

Hiking sticks by **Chris Tait**

I've always thought that woodturning can offer a quicker route to making functional hiking sticks rather than the traditional method of carving horn or antler. I've always admired people who have the patience to carve traditional sticks, many producing fantastic work, putting hundreds of hours into creating a single stick. These sticks deserve to be displayed and admired but not bashed about the Northumbrian countryside in all weathers. I want to see if I can produce a functional hiking stick in an afternoon, turning the handle and using a seasoned blackthorn rod for the shaft.

The design for the handle of this stick is born out of experience of using hiking poles. It is based on the need for a good grip section to provide support and drive when walking on the flat and uphill, whilst the top knob is useful for support when walking downhill to help balance and prevent slipping.

Choice of wood is up to you or in my case what's available, though consideration of grain direction and ultimate strength of the finished handle needs to be thought through.

I started with a piece of yew, 50mm square by 180mm long. This is mounted in the chuck and the end squared off ready for a 10mm hole to be drilled. This needs to be at least 50mm deep to take the connecting rod (a piece of 10mm threaded bar) to join the handle to the shaft.

Next, I reversed the blank onto a friction chuck made from scrap wood. This is to ensure a good alignment of the hole for the connecting rod with the overall shape of the handle. The chuck therefore consists of a 10mm diameter pin in front of the rear section which is the same diameter as the shaft of the stick (25mm)

The drilled blank is mounted on the chuck, the tailstock brought up and the blank is turned down to around 45mm diameter using a roughing gouge.

A story board is used to mark out the rough dimensions of the handle. This is a useful step if you plan to do repeat turnings and, in this case, maybe another identical stick to make a pair.

I start turning with a 3/8 spindle gouge on the ball end of the handle, having taken the diameter down to about 40mm, the tailstock stays in place throughout the process.

The body of the handle is then turned, again with the spindle gouge, the easiest way to do this is turn two coves at each end of the handle and blend the two in the middle. The handle is about 25 -28mm diameter in the hollow of the coves whilst the wide section of the handle is 35 – 38mm, whatever feels good to your grip. The bottom of the handle is finished with a small cove and is then blended down to the wood jam chuck at the correct diameter for the shaft of the stick.

The handle is then sanded down to 400 grit and a few grooves and burn marks added. These help with grip, as a highly polished surface can easily slide in your hand especially when it is raining. Finally, the top is parted off. I did this with a parting tool as I planned to drill a shallow recess in the top to take a badge. Parting off could be done with a skew or spindle gouge to complete the ball shape as required.

The recess for the badge was drilled using a 25 mm bit. With hindsight this could have been done at the beginning of the process and the tailstock could be brought up into the recess during turning, it was a bit tricky trying to maintain alignment whilst drilling this recess when the handle is held in the jam chuck.

Assembly is relatively straightforward, using a straight well-seasoned blackthorn shaft (this one was cut about 10 years ago!) to make a nice contrast with the yew handle. The end of the shaft is cut square and a 10mm hole drilled to at least 50mm. This is the tricky bit in trying to make sure the hole is parallel. The connecting rod is glued into place with epoxy and the handle is then added. The turning at the base of the handle ensures a good flow between handle and shaft as seen below.

The badge is also glued in at this stage (I used a lapel pin badge) and everything is held together with tape whilst the glue dries. So, it is possible to turn a functional hiking stick in an afternoon, albeit you have to wait overnight for the glue to dry before cleaning it up, cutting to length and applying a finish, which in this case is danish oil for both the handle and shaft, sometimes poly varnish is applied but is easily damaged when in use allowing water to get under the varnish and stain the wood. The stick is cut to length as a hiking pole. This is done by inverting the stick and holding it with your elbow at 90 degrees, cut stick above your hand. A ferrule is added to the bottom of the stick and it is good to go.

As always, this project has made me think about the next sticks I can make, a two or three sectioned shaft that can be carried and stored more easily, a turned shaft, a turned thumb stick, there are plenty of options and the turning is not too tricky!

