Good plane value

Big, basic and heavy it may be, but **Andy King** reckons this Far Eastern planer/thicknesser from Charnwood is a winner

Andy was impressed with the way that the Charnwood handled this chunk of oak

On first glance this machine looks very much like the Czech machines that came in a few years ago. Though very basic in their looks they were also built very robust - qualities embodied by this Far Eastern planer/thicknesser from Charnwood. The metalwork on the planer is all very chunky and solid, contributing to its considerable 210kg weight. That mass is especially noticeable when swapping between planing and thicknessing modes as there's no gas strut to help take the strain when lifting the beds, and as both beds lift simultaneously, you need to be reasonably strong! The planer would benefit from a pair of handles rather than the single hoop handle currently fitted to help distribute the load. There are, however, a couple of big clothes-peg like springs that help to take the strain when dropping them down again.

Table and fence

The fabricated fence assembly stays on board when you change functions, which is a big plus for me; having to remove bits and pieces always drives me mad.

The construction of the fence bracket does make it a little sticky when you need to move it across the cutters, but everything locks down solidly, and there are basic adjusters to set the fence for 90°. The fence itself is a thick, 1110 x 150mm extrusion, and once set it remains rigid affording plenty of support when edging wide, long stock.

Simple spring-loaded cam locks hold the tables down firmly, so swapping is really quick and easy, although you do have to wind the bed down to around the 150mm mark to allow the integral dust hood to be folded back underneath and engage correctly around the block for surfacing operations.

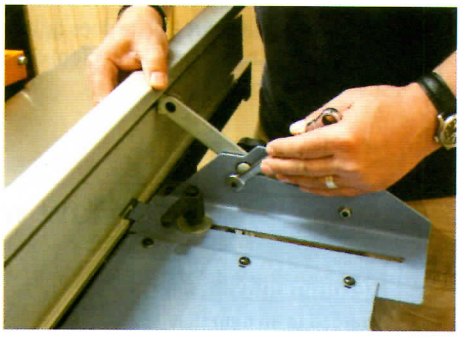
With the beds up and the hood out of the way you can get a good look at the rollers and block. The infeed is serrated and the outfeed rubber-coated, much the same as many others on the market nowadays, as well as substantial anti-kickback pawls.

The design of the planer gives excellent access to the roller area for general maintenance as well as very easy knife swaps while also offering equally good access for the actual thicknessing function.

Reduced motor strain

The three-knife block has a cut-per-minute ratio equal to 2.35 per millimetre. Though this is a standard ratio on many planers, the advantage of the third knife is that it reduces motor strain and also allows a faster feed speed without detriment to the quality of the cut. The planks of 200x25mm ash and 200x100mm lumpy oak that I used for my own testing went through the planer as sweetly as nuts, as they say, and came out with a first-class finish.

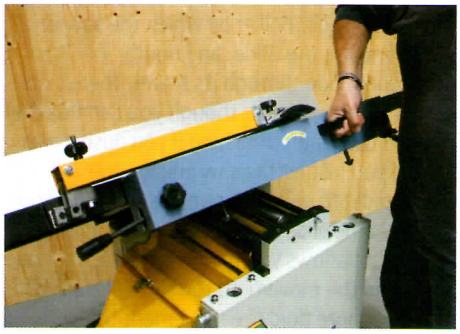
▲ Adjustment is very smooth, and the digital scale makes it very easy to replicate settings



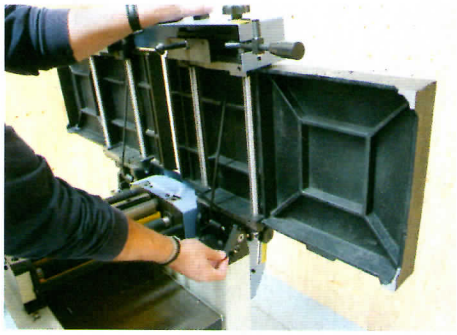
▲ The fence bracket has simple adjustments to set the fence return at 90° and 45°

▲ Two locking levers release the beds so they can be lifted...

Charnwood W590 planer/thicknesser



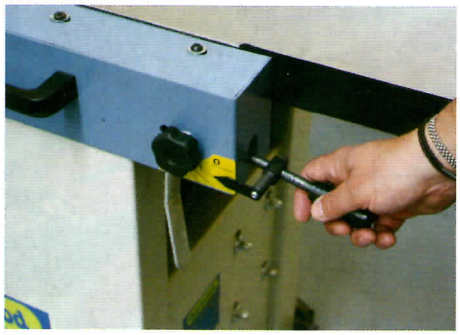
▲ ...though they're pretty weighty and could prove a bit of a struggle for some users



▲ A simple clip drops in to lock the bed in place during thicknessing

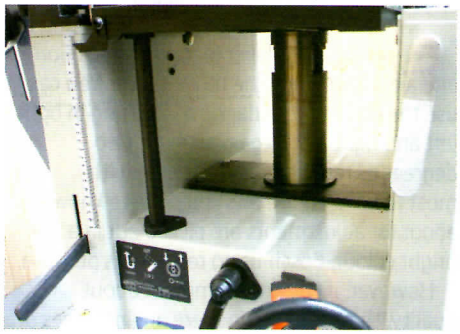
▲ The extractor hood is built in and is very quick to engage or disengage

▲ Knife swaps need a spanner, but access to the block and feed rollers is excellent



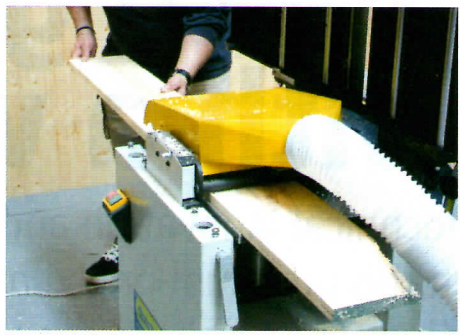
▲ The lever for surface table adjustment is very responsive, making fine tuning easy

▲ This lever disengages the feed rollers to prevent unnecessary wear when surfacing



▲ The central column and auxiliary support keep the table rock solid

▲ Facing and edging this ash was a cinch and the results were superb



▲ Access to the infeed and the outfeed side of the thicknesser is very good

To keep the planer running at its most efficient there's a lever alongside the thickness bed adjusters that disengages the feed rollers when you are surfacing. It didn't seem to cause any problems when I forgot to do so, however: there was no sign of the motor struggling, and the resulting finish faces were as clean as a whistle.

Adjustment of the surface cut is made with a lever, with a maximum of 3mm per pass - a useful depth of cut for initial flattening of twisted or bowed stock before dropping back to a finer cut. The lever is also surprisingly responsive, so you can make a pretty fine adjustments if you need to.

There's an identical lever on the outfeed, which would've been a useful for fine tuning the surfacer after knife swaps to eliminate any sniping. On the test model, however, this lever was locked off tightly.

Smooth operator

Moving on to the thicknesser, achieving consistent and accurate machining is aided by the addition of a dial indicator linked to the wheel adjuster, whose 0.1mm scale seemed to be accurate. Setting up is quick and easy: there's no discernible backlash or sloppiness in the table adjustment, and the stability and smooth operation of the central column design and its winding handle made it easy to replicate a setting, and the produce a piece of timber that tallied up exactly with previously thicknessed boards.

Conclusions

Overall, this machine is made solidly enough to satisfy its trade-rated description, and though the adjusters are plastic they're of decent quality and should be durable. The easy-to-read dial scale, which is much easier to use compared to the usual rule-type scale, is also a handy addition.

If your workspace is limited, or if you follow the classic workshop layout and site it against a wall, you'll need to allow a space of about 700mm between the machine and the wall to allow room for the beds to lift, and with the 4hp motor, you'll need to make sure you have a 16A power supply.

In operation, the Charnwood leaves a great finish with pretty fast turnaround times on stock thanks to its 7m/minute feed speed. Its heavy construction means it'll withstand light trade use; on the other hand if your budget will stand the cost, it'd be a solid addition to any home workshop.

The Woodworking Verdict: Good

+ Dial thickness scale, solid construction
- Could do with a gas strut for table lift, and/or second handle, sticky fence adjustment

Rating ★★★★☆

Typical price: £1499

Motor: 3000W

Speed: 5500RPM

No of knives: 3

Weight: 210kg

Table sizes: 1290 x 310 surfacer
545 x 305 thicknesser

Web: www.charnwood.net