Bill Carter Was Struck by Cupid's Arrow, But it Was the Bow that Got Him.

From *Sharp & to the Point; A Shameless Shill for Hock Tools* #1/2018

Sarah and Bill Carter at their Bill Carter Woodworking Planemaker booth at the 2017 European Woodworking Show at Cressing Temple Barns in Braintree, England. Thank you to David Barron, who took this photo, which means he stole time from his own busy booth, David Barron, Maker of Fine Contemporary Furniture.

I had the pleasure of meeting up with Bill and Sarah Carter at the European Woodworking Show last September. The weather was bracing in the barn to which Bill Carter Woodworker Planemaker and Hock Tools were assigned. The Carters off in a corner, Hock Tools in a booth along a wall in one of the two barns built in the 13th century by the Knights Templar at Cressing Temple. Bill's table-top was filled with his planes, both small wooden handplanes and many of his now signature (pun accidental) metal mitre planes. Bill and Sarah hardly had a moment to breathe; so many woodworkers and well-wishers flocked to their tiny corner in that rare, medieval barn.

It's difficult at tool shows for vendors to get a chance to visit one another. Yet, I stole a moment to visit Bill and Sarah, dashing over when I saw an opportunity to say hello. It seemed to me that Bill had more planes to offer than during the 2015 exhibit. he's made hundreds over the last 30 years. And, finally, I took better notice of Bill's use of the Cupid's Bow motif. As I reviewed the table, the Cupid's Bow motif become increasingly obvious to me, and more varied as Bill worked it differently into different homages to 18th and 19th century British handplanes.

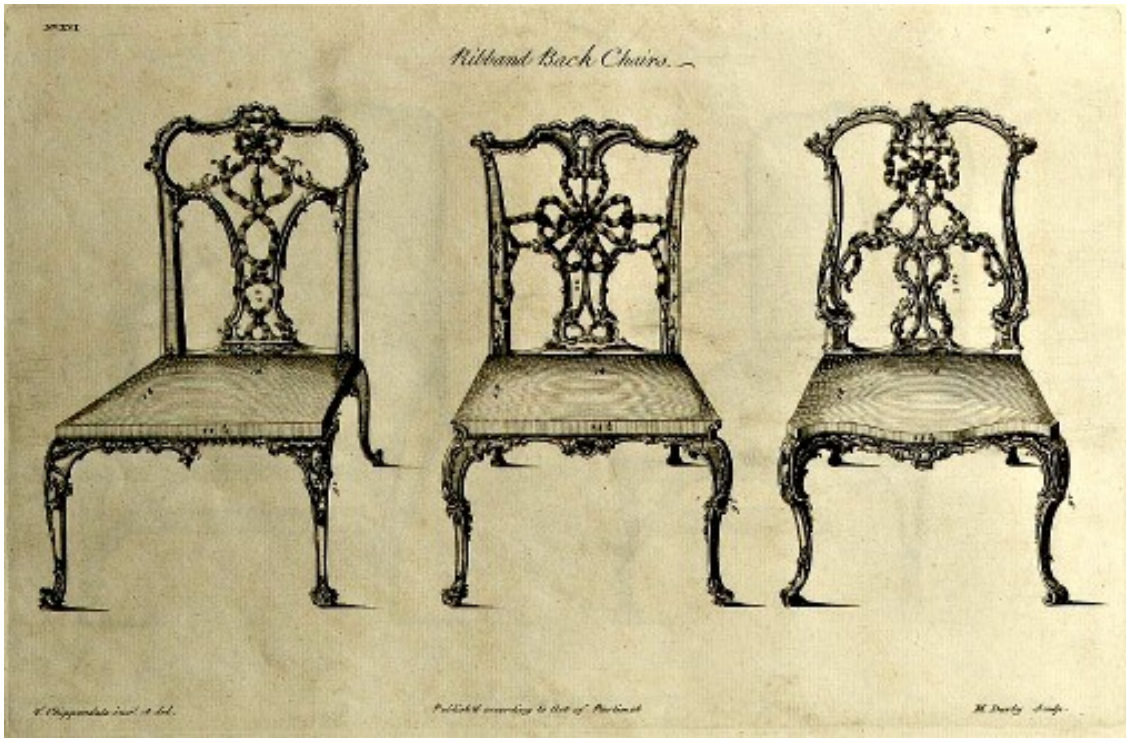
Since then, I've contemplated the 18th and 19th centuries – specifically Bill Carter's passion to re-create the fine hand-made planes built during that era - a convoluted time that spanned Neoclassicism, Romanticism, the Victorians. I thought, too, about the position the Cupid's Bow motif and all it stood for held against the realities of British expansion and the cultural, economic, and social upheavals resulting from and including the Industrial Revolution. British history pulsates inside this innocent-looking pattern. And, yes, Bill Carter loves the Cupid's Bow for its historical value and illuminating British traditions. But, as a craftsman, he is most intrigued by the challenge this visual gesture offers his metal and woodwork, and how many ways he can invent and manipulate joinery to tease us with his sleight-of-hand: *Voila,* the Cupid's Bow!

Cupid Cutting His Bow from the Club of Hercules **by Neoclassical sculptor Edmé Bouchardon, completed 1750, Getty Museum (Jan.-April, 2017), Louvre Museum, Paris, France.**

Above: Bill Carter infill plane. Each metal plane made by Bill is a one-off, which means the sizes vary, and Bill does not concern himself with specific dimensions—this plane would be about 6" long x 1 1/2" wide. Steel and bronze with laburnum infill.

As the story goes, a mischievous Cupid stole Hercules's club and was able to tear a piece of wood from it, shaping that piece into an archer's

Bow. Cupid performed the most primary woodworker's chore when he cleaved off enough wood from that famous club, then he went on to accomplish the task of sculpting his enduring, fabled archer's bow. You might recall Cupid's Bow's artful and ever-popular expression in the top rails of 18th century Thomas Chippendale chairs (1752 to 1813).



Drawing of 3 Chairs from *Gentleman-and-Cabinetmaker's Director*, by Thomas Chippendale, 1750. Ribband backs such as these show three uses of the Cupid's Bow motif.

And, you can easily see Cupid's Bow represented in the handplanes made by Bill Carter's most revered British toolmaker, Robert Towell, considered Britain's first full-time infill planemaker, from about 1810 – 1850.* Today, Cupid's Bow is well-preserved, and lovingly returned to the world of woodworking toolmaking by

19th Century Robert Towell (London) Miter Plane, dovetailed steel with rosewood infill. Thank you to Jim Bode of Jim Bode Antique Tools for this photograph.

British planemaker Bill Carter. Bill Carter planes are not all replicas per *se*; however, the Bill Carter ethic in each plane fully expresses the quality of craft, design, and character of late 18th and 19th century British planemaking. Both Neoclassicism and quality British toolmaking are alive and well in his hands.

It also came to mind that I could interview Bill Carter about his use of the Cupid's Bow for this newsletter. You can imagine how thrilled I was that he said yes! Please read on. — *Linda at Hock Tools*

Bill Carter Interview

Linda: I only took notice of the Cupid's Bow motif because you pointed it out to me on your planes, but now that I think about it, it seems to me that bow motif, with its two little swooping arches, was used by other toolmakers. Is there a tradition or history of using the Cupid's Bow in construction and decoration of tools in Britain?

Bill Carter: First, I am no scholar and although people think I am, I am not an expert on any subject. My answers are purely based on what I have picked up in my working life.

The first metal planes made in Britain about the last quarter of the 18th century is what I am most passionate about. I am referring to the dovetailed metal mitre planes mainly, although a few are cast in bronze and brass. Who is to say, as they have been casting bronze for 4,000 years, that some of those may well have been made before the dovetailed ones?

The first dovetailed mitre planes made over here were very plain, no decoration whatsoever. But, very soon afterwards they appear with a Cupid's Bow, normally on the bottom of the bridge, and that is the only decoration that you get on an English plane. They don't know what date Robert Towell started making planes, but he was one of the early ones, and everyone I have seen by Towell has a Cupid's Bow.

Detail of Robert Towell Mitre Plane with Cupid's Bow bridge, circa 1810—1850. Thank you to Joel Moskowitz of Tools for Working Wood. Joel's Blog at Tools for Working Wood provides a wealth of information on and discussion of all manner of woodworking tool, including Robert Towell's mitre planes.

Incidentally, Towell's Cupid's Bows, even at this early stage of making, are always perfect and are stunning examples. This also applies to the quality of his planes and others of that period – another reason why I am so passionate of this period.

Cupid's Bow detail also appears on early English furniture and later. Also, I will just mention, that a lot of Scottish planes have

Above: Konrad Sauer's #A1 Panel Plane, 14-3/4" long x 2-1/2" wide; bronze sides, lever cap and lever cap screw; 01 tool steel sole, ebony infill.

When I started making planes, there was Bill Carter and Karl Holtey - at opposite ends of the spectrum. Bill working away in his garden shed, and Karl with machines as big as a garden shed. It was an amazing contrast really, and provided the best type of inspiration - that it could be done.

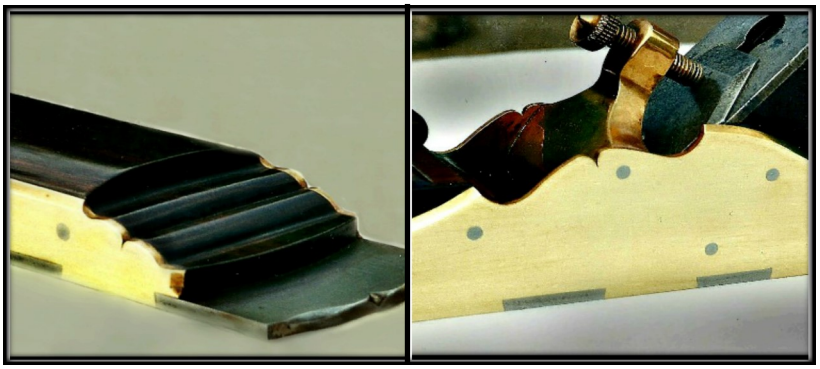
Both Bill and I used the same tools as reference when we started – the traditional form of the panel plane has not changed since panel planes arrived (way back in the 1800's. We both 'copied' the early makers like Spiers, Norris and Mathieson.

If you do a google search for 'infill panel plane' you will see that everything looks shockingly similar – especially the form of the front infill, or 'bun' as it is often called. They are often like a tiered layered cake. Bill certainly added his own flourishes to them - an extra cupid's bow here or there, or an extra chamfer or step in the profile.

Konrad Sauer,
Sauer & Steiner Toolworks

decoration like pierced work in their lever caps and very decorative wooden infills, but not English planes.

Above: 6 different 19th Century Scottish handplanes with pierced lever caps, illustrating Scottish style piercing discussed here by bill. Thank you to collector George Anderson. You can reach George at sqando99 on Instagram.



Above left: Cupid's Bows on rear of a Bill Carter jointer, from the standard shape to a Cupid's Bow. Above right: Side profile of jointer with somewhat stylized Cupid's Bow as detail in the middle; again, from the standard shape to a Cupid's Bow.

Again, later, some mitre planes could have a Cupid's Bow on the bottom of the wedges, but rarely were they cast into the front bodies of metal mitre planes.

Above, Daed Toolworks M1 Miter plane by Raney Nelson. 6-1/4" long, 1" blade, 20 degree bedding (bevel-up). 410 stainless steel body and bridge, boxwood infills — note the stylized Cupid's Bow bridge and wedge.

When I started making planes, there were three modern makers that were enormously influential on me. Karl Holtey - for being absolutely uncompromising in both engineering and execution; Konrad Sauer for his unparalleled design eye and focus on the fundamentals, and Bill Carter for - well, for all the ways he's unlike any other toolmaker I can think of. It's hard to pin down, but somehow he is both totally unique - and even alien - to planemaking tradition, but somehow still undeniably at home in that same lineage. If you've never seen one of his 'saw back' mitre planes, it's virtually impossible to picture such a thing. But once you've seen one, they really seem totally natural. To me, that's a remarkable feat.

— Raney Nelson,
Daed Toolworks

Above: Cupid's Bow motif cast in the metal at the front of this infill plane. The Cupid's Bow motif round the top edge was formed with files after the plane was made.

Above: Philly Plane low angle plane for end grain work. Beech, 38 degree angle, iron is 50mm wide x 6mm thick 01 tool steel.

Linda: What was the first plane in which you incorporated the Cupid's Bow motif?

Above: Bill Carter mitre plane with Cupid's Bow decoration on bridge and wedge, a detail echoing late 18th century makers.

Bill Carter: I copied some of my first mitre planes from a very early, unnamed English maker. These were bronze and steel dovetailed and fronted with a Cupid's Bow.

Left: Detail of a late 18th century metal mitre plane by John Sym. Thanks to Martin Shepherd.

Bill has been an inspiration. Something that hobby woodworkers "miss" out on is repetition. Making a project is such an education, you make mistakes and fumble on to completion. But to make the same project again, you use that knowledge gained to build a much cleaner example. And, by the time you've made 50 of them you have then mastered it.

But if you look back over the completed items you will see a natural evolution as each successive item gets subtly better and better. If you look at Bill's planes you see this, especially as he focusses on a lot of similar plane types.

A second aspect of Bill's work is his workshop and the tools he uses. You would assume, as he makes a lot of metal planes, that he would have machinery to help with cutting, drilling, etc. but he uses mainly hand tools.

Continued...

Also, although I am a stickler for English tradition, to improve the appearance of wedges, I change them a little bit. A traditional wedge has a flat back running the full length to get maximum grip on the face of the cutting iron, I curl the bottom of the scroll up marginally from the cutting iron,

Left: Three of Bill Carter's mitre planes showing uplifted scroll wedges.

Phil Edwards continued from page 7

...So he has inspired me to keep going, to keep making and improving through a natural evolution of doing. I look back at photos of planes I have made over the years and I'm pleased to see how my work subtly changed and improved and it gives me great cheer.

—Phil Edwards,
Philly Planes

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Bill Carter is the best; his work is most unique and wonderful.

Martin Shepherd,
Martin Shepherd Piano Service

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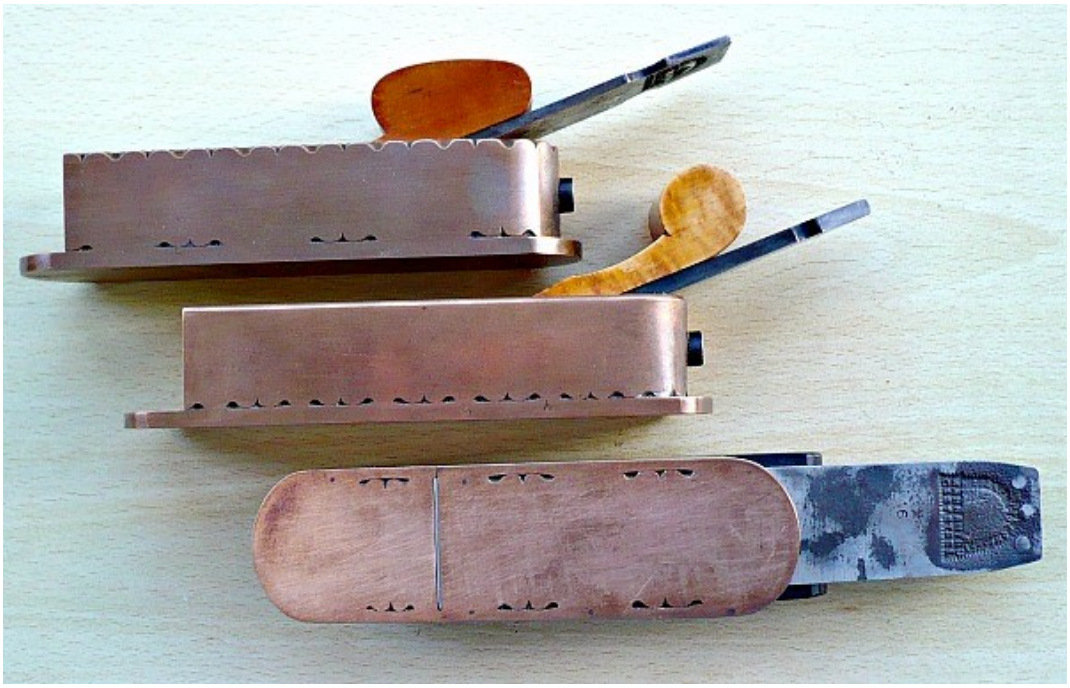
(Martin Shepherd is an accomplished and well-known, San Francisco Bay Area piano technician who has written extensively about historical hand tools made for the piano and woodworking industries.)

which greatly enhances the side profile of the wedge. A few English mitre planes made in metal have the backs of the body cut away to enable the maker to lower the bed angle, making them more efficient at planing hard woods.

Early on in my planemaking, I would similarly lower the bed angle, but also incorporate a small Cupid's Bow on the part that I cut away for appearance sake. I will also run them all the way around the top of the body on a few of my planes.



Above: three Bill Carter bronze mitre planes displaying the Cupid's Bow motif running the bottom of the bodies. 7" l x 1 1/2" w; two with boxwood and one with rosewood infill.

Linda: What inspired – both technical and decorative – your use of the Cupid's Bow motif in your plane making. Where did it come from, or what made you decide to use it?

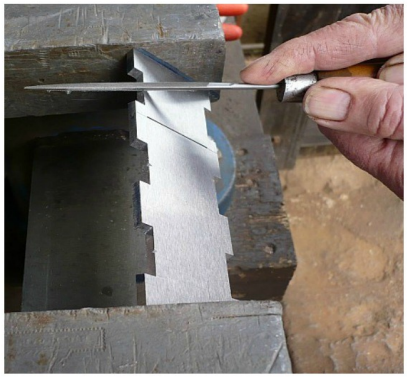
Bill Carter: I think the Cupid's Bow shape along a straight line is really pleasing to my eye. I can't think of a better shape, especially in a small straight line such as in a dovetail. But once more, with me it is all about English tradition.

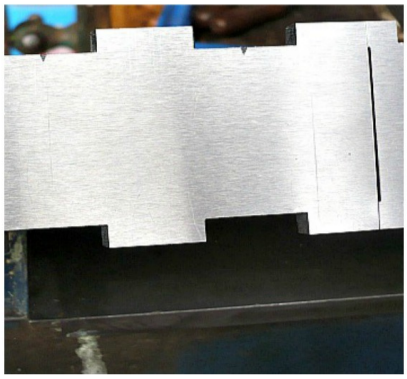
Linda: Is there some fundamental rule you apply to the use of the Cupid's Bow motif in wood that you do not use in metal?

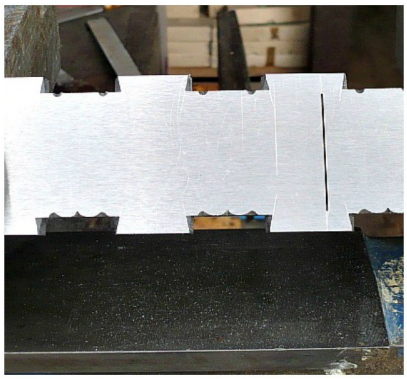
Bill Carter: No, none what so ever. But, bear in mind you don't get decorative joints in metal when you are joining two pieces together. As far as I know they have never been done in metal joint making, neither in wooden joints, ever. When you are joining two pieces of metal together, especially if the two metals are the same color, the idea is just to join them together trying to make the joints invisible. I add exposed Cupid's Bows to some of my planes, just as a decorative feature.

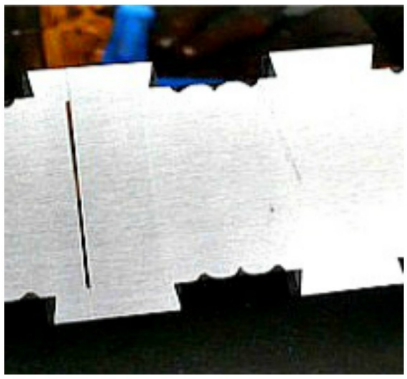
Linda: Am I seeing that your Cupid's Bow motif is your dovetail in your metal work?

Bill Carter: I incorporate a Cupid's Bow in some of my metal planes. That is, when I am joining metal-to-metal they are incorporated on any straight part of the dovetails, again just to make a pleasing pattern when the plane is finished. In this instance the Cupid's Bow shapes on the finished plane, whether on one or a whole row of Cupid's Bows, are sandwiched in the metal so that the metal completely surrounds the pattern you have made. This detail cannot be added after the plane is made.









This also applies in wood, if you have got Cupid's Bows or any other detail on any of the edge of the object you are making, these can be added at a later date, but not as I have previously said in the joints, they are completely unique. This is the bit I am trying to get over to everybody, nothing like it has ever been done before in wood or metal.

Above: taken from his use of the Cupid's Bow, Bill is now playing with the idea in *woodwork.* He designed a box using the exposed Cupid's Bow dovetails in the joints to hold one of his bronze planes (which, in turn, is adorned with the Cupid's Bow along its top and shows Cupid's Bows joining the metal box to the sole. The box was made by cabinetmaker Tim Smith.

Above: detail of box above right.

Linda: One thing comes to mind, though, and although it has nothing to do with the Cupid's Bow *per se*, it does about your methods: it seems from your website that you appropriate materials already in use or having had a good use, to make your planes. Do you use all recycled, thereby re-purposing, all the material used in your planes? Or am I way off base on this one?

Bill Carter: Most of materials I use in plane making are new. But early on in my plane making—through doing property repairs—I had access to numerous materials second hand. They didn't cost me anything. Again, early on in my plane making, I had access to see many rare planes. A lot of them are very small planes and I would make copies of them with all this second-hand material I had. I have made planes out

of just about anything, including bronze bearings, bronze and brass glazing bars, the brass internals of locks, piano hinges, even bed steads, and many more.

Above: assortment of Bill Carter planes.

I had the bright idea early on of using the brass and steel backs from rusty old tenon saws. A lot of these had saw makers' names beautifully embossed or scripted, and of course the brass and steel used in these saws are nothing like the colors that are used today. I have made numerous small mitre planes out of these old tenon saws. Again, this was a first. Nobody had ever done this before. I am still using them today.

Above: detail showing marks on brass back of n old tenon saw. According to Bill, *"This one is in too nice a condition to destroy, but it does show the period with the superb maker's mark, which looks lovely on a plane when finished."* Bill often leaves these marks so they show in the metal work of his planes.

Incidentally, I had access to endless supplies of second hand timber to infill my small mitre planes. Although I have made six 36" metal dovetailed jointers and various sizes below 36", I would guess that 95% of all the metal planes I have made are miniature mitre planes, which need very small amounts of material to make. I am extremely lucky in that instance. I am also very lucky having access to the very best cutting irons, which were laminated and made in Sheffield, all taken from

hundreds of discarded wooden planes. I cut down these irons for use in the planes I make.

I should point out I estimate I have made over 1,000 metal planes, no two are the same. If you have a Carter plane in metal, it is a one off.

Above: assorted tools made by Bill Carter.

Linda: Any thoughts relating to the use of motifs or their repetition from project-to-project that you can offer other tool makers or woodworkers?

Bill Carter: I have worked it out wherever you get two pieces of timber coming together to form a joint in whatever you are making in wood, provided it is end grain, you can have an exposed Cupid's Bow purely for decoration. For instance, if you are making a door where the rails meet the stiles, the rails will be end grain. This means you can have an exposed Cupid's Bow on the shoulder of the mortise and tenon joint. If you are making a chair or table, etc., showing the end grain coming through the mortise, like a leg sticking through the seat of a chair, you will have the end grain showing on the top of the leg and on the square mortise on the seat of the chair. Two ends of the square will, again, be end grain. In that instance, at that visible joint,

there will be a choice of six areas where you can have this exposed detail. Hence, you can have the choice of one or even six exposed Cupid's Bows. Two would be ideal in my opinion. If you had, say, a rail going into a back of a chair or elsewhere, you would only need to see one exposed Cupid's Bow. I should add, when using this method that I have come up with, the world is your oyster. You can use it anywhere you wish.

Thank you, Bill and Sarah Carter!

Note: **please take a look and click-through this list of resources, people who helped with background, photographs, and support about 18th –19th century British planes and planemaking. Each site and attendant blog is well worth your time —I leaned more so much from these generous people:**

- **Phil Edwards,** Philly Planes
- **Joel Moskowitz,** Tools for Working Wood
- **Raney Nelson,** Daed Toolworks
- **Konrad Sauer,** Sauer & Steiner Toolworks
- **Martin Shepherd,** Martin Shepherd Piano Service
- **Jim Bode,** Jim Bode Tools
- **George Anderson,** Collector of Antique Tools
- **David Barron,** Maker of Fine Furniture