want others to feel the same. In this ebook I want to share my experience with you so that you can perhaps get more learning and less mistakes!

I am not offering this advice so that you can take the same path into professional woodwork that I took. In fact I often wonder if there are too many furniture makers in

the world! Some of the best work is being done by hobby woodworkers. No, my aim in all my teaching and writing is to enhance people's enjoyment of the craft.

There is nothing like the buzz from designing a piece, working on it with good, well maintained tools using beautiful hardwoods and then seeing the thing that you have conceived completed. But there are elements that are essential to achieve that buzz.

Success in woodwork is dependent on three factors:

- Good tools and working environment.
- Sound method.
- A positive attitude to the work.

It's when these three elements come together that you really begin to achieve something and gain a sense of fulfillment. My aim in writing this is to help you bring these elements together sooner. It may be that after reading it through there are areas that you are unsure about. I am always happy to answer questions about furniture making, just email me at chris@christribe.co.uk and I'll reply ASAP.

There are other sources of help.

- Evening classes; my interest started with an evening class, but sadly they are few and far between nowadays.
- Courses. I offer a range of courses for all skill levels, check out: www.christribefurniturecourses.com

I hope you enjoy this e-book and that it kindles a lasting interest in working wood.

Now let's get on with it!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Tribe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line above the word "Tribe".

Part 2: Good tools and working environment

It is not possible to do good work with badly made, sharpened or maintained tools. When buying new tools buying very cheap is a false economy, however there are mid range tools that work well and there is always the second hand market. I will show you what to look for when buying tools and how to treat them once you have them.

You also need a workshop environment that is conducive to good and safe work.

Environment

The workshop environment is usually a matter of compromise for most home woodworkers, but there are a number of factors that need to be considered when setting up a workshop.

Damp

All wood reacts to moisture in the atmosphere. If your workshop is damp you will have problems with timber movement when you take pieces you have made into a centrally heated environment. Take remedial action to prevent damp, perhaps in a basement tanking of otherwise lining the walls. You are aiming for a relative humidity of approximately 50%. If this cannot be achieved run a dehumidifier or store the timber you are working on in the house between your sessions.

Movement due to changes in humidity have to be allowed for in the construction of a piece, I will help you with this later.

Light

Good light is important. If this is natural light all the better. A good spot light is also important for detailed work like dovetailing. Good light is essential when applying a finish, the light from fluorescent lights is too diffuse to show up blemishes in the surface so a low light from a window or spot light is best for this.





Electrics

Nowadays woodwork usually involves machinery, so good provision of sockets is important. Residual Current Device (RCD) provision in the circuit is worth investing in for your own safety, this is a switch that will trip if you cut through a cable and accidentally come into contact with the bare wires. Later you may want larger machines perhaps requiring an additional 16amp circuit.

Top Tip: Fitting an RCD can save your life

Dust

Woodworking machinery produces an amazing amount of dust! From the very small particles from a sander to the larger chips from a planer, they are an inconvenience in different ways. Fine particles (about 5 microns) are a health hazard, the larger particles are a fire hazard. How to deal with them?

Extraction

It is better to collect particles as they are produced rather than let them get away. So extraction is best. There are two main types of extraction:

- Low volume high pressure (LVHP) systems. These act like a domestic vacuum cleaner. Because of the high pressure they filter much smaller particles. The problem is that they cannot cope with large volumes of chips such as are produced by larger machines.
- High volume low pressure systems (HVLP). These can collect large volumes from larger woodworking machines but are not good with small diameter piping which rules them out for power tools. Also they are not so good at removing the really fine particles that are most hazardous. These are not really suitable for the beginner with limited machinery.

For someone setting up a home workshop who does not have large shavings producing machines I would recommend a vacuum type machine. Especially one incorporating a socket so that it switches on when you turn the machine on. I have used a Numatic for over 20 years and it's still going strong! Numatic make the small Henry vacuum cleaners, something like this would be OK for most portable machines and can be bought cheaply on ebay, although the bags may require changing frequently.



Air cleaning

Air cleaners collect fine particles from the air by drawing air through a filter. They are particularly useful if you do a lot of hand sanding. However the more economical option may be to wear a dust mask.

Dust masks



Even with the most efficient extraction there will still be times when a dust mask is useful e.g. Hand sanding. I find the larger moulded masks rather uncomfortable and difficult to seal round the nose, I would recommend a good quality light weight mask with a moulding facility and replaceable filters such as the 3M 2125.

For the absolute beginner wearing a dust mask is the most economical way of dealing with dust. But eventually you will get fed up with the layers of dust laying around the workshop, then it's worth considering a simple LVHP system.

Warmth

A cold workshop is more likely to be damp and is not very pleasant to work in. The easiest way to heat a small workshop without access to mains gas would be some form of electric fan heater, although they can be affected by dust. I would recommend oil filled radiators, they give a good background warmth and are not affected by dust. I would not go for calor/propane gas heaters as they increase humidity and would lead to condensation.

The idea of a wood burning stove is attractive, but bear in mind that you will need to store your off cuts for burning and keep a radius of at least 500mm round the stove clear. This could be a factor in a small workshop where space is at a premium. You will need to check out the environmental regulations in your area to see if the stove will conform (many wood burners can run in smokeless zones.)

Regardless of the regulations there can be problems with smoke when the fire is stoked. If your workshop is in a shed around other higher buildings there can be trouble with the smoke eddying down and annoying the neighbours!



Fire

A dusty workshop is a fire risk so it is worth reducing dust where possible, but you should also have an extinguisher. The best extinguisher for wood is a foam extinguisher. However with a lot of electrical equipment in the workshop it's useful to have something that can deal with both. So I would recommend a power extinguisher for the home workshop, or a powder and a foam extinguisher.

Your Work Bench

Possibly the woodworkers most important tool is their bench. Many people start with a Workmate or their kitchen table but soon get frustrated with them. When it's time to move on what should you look for in a bench?

- **Stability.** The most important factor. You will be planing, sanding, chiseling, hammering on this surface, you don't want it moving or shaking around.
- **Flatness.** The top must be flat. It will be used as a reference when planing and it's almost impossible to get a piece of wood flat on an uneven surface.
- **Work holding.** The bench can be seen as a big versatile jig for holding pieces while you work on them. So there must be plenty of work holding facilities such as: vices, bench dogs and hold downs.

It is possible to buy ready made benches but unless you buy top end models at up to £1200 then stability can be an issue. Possibly the cheapest way to get started is to buy a fire door blank and screw it to the wall, glue and screw some 2"x4" under the blank at the front to prevent sagging and support the front with simple framed leg. A good vice is important. The Record 52 ½ is excellent and can often be picked up on ebay at a very reasonable price.

This arrangement will be OK to get you started. Later you may wish to make something more elaborate. I offer courses in work bench construction.

Top Tip: For your first workbench use a door blank attached to the wall.

What height should the bench be? A general rule of thumb is to measure the height to the crease on the inside of your wrist, that should be your bench height. However it does also depend on what you will be doing at the bench. For instance, for wood carving or marquetry work the bench could be a couple of inches higher. When making a bench it's probably best to err on the high side, you can always cut it shorter.



My bench is shown on the left.

Bench accessories.

There are some tools that you can make yourself as accessories to the bench.

Bench stop

The bench stop is used to hold pieces on the bench when planing. It consists of a piece about 2"x1" that slides in a hole in the bench top adjacent the leg and it's retained by a screw into the leg.

Saw hook

This is a simple device which aids sawing at the bench. It hooks over the edge of the bench and aids holding a piece when sawing it.

Shooting board

This is a very important tool for those without a machine saw. It can be used to square up the ends of pieces that have been hand sawn. It is also good for planing the edge on veneer to aid jointing.

It consists of a board with a shallow rebate on which a plane runs on its side. A stock at one end at 90° to the rebate holds the piece to be squared.

Top Tip: If you don't have a machine saw make a shooting board to square up the ends of hand cut pieces.



What tools do I need?

For the beginner it is difficult to decide which tools are important and which a luxury. Here is my list of the tools you really cannot do without if you want to be serious about woodworking. I discuss suppliers in a separate section.

Let's start with hand tools

Planes

Planes are the work horse of the workshop. They do the basic smoothing, shaping and squaring up. A good plane can be a joy to use, a bad one you just want to throw out the window! I would recommend that the beginner have two planes, as follows:



- **Block plane.** This is a small plane that fits nicely in one hand and is used for little jobs like rounding edges, planing end grain etc.
- **Jack plane.** The standard planes we all recognize are numbered according to size, the higher the number (3-8) the bigger the plane. The jack plane is a number 5, the 5½ has a wider blade (2 3/8" rather than 2"). I would recommend a 5½. Most beginners buy a number 4 when they start, but a number 4 does not have enough weight, planing is about momentum and the weight of a 5½ gives good momentum. If you can only afford one plane get a jack plane.

Try to avoid cheap planes, they require a lot of work to even get them to cut properly and even then are difficult to use. I have found the mid range planes from Quangsheng to be good (although they don't currently do a 5½ you would have to get a 6). If you really want to splash out go for a Lie Nielsen, Clifton or Veritas. Another alternative is to buy on ebay, a good older 5½ from Record or Stanley would be about £30.

Top Tip: The best all round plane for the beginner is a 5½ . Good Record and Stanley planes can be found on ebay.

Chisels

The best chisels for a beginner would be a set of 5 bevel edged $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6mm), $\frac{3}{8}$ " (9mm), $\frac{1}{2}$ " (12mm) $\frac{3}{4}$ " (18mm) and 1" (25mm). Other styles of chisel are available, such as the chunky mortice chisel, the square edged firmer chisel and the slim paring chisel, but the bevel edge is the best all rounder.

The quality of steel is important in all edge tools. It is possible to get a really sharp edge on most tools but if the quality of the steel is bad then the edge will dull very quickly meaning you waste a lot of time sharpening. Of the budget chisels I have found Narex (from the Czech Republic) to be good.



Top Tip: Of the economy chisels Narex are a good brand.

It is important to realize that most chisels and planes will not be ready to use straight from the box as they will need some adjustment and “fettling” to get them working properly.

Measuring and marking tools.

Rules and tapes. Where possible measuring should be done with a steel ruler, so 12” and 36” steel rules are useful. For larger dimensions beware of tapes where the hook on the end of the tape is inaccurate. I find Stanley tapes to be good.

Squares. Engineer’s squares are usually more accurate than the woodworking square with a wooden stock. Check for square by marking a line from a straight edge then flipping the square, if it does not line up it’s not square.



Marking knife. A lot of marking out is done with a knife or scalpel. Marking knives are sharpened on one side, leaving a flat side to go against the square or straight edge. The Japanese marking knives shown are good.

Pencil! Avoid HB pencils for marking out; it is not possible to maintain a good sharp point on an HB, so use H or 2H instead.

Top Tip: Use a sharp 2H or H pencil for marking out, not an HB.

Marking gauge. The marking gauge uses a point to mark lines parallel to another surface. It's used mainly for marking up a piece of wood prior to planing it to dimension. Another version is the mortice gauge that has two pins for marking the width of a mortice or tenon. You may be able to manage with just a gauge but you will later decide that you'll need a mortice gauge.



Saws

For the beginner a good tenon saw and a cheap hard point panel saw will suffice. The tenon saw should be about 16 teeth to the inch. As this saw will last a long time and can be re-sharpened it's worth buying a good one. The Atkinson Walker is good. As you progress you may wish to get a saw for finer work such as dovetailing. I would recommend the Veritas cross cut or dovetail saws, or a Japanese saw such as the SunChild Dozuki from Thanet Tools.

Sharpening

You've got all your tools, how are you going to maintain them?

Sharp tools are the essence of good woodwork, they are more responsive, require less effort and are safer to use. So you need some way of sharpening your chisels and plane blades.

I could write a separate ebook on sharpening and honing and spend much time on my courses talking about the subject, so the following is a necessarily abbreviated survey of the subject.

There are two stages in sharpening:

- **Grinding.** A tool will be ground when the edge is seriously damaged or needs reshaping, for instance if you hit a nail with your plane. Grinding requires a grinder, usually a rotating abrasive wheel!
- **Honing.** Honing gives a finer edge than grinding and is usually done on a flat “stone”.

There are numerous honing media, carborundum oil stones, water stones, diamond and ceramic stones and abrasive on glass.



For the beginner I would recommend abrasive on glass, it's cheap and does not require regular flattening. The abrasive could be just wet and dry abrasive stuck to a piece of 10mm glass. Use 240, 600 and 1200 grit and fix them to the glass using Craft Mount spray adhesive. 3M also make some self-adhesive lapping film which gives a nicely polished edge; use 30, 15 and 5 micron grits. But make sure you only press down on the back stroke, else you will dig in.

The problem with this system is that the abrasive will require changing regularly. You will probably want to upgrade to water or diamond stones eventually. If finances allow I would recommend getting these to start with.

There are two main approaches to sharpening edge tools.



- **Single bevel.** The edge is both ground and honed to a single bevel of 25°, as shown on the chisel on the left. For the beginner buying new tools this system would mean they could get started without having to buy a grinder, simply honing to the same angle that the edge was ground to. You would need to buy a grinder once the edge was damaged. With this system honing will tends to take

longer.

- **Double bevel.** Here the edge is ground to a bevel of 25° and honed at 30°, right hand chisel. Honing is quicker with this system as the narrower honing bevel is easier to sharpen, however you will have to buy a grinder.

Honing guides. Most beginners find it very difficult to maintain a honing bevel, the bevel becomes more and more rounded making honing increasingly difficult. This is where a honing guide comes in useful. They are particularly important if you are using the single bevel sharpening system. There are various honing guides on the market, including those from Stanley, Veritas and Richard Kell. I use the Veritas on my courses and find it works well.



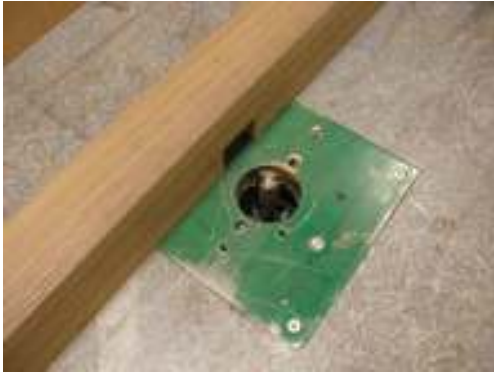
So, for the beginner I would suggest the single bevel system using abrasive on glass and a honing guide. But you will eventually have to get a grinder, then it would be worth switching to the double bevel.

Top Tip: Use wet and dry abrasive stuck to plate glass with spray adhesive to get started with honing.

Clamping tools.

When you come to assemble your furniture you will need something to clamp it together. Sash clamps, G clamps and quick clamps, these can be acquired as you find you need them rather than in one go at the start. Auctions of joiners' shops selling up can be a good source of clamps, although they can often be rather abused. Quick clamps are also good for holding work to the bench whilst working on it.

Power Tools.



It is possible to do woodworking without power tools; people have been working wood for thousands of years without them. Good work can be done with hand tools alone but power tools certainly make life easier.

Safety: It's easy to cut yourself using hand tools. But you can really make a mess of yourself with a machine! Think about safe use of power tools all the time you are using them. Wear goggles and ear defenders and follow the manufacturers' instructions.

Router. Let's assume you have a drill. After that I would recommend that your next acquisition be a router. A router consists of a fast running motor (24,000rpm) with a shaft and collet in which you can fit hundreds of different shaped cutters. This makes it a very versatile tool and the list of operations it can perform includes:

- Grooving.
- Rebating.
- Moulding.
- Rounding.
- Shaping using a template.
- Morticing.
- Tenoning.

The router can either be used hand held or inverted into a router table. Using a router table greatly increases the machine's versatility. The table doesn't need to be a big outlay, simply an off cut of kitchen worktop from a kitchen fitter and a proprietary plate pre drilled for the model of router you have.



Top Tip: Make yourself a router table by inverting your router under an off cut of kitchen worktop using a router table insert.

Larger routers usually have a ½ “ collett, allowing them to take larger cutters. The smaller routers have a ¼” collett, they cannot take big cutters but are better for fine work. The collett on the large machines can be swapped to ¼” so the large machine is more versatile.

I would recommend the larger machine for the beginner, it's a bigger initial outlay but more flexible and is good in a router table. Dewalt and Makita are good while the Trend T11EK allows the depth of cut to be adjusted from above when in a router table, a good feature.

Feed direction is important for safe use of the router, especially when in a table. Briefly, the rule is that when pushing pieces over the cutter on a router table the fence should be on your right. With the hand held router, when pushing the router over the piece the fence should be on the right.

Other power tools.

After getting a router you may not have much left over for further power tools so I will not go into great detail about all the other stuff you could get. I'll just mention other tools you may find useful as you progress.

- Chop or pull over saw. This would be good for cutting square, mitring and tenoning, but may be omitted if you are thinking of buying a circular saw bench.
- Biscuit jointer. This is good for assembling MDF cabinets and for reinforcing edge joints.
- Belt sander. Good for leveling large jointed panels.
- Orbital sander. Good for cleaning up prior to finishing.

Of course none of these are essential, you can get just as good results using hand tools - it just takes longer.

Make friends with a local joiners' workshop.

This bit is not really about tools, but I can't think where else to put it. When you start you will probably not have the facilities to machine wood to width and thickness. You will probably buy your wood from the timber yard as sawn boards and need to prepare them. If you can find a joiners shop that can machine wood for you it is a big time saver. They may also have good hardwood off cuts you could buy from them.

Where to buy tools.

Buying new tools can be expensive which is why I like to buy second hand tools on ebay or at car boot sales. However, it is a case of *buyer beware* so you need to look carefully at what you are buying and not be afraid to ask questions. I dealt with how to buy edge tools at car boots and on ebay in a recent blog [here](#).

Top Tip: Buying tools on ebay or at car boot sales can be an economical way of stocking your workshop.

Part 3: Sound Method

By sound method I mean the way you go about making things. For instance, having a map of each process in a project from start to finish, without this map a project is likely to go wrong. Good method tends to come with experience, here I give you my tips to set you off on the woodwork journey.

Plan ahead.

When you start out on a project you should have a good idea of each stage in the job and the order you will be doing things in. This needs to be thought through. If not you may find that you have committed yourself too early. For instance you may glue up a piece then find that you then cannot access something you need to work on. It's by thinking through the stages of a job that you avoid embarrassing fudges that can spoil the success of the piece.

Planning ahead can start by drawing out the full size plan of the piece. By doing this you can think about how the thing will be put together and also draw up an accurate cutting list.

At the beginning of a job I draw up such a plan, it's almost like a ritual to start a new job.



Mark out carefully.

This starts with creating reference surfaces that are flat and square to each other, known as face side and face edge. All marking should be done from

these edges. Use the face side and edge to orientate the pieces during the work.

When marking be accurate, we are talking half millimeters or less here. A blunt pencil line can be that wide! So use a very sharp H or 2H pencil or better still a marking knife or scalpel.

Do each stage right.

There's a saying oft quoted by Bruce Luckhurst who taught furniture making in Kent. "In furniture making you always get found out". What this means is mistakes have a habit of coming back and biting you in the bum. Perhaps you were a bit careless in your marking out and were a millimetre out, it'll be OK you thought. But a week later when you come to glue up there's a little gap in the joint.

Sometimes the error can be multiplied as it works through the job. The lesson is that you need to make sure that each stage in the job is done right before you go on to the next stage.

Think about finishing the interior of a piece before assembling it.

It's a lot easier to sand and apply finish to flat panels than something with lots of interior corners. So often it is sensible to apply a finish before you assemble a piece. You can then sand right up to the edge of panels. It also means that it is easier to deal with glue squeeze out, you should be able to peel it off the finish while it is still partly set.

Always dry clamp.

In my years of teaching I have occasionally had to help students dismantle a piece that has not clamped up properly. The work is all covered in glue and the student all hot and bothered! This is usually because they have ignored my advice to dry clamp first. It's understandable, they are near the end of the job and keen to see it together. But glue up is stressful enough as it is let alone having to worry about whether the thing will actually go together.



Dry clamping will highlight problems with assembly. You may decide to do the assembly in two parts as a result of problems found during dry clamping.

A dry assembly takes the stress away, you know it will go together and dry assembly means that all the clamps are ready set for the proper assembly.

Top tip: Always dry clamp prior to gluing up.

Keep your tools sharp.

If a job using an edge tool seems to be difficult don't assume it's your incompetence! Check the cutting edge, does it have bite or does it feel a bit tame. Try sharpening it, usually this does the trick.

Top tip: If you are finding the task difficult don't assume it's you. Try sharpening the tool

Practice makes perfect.

If there's a task you are unsure about, a particular angled cut perhaps, do a few practice cuts on a piece of scrap to get your eye in. This is particularly useful with sawing tasks such as dovetailing. A few practice cuts helps to awaken the muscle memory for that operation. When dovetailing I often start with a few practice cuts to remind myself how to do it!

Always cater for timber movement.

Wood is a lovely material to work with, but it can also be a right pain in the neck!

It's constantly on the move and if you don't allow for that movement you will have problems. I could almost write a book on movement compensation but will try to give a brief resume.

There are two forms of movement you have to deal with.

- Release of tension when preparing wood. Usually you will get the wood for a project as sawn boards. These will need to be prepared to the right width and thickness for the job. When you reduce width and thickness you change the balance of tension within the piece, this can lead to the board cupping or bending slightly

To get round this it is worth preparing the work slightly over size and leaving it a few days to acclimatize then doing a final planing to get it to size.

- Movement due to changes in humidity. Wood is constantly expanding and contracting across the grain due to changes in humidity. An oak table top nominally 900mm wide may be about 8mm wider in the summer than it is in the winter when the central heating is on. If this movement is not allowed to happen you will have problems with splitting and joints opening.

Man made boards such as MDF are not subject to movement. That's why it's used in most mass produced furniture.

Ways of allowing for movement:

- If your workshop is damp then there will be movement when you bring your work indoors if it consists of wide panels (narrow pieces less than 100mm the movement is small enough not to worry about). The best way round this is to prepare the pieces slightly over size, bring them indoors for a couple of weeks to acclimatize then resize them and bring them indoors between sessions in the workshop.

A bit of a phaff I know but it will avoid problems later on.

- Don't use a single solid piece for a door. The chances are it will cup across the width and it will certainly expand and contract so that in summer it may stick in the opening and in winter there will be gaps.
- The way round this is to use a frame and panel style door. But make sure that the panel is not glued in the frame and that there is room for the panel to expand in the frame.
- Do not screw a table top directly into the under frame, instead use some form of fixing that allows the top to expand and contract.

- There are many other situations where movement has to be allowed for, the point is to be aware of the problem when designing and making a piece.
- Alternatively you could do it in MDF!

Top tip: Think about and allow for wood movement whenever designing or working on a project.

Part 4: Positive attitude.

To make a thing well requires patience, concentration and attention to detail. It's not something you do whilst doing something else. Whilst working one should be constantly asking "Is this the best way of doing this, could I get a better result by doing it differently?" It's this constant striving for improvement that leads to skill development and greater satisfaction with the craft.

Attitude is related to method. It's about a rigorous attitude to applying method. Sometimes it's a bit of a bore having to apply method. For instance one can think, "Well that bit is not quite square, but it will be alright in the end". The problem is that it usually doesn't turn out alright. So (at risk of sounding like a high school teacher!) it's a lot to do with discipline.

Attitude is also about being in the zone. By being in the zone I mean a state of concentration on the intellectual and practical requirements of the task which leads to good work. It's usually when you are distracted or lose concentration that mistakes happen. So it's a good idea to turn off the iphone and forget your emails whilst in the workshop.

I have blogged about being in the zone [here](#).

Part 5: Conclusion

I hope you have found this ebook useful. It is not intended as a comprehensive guide to woodwork practice, merely an aid to getting started on the craft. As I've said before there are areas that I have covered in a few sentences that deserve a separate book to do them justice. If you do come across problems that are not covered you can always email me at chris@christribe.co.uk and I'll try to give you some advice. I'm also pleased to hear from anyone with comments; are there areas that I have missed or facts that you dispute, I would like to know.

Enjoy your woodwork.



Happy students with their completed project after attending one of my courses

For Details of the Current Courses Available, go to:

<http://www.christrifurniturecourses.com/course-calendar.html>