

Book Review

Revealing the Tale of the Candle and the Plane

by Ted Ingraham

Early Planemakers of London by Don and Anne Wing (Marion, Massachusetts: The Mechanick's Workbench, 2005), Softcover, 86 pages, \$29.95.

What do candles and planes have in common? A lot more than one might think.

In their latest publication, the research team of Anne and Don Wing methodically presents the details of yet another exhaustive research project. Since they began in the early 1980s

writing on the planemakers of Southeastern New England, the Wings have assembled an impressive portfolio of information on early planemaking, in both New and Old England.

In the first two chapters of their new book, Anne and Don very carefully examine the research that has been done in the past on early English planes. They then present a well-rounded examination of the state of planemaking in the mid-seventeenth century, examining the business in England and Europe and the export trade with the Colonies,

which included, among other things, trained planemakers. One very intriguing connection they suggest in this book is that America's very own Francis Nicholson may possibly have learned the trade in England, before he settled in Boston early in the eighteenth century. The Wings also chronicle some of the major historical changes in England, and in particular London, that lead to the development of toolmaking as specialist trade.

In the next several chapters, the authors look at the records of some of the early companies in the City of London for planemakers' indenture agreements and other documentary evidence of company membership. A "company" at that time was not a business as we think

of today, but a tightly controlled trade organization resembling, in a sense, today's labor unions. For readers with questions about companies, the text presents a clearly written description of how they functioned. Naturally, the Wings' search through the records of the Joiners' Company was successful. After all, where else would you expect to find planemakers? Well, amongst the candlemakers, it seems.

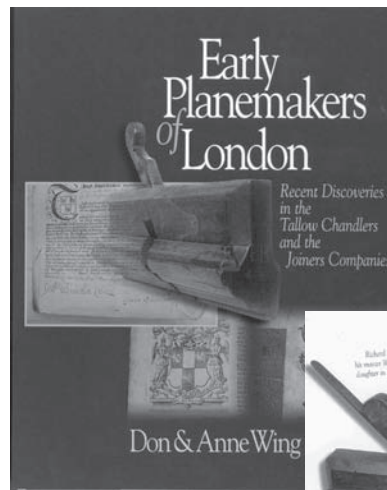
In the documents of the Tallow Chandlers' Company, a group of tradesmen who specialized in making candles, and a most unlikely place to find any kind of woodworker, the Wings hit a mother lode of information. It seems that late in the seventeenth century, one Richard Ingram, a builder and ironmonger (hardware dealer) and also a freeman of the Chandlers' Company, took an apprentice named William Reynolds. In 1693 Reynolds was referred to in the company's records, as a

"wooden toolemaker." From that starting point, the authors were able to trace the apprenticeship/master relationships for a large number of men, who became known as planemakers and who served within and became freeman of the Tallow Chandlers' Company.

In the English Colonies, in spite of the determined efforts

of English authorities, guilds, not to mention formal companies, would never exert much authority over trained craftsmen. This was due largely to the chronic shortage of skilled tradesmen in the Colonies and a more informal training structure. In England, it seems evident that it was more important to have a strong membership than to be too concerned about what the company freeman actually did to earn a living.

Ensuing chapters examine planemakers who were



Don and Anne Wing's new book (above). At left, an example of the illustrations, which include in addition to planes, maps, indenture agreements, and other documents.



members of other companies, like the blacksmiths', and known makers who still refuse to be matched up with trade associations. In the book's final chapter, one that will benefit collectors on both sides of the "Pond," the Wings have put together a very informative look at the features of early English planes. It covers every aspect from wedge patterns and irons to the regional variations that existed in the seventeenth century. This information alone, in terms of recognizing and classifying seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American—or should I say Colonial?—English planes, will prove to be invaluable, and to my mind, worth the cost of the book alone.

Without a doubt, the highlight of the book is the numerous color photographs of planes and their makers' marks and documents. The quality is so good that you can actually read the text of the indentures with little trouble. A number of maps, reproduced from

original London documents, depict planemaking centers in and without The City, and complete the long list of graphics the authors have assembled to illuminate their work.

As a supplement and to help clarify all the complex and intertwined relationships of early London planemakers, the Wings have also included a full-sized pull-out chart that enables one to easily follow the growth of the trade within the various companies.

Without a doubt, *London Planemakers* is destined to become one of the foundation publications for serious tool collectors. Even though the book is tightly focused on London planemaking in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries and the English system of guilds or companies, which never took hold in this country, the products these guilds and companies produced and the men they trained had a profound effect on the development of American woodworking and architecture.