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Nine-piece burnt bowl

Chris Grace refused to allow an old post to die – so he decided to chop it up, burn it and turn it

Sometimes I start with a clear idea of what I want to make, and search for just the right piece or pieces of wood. Or, I see a piece of wood and it dictates what form it should take. Other times, the design changes as I progress, revealing hidden features or flaws in the wood.

This time it was a very different tussle with a post that a friend had given to me, believed to be oak (*Quercus robur*). It was too good for firewood, but definitely a bit worse for wear with some rot, having served faithfully for years holding up a fence in all weathers. I had moved it round the workshop for a while not quite knowing what to make with it, but one day I just started to wonder – could I make a bowl from a post?

That was when the fun started, because I wanted to make a feature of the decay and weathered exterior, and contrast that with a freshly cut area, revealing the hidden beauty of the wood shining through the evidence of its hard life. The only way I could think of achieving this was to cut it up and put it back together again, but how? It would be all too easy to destroy much of the character I wanted to retain.

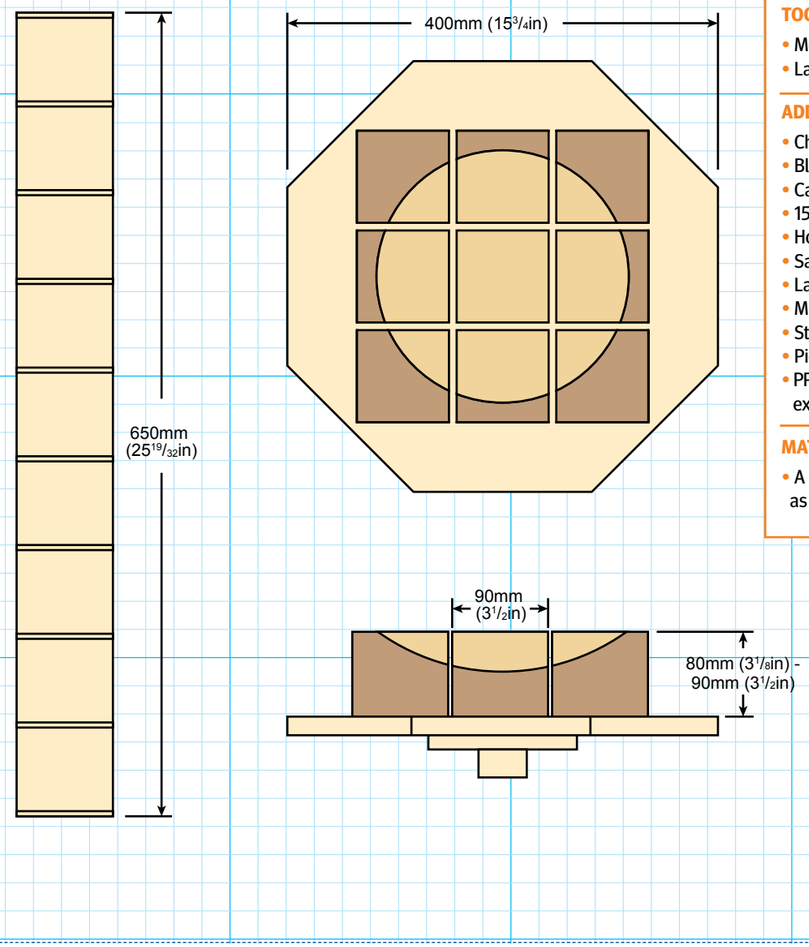
Ultimately I decided that I would cut it into nine pieces, keeping the weathered edge on the sides. That still meant that I would have newly cut surfaces on the top and bottom of each segment – I would have to think further about how to finish them so that they were in keeping overall. A quick examination revealed that, rather unsurprisingly, it wasn't square or terribly straight, but it was about the right length to yield nine cubes.

Inspired by its hard life, I decided to use fire to emphasise the texture mother nature had provided, and this would enable me to blend the textured sides with the newly cut areas of each block. As with many of my pieces, it was a bit of an experiment, but unusually, I hadn't fully worked out the whole process before I set out to make it. Instead the process simply developed as I progressed. So the obvious question is – is it a bowl? To be honest, it's still a bit of a puzzle to me!

CHRIS GRACE

About the author: Chris has been turning wood for about four years. He has enjoyed making things with wood and metal on and off all his life alongside his work commitments, but the discovery of the lathe rekindled his enthusiasm for working in wood. Chris sells his work by commission, demonstrates and provides instruction.
Email: Chris.grace@notjustround.com
Web: www.notjustround.com

NINE-PIECE BOWL DIMENSIONS



INFORMATION

TIME TAKEN & COST

Time taken: Several sessions over about a week
Cost: The post was free, plus other items from the workshop

TOOLS REQUIRED

- Medium bowl gouge
- Large bowl scraper

ADDITIONAL TOOLS

- Chop saw
- Blowtorch & wire brush
- Cabinet scraper
- 150mm faceplate
- Hot glue gun
- Sanding sealer
- Lacquer
- Microcrystalline wax
- Stainless steel garden sphere
- Pieces of felt for the underside of the blocks
- PPE: facemask, respirator/dust mask and extraction

MATERIAL REQUIREMENTS

- A square(ish) post just over nine times as long as its width: 90 x 90 x 850mm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1 To make this project, start by using a chop saw to carefully measure and set up a stop block from scrap wood; this will ensure repeatability of cuts. I made my blocks 82mm high x 92mm square – but you can adjust yours to suit your post

2 Next, having produced nine blocks of equal height, arrange them with the most rotten parts located in the corners and match the grain as best you can to create a pleasing result. Drill reference holes in areas that will eventually be turned away so that you can keep track of which side of each block is up and reassemble the pieces once they have been burnt ▶

3 Now for scorching. I always scorch or burn wood outside the workshop where possible, as this minimises fire hazards and the build up of fumes. Take care when scorching old posts from unknown sources; ensure you are upwind so that you don't breathe in any fumes. Burning is a bit of an art: the hard, newly cut surfaces take the longest, and the dry rotten parts combust almost instantly

4 Once scorched, brush off the excess soot – again, this is best done outside for safety purposes

5 The reference holes drilled during your mock-up stage should still be clearly visible after you have scorched your wood

6 On examination, if you think the blocks are too blotchy, use a radiused cabinet scraper to even out the scorching until you are happy with the overall result. You want something that is neither too uniform, nor too blotchy

7 To prevent getting blackened every time you touch the blocks, apply sanding sealer at this stage. This also helps to stabilise the rotten parts, which will literally drink up the sealer. Apply a couple of coats overall

8 Further planning is required to mount the blocks for turning. Because my post wasn't square, the blocks would not sit flush with each other. If this is also the case with your project, draw a grid on the MDF with a little space between each piece; this will allow for further adjustment

9 Next, mark the centre of the MDF and a circle that is slightly larger than your faceplate; this will act as a centring guide for attachment later

10 You can now carefully align the first block of wood on the MDF faceplate, ensuring to clamp it in place before securing it with two screws

Handy hints

1. When measuring, make an allowance to square the ends of the blank and for the saw cuts
2. Check the accuracy of laser guides before relying on them
3. Ensure your stop block has a chamfer where it touches the saw table and fence; this means that sawdust cannot become trapped and result in a ruined block
4. Any scorching from the saw blade is not an issue when planning to burn the blocks all over


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11 With all the blocks secure, mount the faceplate using all the holes, as you are screwing into MDF

12 To ensure all the blocks stay attached during turning, start on the lowest speed possible and ensure that you are well out of the way, just in case there is a problem. When you are sure all is safe, raise the speed to the maximum you are comfortable with

13 Using a medium-sized bowl gouge, slowly start the hollowing process. As there are gaps between the blocks, use a firm grip and a light touch here

14 When turning my project, as soon as I got to the edge of the middle block the tool started to judder because I was cutting a bit of air. Here it is essential to keep moving the tool in the direction you intend, and not allow it to go deeper where the spaces are located

15 You need to stop the lathe frequently to see how you are progressing. Inspect the wood for finish and ensure that the blocks are all still secure

16 Continue to hollow carefully and slowly, taking the best cuts possible to help avoid breakout at the edges

17 Despite my best efforts at turning carefully, I still encountered breakout around the edges of many of the blocks, partly because of the decay. This is why it is important to stop the lathe regularly, as you need to inspect and deal with any potential problems before you get to the finished bowl size

18 Use hot melt glue here as gaps will vary in size. Squeeze as much glue as possible into each of the gaps; this will give the wood fibres some additional support before you complete the bowl turning

Handy hints

5. Start with a square sheet of MDF; this will make it easier for marking out
6. Cut the corners off MDF faceplates; this will make them octagonal, which will make for safer turning
7. Ensure your screws will not protrude into the area you intend to turn away
8. Make sure the faceplate screws don't go through the MDF and into your work
9. If your lathe has the facility to adjust how quickly it spins up to speed and slows down, now is a good time to use it. I set the acceleration curve on my inverter to slow for this project

19 Now back to turning. Use a freshly sharpened bowl gouge to ensure the best possible cut as you near the end of the turning. For the final stage of turning, use a French-curve scraper in shear cutting mode; this will help to ensure a smooth surface and will provide the best finish


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20 Now to remove the hot melt glue. When I did this on my bowl some of the glue wouldn't come out and I had to disassemble most of the blocks before I could persuade it to let go. To facilitate this, make sure the screws for the eight outer blocks are not obscured by the faceplate. With the glue removed, you can now power sand the interior of the bowl up to at least 400 grit. You will need to follow this with some hand sanding with the grain


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21 The power-sanding process allows plenty of dust to get into all the tiny crevices of the weathered timber, so blow them out with an air duster, with extraction running to suck away any dust. In spite of your precautions against grain tear-out there may still be some areas where the timber is particularly weak, which will leave fresh timber showing. If this is the case, then use a black marker pen to cover these areas. The freshly cut bowl portions can now be given a good coat of sanding sealer...


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22 ... followed by a thorough de-nibbing with a Webrax pad all over the surfaces of the bowl


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23 In order to further emphasise the contrast between the blackened weathered wood and the freshly cut 'bowl', I decided to lacquer only the bowl portion of the finished piece, leaving the blackened areas with a matt finish. To achieve this, mask all of the black top surfaces before spraying several coats, with a light de-nib in between


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24 The final stage of finishing is to apply a couple of coats of Microcrystalline wax. Apply this using a brush; this will prevent build-up in the many crevices

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25 To add further interest, I incorporated a stainless steel garden sphere, which will give interesting reflections. Suspend the ball part way up one side, so it shows off the 'bowl' to best effect. So, how do you get the ball to stay where you want it? I toyed with several ideas before I stumbled on the idea of a small piece of angled plastic covered in black tape


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26 Once the ball is on its support, it should look something like this ●


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