The cabinet scraper. By Colin Wood.

(Pictures found on last 2 pages)

Over the years I must have saved a small fortune on abrasive paper and paint stripper by using nothing more than a simple cabinet scraper. My favourite scraper was obtained as a free sample from the front page of a woodworking magazine over twenty years ago. It is a rather small scraper at 4" x 2" x 0.020" thick. It flexes easily and holds a good sharp edge. This scraper has done an enormous amount of work for me not only in stripping radio cabinets but on solid wood furniture I've made. Abrasive paper can rub dirt into the grain and can carry dust from dark veneers onto lighter coloured veneers. Freshly sharpened the scraper will make a wonderful job of removing old lacquer or French polish leaving a perfectly clean and flat surface ready for finishing. It will level uneven joints and used bowed can remove small blemishes; the gossamer shavings produced crumble at the slightest touch.

A decent cabinet scraper can be bought from eBay for £5 or less and will last a lifetime with care, I don't like the thick heavy gauge type as they are tiring to use.
Before using; the scraper requires sharpening and the edge turning, it is generally pushed along the surface using both hands with the fingers in front and thumbs behind applying moderate pressure; if used too enthusiastically it will just about set fire to my thumbs. There is a knack to sharpening and using a scraper but with a little practice these are soon acquired. For anyone who has never tried using a scraper then it would be wise to gain a bit of experience on something of little value as it is easy to leave knife marks and if allowed to chatter will leave a number of fine lines that if not removed will show up rather badly once finish is applied.

A scraper is usually worked from the center outwards on a panel and if any endgrain is showing care must be taken not to remove splinters from edges.
Care is needed with veneered panels as a sharp scraper will remove edges of veneer down to the substrate with little difficulty but this is avoided with practice. A sharp scraper is a joy to use it produces clean cut shavings not dust and there are no irritating fumes which are ever present with chemical stripper. I'm so used to my scraper that I can remove finish from the tightest of corners and by using it almost laid flat endways on can usually pop the finish from mouldings. I find the scraper invaluable whilst veneering for cleaning up surfaces also if the job is a re-veneer the scraper will remove old hide glue leaving a perfect base for the new veneer.

I would never ever under any circumstances resort to power sanding a radio cabinet. A few years ago a friend decided to have a go at restoring a veneered radio cabinet and was to use his fine detail sander (the kind with the triangular pad) to which I advised him against. I ended up with a nightmare of a finishing job after he had removed all the veneer edges leaving fine light coloured lines which I had great difficulty in touching in also a lot of the old finish remained which I had to remove. Of course I use paint stripper and abrasive paper but limit their use as much as possible. A surface correctly finished from a scraper will have a nice sheen and after dusting off the chosen finish can be applied without the need to wash off and sand if chemical stripper had been used.

For large cabinets I place a clean piece of carpet on the floor and lay the cabinet on this as it is easy to cause dings and scratches which are not seen until it is too late. Smaller cabinets are placed on the bench but again with under carpet for protection. If the cabinet tends to slide around then I push it against something solid but again ensuring protection. I now find stripping finish from a cabinet using a scraper therapeutic and no longer suffer from dressing up like a deep sea diver due to dust from sanding or suffering from nasty fumes from chemical stripping.

I've also tried making scrapers from glass; I used a glass cutter to cut out rectangles and although initially the action was splendid the cutting edge was soon lost; I've seen the use of glass mentioned before for use as scrapers and it was suggested that by breaking the glass and selecting a piece with a curved break that this would prove effective; this would be better than the straight edges I obtained from using the

glass cutter but I would not recommend either method because the glass could break in use resulting in a laceration that might require a visit to the A&E for a few stitches.

For general woodworking I bought a Stanley No80 cabinet scraper and I can bring a rough sawn hardwood board down to a smooth surface requiring no other treatment ready for finishing in short time. I don't use this scraper for cabinet work because it removes material with such little effort but in its place it is a delightful tool to use.
I've included a few pictures of cabinet stripping using nothing more than a scraper.

To correctly sharpen a scraper can cause difficulties at first but the technique is soon grasped. A traditional cabinet scraper is simply a rectangle of thin gauge good quality tool steel. Both long edges are sharpened and each gives two cutting edges. Each long edge requires bringing to dead smooth and at right angles to the faces. This can be accomplished in a number of ways; the simplest is to place a sheet of 240 grit wet or dry abrasive paper onto a dead flat surface such as a cast iron machine bed or even a piece of Contiplas; the faces of the scraper are firstly polished ensuring the scraper is not allowed to lift therefore imparting an unwanted taper; this will remove any previous burr and leave the surfaces highly polished and dead flat. Now the long edges of the scraper are rubbed along the abrasive paper ensuring the face of the scraper is at ninety degrees; once both edges are thus treated then the scraper should have two highly polished faces and two long edges; all nicks must be removed and it is important to get both edges perfectly smooth.

I find it convenient to nip the scraper in my engineering vise to turn the burrs (cutting edges). If this method is used then I ensure the vise jaws do not contact the scraper edges or the action of closing the jaws would crush any burrs on the lower edge. With the scraper protruding from the vise a piece of highly polished steel is drawn along the edge at a shallow angle in a slicing motion whilst bearing down quite hard; this will turn a burr along the edge which can easily be detected with a thumb nail; at this stage the scraper will now have a razor sharp burr and it is not wise to run a finger or thumb along the edge because nothing will be felt but things will begin to turn red from a nasty cut; the other three edge corners are equally treated giving four cutting edges. It isn't necessary to turn a large burr otherwise the cutting action will be too aggressive; usually four strokes will turn a nice burr and I find using a long screwdriver blade or wood turning tool blade that is highly polished ideal for forming such burrs.

Much care is taken whilst turning a burr as one slip could end up in a deep wound requiring stitches so it pays to concentrate on the job in hand.

I have a double ended bench grinder fitted with a smooth grinding wheel; I remove the old burrs as described by rubbing on abrasive paper but then run both edges across the grinding wheel before turning the burrs but I'm so used to doing this it comes natural to me.

A sharp scraper is a good friend and a delight to use. It is a razor sharp cutting tool and commands respect; it must be stored safely to prevent damage to the cutting edges.