

# Big and

Phil Stevenson has been woodturning since 1989, although he says that it's only in the last few years that he has been able to achieve the smooth, flowing curves over large vessels that he has been reaching to attain for a long time. "As any turner will tell you, these are the most difficult cuts to make," he says. "Unlike working with clay, where material can be added to a piece, wood can only be cut away. Just one wrong cut that is made too deep into the surface of a vessel can ruin the whole shape. In trying to remove that cut, the diameter of the vessel is reduced, so the height must also be adjusted to maintain proportions and the whole thing changes."

Phil's first lathe was only a very basic machine, but he taught himself how to use the tools and create shapes with it. "The learning curve for working with wet timber was enormous, finished pieces would split and crack within days of finishing, as a result of uneven drying. From the early days, I was drawn to larger pieces, and was soon looking to buy a new lathe

Below: Mandrone Burl  
Bottom: Stand at  
Patchings Farm



after overstretching the bearings of the first with a large log." Despite spending quite a lot of money, the second machine unfortunately didn't seem quite up to

the job either. After only a few months, the shaft developed a wobble whilst Phil was turning a sycamore lamp base.

"To be fair, it did weigh about 350lbs so I was pushing it just a little!" he revealed. Phil decided that the best solution was to design and build his own lathe to meet his exact requirements. He sourced some very heavy steel sections, a conveyor shaft and powerful 5.5HP motor. After acquiring a welding qualification, he successfully constructed his own machine, which is geared down to attain the slower speeds necessary for big work. "Additional electronic speed control is also essential when starting work on huge, out of balance logs," he explained. "The largest piece I have turned so far weighed 750lbs and was a teardrop shaped hollow form which can be seen on the 'gallery' page of my website.

"After buying from the UK woodturning supply shops for too many years, I sourced suppliers of my favourite timbers both in Australia and California via the internet last winter. After several months of emails and the benefit of electronic photographs, I made my selections and organised the shipment of a large crate from each." The American shipment arrived first, with a very special piece of Mandrone Burl which weighs 1,114lbs (half a ton) on its own. "It sounded like just the thing I have wanted to turn for many years, until it landed on the top of my drive. When two of the neighbours and I, equipped with long scaffold poles, were unable to lever it even a few inches down the slope of my drive, I began to question the wisdom of my purchase!"

Not one to be easily deterred, Phil improvised some steel rollers and other pyramid style building techniques and got the piece safely under cover. ("Look out for a special article in Craftsman Magazine next year about turning this piece - if I can get it on the lathe!")

The 2-cubic metre crate from Australia arrived just a few weeks later. "I prized off the top panels with a crow bar, to reveal some of the most magnificent pieces I have ever seen. Each piece was a good size, the shapes were just as requested and all were in really perfect condition. This is important for my work as I try to incorporate the natural features into my designs.

My wife Helen helped me unload, and after a few hours we reached the bottom of the crate. The entire workshop was completely packed edge to edge with burrs and looked just like the coral reef!" The next few days were spent installing industrial shelving in the shed to accommodate the new delivery. For a number of years, Phil has sold his work through a few galleries and forged some good working relationships. Trading has been on a 'sale or return' basis with each gallery.

"Typically, sales have been steady, but I have found that payments have to be chased with tenacity. This causes major cash flow problems as I have to pay for raw material in advance. Whilst the galleries produce valuable sales, the SOR practice would not support my business without supplementation. Helen suggested trying a craft fair, so we searched the Craft Council website and applied for one of their expensive October shows in London. We only made the reserve list on this occasion, which actually did us a huge favour. At late notice, The Patchings Farm Exhibition at Nottingham was kind enough to give us a chance and accommodate our first show. The visitor's reaction to my work was absolutely overwhelming and we had a very successful show. The other exhibitors were an inspirational bunch of characters, who offered lots of help, advice and guidance throughout the show. This created a fantastic, positive atmosphere, which Helen and I enjoyed more than we could have imagined and I would like to thank everyone who helped us. It really was inspirational to see people making a living from their creations, if any Craftsman readers are thinking about trying a craft fair, I would strongly recommend it."

Phil will next be exhibiting at Hyde End (6-8 October) and Newmarket (3-5 November). "We are looking forward to these shows with great hope and aspirations. I'm busy creating from my new timber stock, so that the pieces are properly seasoned and have the correct moisture content for me to sell. We look forward to seeing you at the shows!"

T: 01924 259126  
E: phil@philstevenson.co.uk  
www.philstevenson.co.uk



# Beautiful



Left: Phil Stevenson using his purpose built lathe  
Main picture: Teardrop form started out weighing 750lbs

