

# The Postworker's Pocket Book

Manifesto edition

*"The craftsman's world does indeed carry within itself all the elements of wider living."*

Chips from the Chisel in the Woodworker, March 1955

**Chips From the Chisel** was a segment in the Woodworker magazine around the 1950's. Each segment deals with a particular theme that while always unfolded through the rhetoric of craft, deals with themes much bigger than tool sharpening or how to build a solid foundation for your garden shed.

When extracted from its original context of hobbyist craftsmanship the segments in parts begin to read almost like a manifesto for leisure and meaning making outside work. A needed reference for any post-worker.

Throughout the publication fragments sourced from the segments featured in 1955 are extracted, remixed and collaged into a leisure manifesto. Each segment was chosen from passages where the writing transgress craft and begin to become something one could describe as wisdom, or philosophy.

HAVE you ever tried your hand at *original* design? That is, sat down at a drawing board with a blank sheet of paper pinned to it, and attempted to put down on it something no man has ever seen before? If you have tried it and found the result discouraging you need not be unduly upset about it.

Most people find it impossible to get away from what they are familiar with already; and quite a lot cannot see anything except what is already in the room with them.

Many men pass through the throes of attempted creation, and some are more successful in the result than others. But most inexperienced men come to admit that the gift of fine design does not lie in them, and they turn with some little relief to the safer channels which others have dug out for them.

What is the man in the street to do about it? Well first there are the two smart twins, novelty and fashion. Quite pleasant when you don't have to live with them all the time, but they have a habit of becoming old-fashioned very quickly. As a rule they don't last long and soon you become almost ashamed of them. Sudden changes are generally suspect, especially when they are bizarre.

Here is one suggestion. Consider whether this or that idea has come along purely in novelty or as the result of some practical consideration. If it is the latter it is generally safe for design in any period is influenced more by events and circumstances than is generally realised. It may be the development of a new material, such as plywood, chipboard, or plastic sheet; a change in the laws of the country, prohibiting the import of this substance, or allowing that; the invention of a new glue with special properties; the production of a new machine; or what will you.

Design which is the result of events like this seem somehow to be anchored to something solid. There may be mistakes, especially at the start, but then seem more at home when dealing with practical things, and more inclined to avoid the livelier flights of fancy and the dangers that go with it. At any rate, the man who does not feel himself naturally equipped as a designer will generally do well to follow either the conventional work of past generations, or the more restrained efforts of modern design.

All told, then, it is quite a good idea to remember the advice of Dr. Primrose in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, who chose his wife on account of her good wearing qualities. Possibly it will not give you the immediate thrill that something rather more flamboyant would have done, but in the long run you will be the better pleased.

THE modern craftsman is in a far happier state than the modern painter or sculptor, so much of whose work seems to have lost touch with reality. He is tied inexorably to facts.

And it is good for us to be so tethered. It is the world for which and in which we are working, whose needs we share and to whose ideas

we have to make some contribution. But only if we are willing to work within the framework it imposes.

The way of experience is to hold firmly to the knowledge that the end is in the beginning, and that each stage contributes its own share to the final perfection of the job as we want it to be. Taking it so, we can enjoy each stage for its own sake and resist the impulse to scamp, which is always fatal. At first it will need a good deal of self-restraint. We do not take kindly in these days to anything requiring that kind of patience.

The craftsman's world does indeed carry within itself all the elements of wider living. In the everyday world we have the same need to be sure of our beginnings; the same need of standards which must be adhered to if we are to grow into a maturity that knows both freedom and wisdom and a sense of direction. A man is only truly free when, like the good craftsman, he adheres staunchly to the good he knows and builds the good life upon it. The house that has no secure foundation will soon totter and fall, but although we say stoutly enough that only a fool would think otherwise, how often do we fail to apply the practical wisdom which our tools teach us to the management of our own lives. For the rules that appear to limit and bind stand as guides along the highway, safeguarding us from the waste and misuse of the material of our lives—our gifts and talents, our health and strength, and relationships with others. And the true freedom which is the freedom to use our powers to their best and fullest extent, comes from observing them. (758)

MOST of us are haunted throughout our lives by the wide gap between what we feel we could do and the little we actually accomplish.

To feel within oneself the power to do a thing and then to make such a hash of it! We might now have the knowledge and at least sufficient confidence to do a good job, but still there was something that eluded us, some secret vision of perfection. The trouble with perfection is that it looks so misleadingly simple, but the cost is high. We can spend quite a considerable part of our lives discovering just how high and that unless we are prepared to pay the price perfection will continue to elude us.

Usually it is our impatience that defeats us.

It needs besides an attitude of mind that can sustain a prolonged effort with enjoyment

We are each, as it were, our own raw material and by working creatively and setting ourselves to do good work we are shaping and making ourselves as well as the thing we do. In this way alone can we discover our hidden potentialities by learning to do the things which can give them release. It is their presence within us which gives us from childhood upwards that sense of power to do things which, given no outlet, may well prove illusory. As the power of achievement grows, we shall find that we have it in us to do work stamped with our own distinctive character, because character develops inevitably with the things we do, and that we shall be making a contribution in itself unique to our surroundings and within the circle in which we move.

The only fatal thing is to give up trying, to allow that sense of innate ability to become submerged, turning to a feeling of frustration and finally indifference. By so doing we shall cheat ourselves of some of the best things in life.

To the end of our days we shall probably still feel conscious of the things we might have done and did not, the things we might have been and were not, but in so far as we were willing to pay the price of achievement we shall have something to show for having lived. (786)

UNLESS he had been specially pointed out to me I should never have recognised him as the same man.

As different as could be from the times I had heard him speak before in his own surroundings

I found myself wondering how many of those rather dreary looking plain business men exteriors hid just such another world. Probably quite a number. For we can never even begin to know another man from any part of his workaday life.

I suppose it is true of all of us that we are really two men, the one who presents his face to the world and upon whom the world passes its hasty and partial judgments, who follows his job or profession, making provision for the himself and his family and playing his part in the community, doing more or less the things that are expected of him.

And then there is that other self, Mr. X, the unknown quantity, and Mr. X is an important person. For although we can live and put up a tolerable facade to the world without his help, we should be infinitely poorer without him and so, oddly enough, would the world. For Mr. X is that self which we ourselves have most hand in the making, through our beliefs, our interests and hobbies and skills. He is the sum total of what we really are, away from the eyes of the world, the true self with its potentialities for good and evil,

for making and creating and being in turn made by the things we do. We can well-nigh kill him by neglect, turning him into a mere ghost or feeble caricature of a self or he can become something that is of the utmost account in the enriching of our lives.

MOST of us have some sort of general idea about a standard of living, always with the assumption that it shall be a good standard, and it is salutary to ask ourselves from time to time just what we expect of it. Certainly something more than simple basic needs. Money in the pocket, money in the bank, television and radio in the home, a car perhaps, every man has some kind of picture of the things he most desires.

Whatever the dream the tendency in times of easy money is to think of it in terms of the things money can buy.

For there is more in this standard of living than our earning capacity. There is the effort we are prepared to put into the business of living itself if the standard is to be really good.

They are qualities which need cultivation and a good deal of taking thought, the ability to assess the possibilities of material, to know—in part intuitively, in part by trial and error—just how far we can go and what we can do with it and a readiness to back our independent judgment.

We begin to consider the harmony of the whole and to go on step by step with a steadily rising standard till beauty creeps in, almost unaware, the beauty which money cannot buy because it has the seal of our own individuality stamped upon it. It is one of the few remaining curbs upon the barbarians in our midst, being the product of centuries of civilised living which bears within it the power to civilise still. (857)

FURTHEST Asia has a way of getting into the news. It always had, even when, some four or five hundred years ago, it was mainly mythical news. Tales of the great Eastern Empire of Great Cathay and Prester John, its supposedly Christian Emperor, with his palace of crystal, gold, and amethyst and all the silken, jewelled and grotesque wonders of his kingdom made marvellous bedtime stories for the Middle Ages.

The world to-day has yielded up many of its secrets. No longer can we dream of lost Empires behind the horizon. The uttermost ends of the earth have been brought within reach of man and, hardly stirring from his own fireside, he can glimpse on television and cinema screen the lives of people in far countries very different from his own.

There are many things to arouse our wonder; so many experiences are thrust upon us in the course of a day, that they do, in fact, cease to have much effect on us.

The mind becomes

surfeited when so many different experiences are thrust upon it. There is a human limit and we instinctively erect our own defences by taking them for granted. That is why we so often fail to observe and discriminate the things that are close at hand, sometimes to our own ultimate loss.

But something goes wrong when simplicity turns to austerity and bleakness and poverty of thought

We, no less than the men of the Middle Ages, need an outlet for expression. Just as they, from the depths of their simple lives, expressed their wonder in grotesque fantasies, we out of our complexities can express ourselves through the simpler forms; if we do it with humour and understanding and in a colourful way. For we all of us need a mental Cathay, a land of imagination and beauty into which we can escape from the too great pressure of the world in which we live.

Knowledge of all kinds is poured upon us from every side in this twentieth century of ours. We have to select the thing that we would make our own and follow it faithfully, refusing to be distracted from it or be dazzled by the many alternatives. We are deliberately forcing the element of simplicity into our lives when we choose our own path and stick to it, but if we do we may find before long that we are blazing our own private trail to Cathay. (893)

DURING these holiday months a good many woodworkers will be travelling here and there over the country seeing, as I have been doing, how much there is which in spite of modern vandalism remains lovely and unspoiled.

Once, we become conscious of a disharmony, a constant jarring note, we become restless and discontented.

Because before such a result is reached, there has had to be joint interest, joint planning, full and understanding co-operation, and when a man and a woman's thoughts are centred in this way the accomplishment will reflect their unity of purpose in something that is gracious and true.

There are inexhaustible potentialities to life and time which can be for ever exploring, and as we get older we come to see that much of it resolves into the use we

make of our liberty. Always, within limits, there is a liberty of choice which, according to the way we use it, is moulding our lives and forming ourselves and our surroundings. We can use it to acquire knowledge and skill which will work in us and through us fruitfully making us wiser and better, more understanding and more able, or we can let it drift and dissolve away so that there is no inner core of harmony in the things we do. It may seem a little thing that a man should learn to use his hands and the mind that governs them in the making and planning of useful and beautiful things, but if in the doing of it he develops an ability and judgment which enable him to bring a gracious quality into his home, it is not such a little thing. Rather it will stand for ever as the use he has made of the potentialities within himself and the influence which in so doing he can bring to bear upon others, sowing the seed of ideas and kindling the desire for good living by showing it in action. Not for nothing do men venerate the idea of liberty as life's finest gift, but it is the use we make of it that gives grace to life.

(927)

SINCE the days when the first hunter devised the first hunting knife, people have always shown themselves eager to possess anything that had a rarity value, something a man had made or having discovered, had wrought upon with such skill that it became infinitely desirable. The puzzle of it is that today so many men accept passively the idea that they should have nothing in their own hands they have the power of making, and that which they make will be of necessity unique.

At every

point he is able

to consult his

own wishes so

that, in the

finish, this is

no mere chattel turned out by a machine like hundreds

of others, but something unique and personal to himself.

We are not all cast in the mould of elder statesmen and great leaders of men, but we each have our own particular innate gift of creativity which, if developed, can give us both the outlet and sense of achievement we all need. That power to introduce something that is unique into our surroundings;

that power to give an added grace and charm to the things we use, distinguishing them from the impersonality of manufactured articles,

is the power of the free man. It will grow stronger with use for, once we begin to make things to suit ourselves, our outlook undergoes a subtle change.

We begin to look at our surroundings with new eyes, in a way that is both critical and discriminating. Criticizing, because once we are able to mould them more or less to our wishes, we begin to see that there are quite a number of things we would like to change, and that there is no reason why we should not change them.

It is as well to remind ourselves, now that we are in the early days of another year, that here is something to which we can set our hand that is infinitely worth doing, that neither corrupts nor brings unhappiness in its train.

This is the kind of power that it brings with it, the satisfaction of one of our deepest instincts and an interest and awareness in life and living that is something altogether different from the eager greed of a man pursuing the glittering prize which the world calls power. For indeed, it is power over himself which the craftsman knows and which has adorned the face of the earth with the lovely monuments of his skill.

THERE comes a time every year when I seem to get literally bogged down in the very act or fact of living; hustling from one job to another with very little of a breather anywhere, almost losing sight of the reason for doing things in the struggle to get them done. Usually, of course, the summer holiday is the answer, or some break which will enable one to sit back and let things register on the mind for a change. When we don't see the wood for the trees, when we can see neither the shape nor meaning nor whither-away of our lives, then it is time to call a halt. The pattern is there but we have somehow become enmeshed in it. We need something mentally akin to those fascinating pictures which are taken from the air, showing up the hidden contours of the land, revealing old defence works, the shadows of ancient civilisations; a certain withdrawal from the act of daily living to show us to ourselves.

According to my experience, one usually makes the best kind of plans during a holiday, and not only, I think, because mentally as well as physically we have a breathing space. We are told that the sunken lanes of England represent the old trackways along which men's plodding footsteps for two thousand years

Almost inevitably our daily lives get like that, following the routine paths it seems endlessly, till suddenly we are in the clear again and can see the buttercups in the meadows, the kingfisher flashing across the stream and the wide vault of heaven above us.

We get these sudden glimpses of a remote past sometimes when we are least looking for them and they take us back to our roots as nothing else can.

To-day we have to relearn these things and 'make our own standards.' If we are willing to keep a high heart, if we hold fast to those moments of vision which we have received outside the bustle of living, then the skill which we learn will wed itself to the skill we have inherited, something older than ourselves which we can pass on to our children and, till heaven and earth pass away, the price and the joy of good workmanship shall not fail. (958)

THE keen youngster launching out on his career is avid for experience.

So the young man who has begun to master a job soon gets restless.

The danger to most of us comes, I think, when we begin to settle down.

If we remain content to use our powers only so far as they will provide for us a decent living and to make decent provision for our family, we deprive ourselves of the

innate creative powers so personal to ourselves that, whether or not they have any bearing on the job we do, can, if developed, keep our faculties fresh and alert.

The man, for instance, whose job it is to make packing cases may be technically very highly skilled. Confront him with the need for any size and style of packing case whatsoever and he will produce it expertly in the minimum of time. Any difficulties in that particular line have become for him a matter of routine: he has met them all so many times before.

And when we are content to settle down with what we have it is rather as if we resigned ourselves to a life of endless packing cases; something which calls for very little conscious effort and therefore leaves still undeveloped the fullness of our creative powers.

We have it when we are young because then our experience lies all before us: if we want to keep it as we grow older we have to be prepared to go on seeking experience and to keep our sense of effort alive.

Do we not know indeed that the work which pleases us most in retrospect is the work which has tested our powers to the utmost, which has been, as it were, a perpetual challenge, and when at last we have brought it to a successful conclusion has left us with a heightened sense of achievement? The challenge is repeated each time we undertake a really exacting piece of work, depending as it does each time on the degree of mental and manual effort we bring to the task. Just because we are not machines but living men, there can be no standard in our output except the one which we ourselves make.

So we find inspiration not only in the beauty which other men have created but in the recognition of what it has cost them. To be prepared ourselves to pay the cost of creative work in facing and overcoming difficulties, even in going out to seek them, by widening our range and finding joy in being the master of our material is to keep ourselves fully and adventurously alive. (986)

I ALWAYS experience a thrill when I find myself on any part of Watling Street, conscious that under those straight stretches of road is the ancient Roman highway on which the legionaries once swung along in their unhurried, purposeful stride and Roman colonists and country folk passed to and fro battering down the hard surface in the busy traffic of their lawful occasions. For it is not only workmanship which lasts, but ideas too, when these relate to the simple, practical things that are used for basic needs. Large-scale methods advance and change with the development of engineering science, but the fundamental personal needs concerned with a man's own skill work pretty well within the same range.

It is difficult not to be infected by the atmosphere of speed and hustle in which the townsman lives, by the conviction that there is a quick way of doing everything and that the best part of a job is the having finished it.

There are things which have to take their time, good things like the growth of crops or wood when it is well seasoned, and no commercial short-cuts can give the same results.

workmanship needs a type of sympathetic collaboration between man and material which can never come to life in an atmosphere of hurry and impatience.

The achievement of quality takes the craftsman into a new world, one in which he can be a law to himself because there he is master and knows to what lengths he can go with his material and rejoices in the trial of his own skill, so that he is at once cautious and adventurous. Caution is one of the things experience has taught him, adventure comes with the consciousness of his own powers and the desire to use them to the full. He can be a pioneer or a dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist

according to temperament; the one thing certain is that he will be highly individual in his approach to his work which will stamp it as unmistakably his own. His quality is the essentially human one which no machine can emulate because no machine can evoke the response in the material itself which lies within the power of a craftsman's skilful fingers, backed with the knowledge and understanding that have come to him over the years. It will be coloured by his temperament and his prejudices, hence the individuality. Only when a man has mastered his material is he really free to give it expression and then he has judgment enough to use that freedom well. (34)

THE return of Christmas is a kind of beacon in the year. It stands for the good, peaceful things, for the kindly things, for sanity, in a world in which these are too often eclipsed and, in spite of the trappings of festivity which seem to smother if yet do not, it sends out its light under the dark skies of midwinter to give us new heart.

Every kind of legend and all kinds of customs have gathered about it,

Christmas is the best of all times to relax in, with its break from the ordinary routine, free from the secret pressure of jobs waiting to be done which so often haunts other brief holidays. Time is so precious and those of us with eager and willing hands find more than enough to keep them busy and this question of relaxing can sometimes be quite difficult. How often we arrive home feeling tired at the end of a day's work and disinclined to make a fresh start on a job of woodwork for ourselves yet with a kind of inner conflict because we do want to get it done. So after a wash and a meal we rather grudgingly make a start and in next to no time our tiredness vanishes, and we become completely and happily absorbed in the work.

By bedtime we are filled with a pleasant sense of achievement which will encourage us to repeat the process on other evenings. Nine times out of ten it works, but the tenth time may come when fatigue has gone deeper and on such an evening nothing goes right. Any little difficulty makes us impatient and irritable, something is lacking

The only remedy is to learn to know the danger signals for what they are. The impatience that is founded on fatigue is something more than a mood.

One of the fascinations of craft work is that it compels us to this awareness of ourselves. We learn something of our limitations, of our tendencies, we learn to respect our own powers and feel a pride in developing them.

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