

PROFILE OF A TURNER

A WOODTURNING JOURNEY

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I was on a holiday with my family in the beautiful town of Denmark and as we were driving to visit one of the tourist destinations, I noticed a little wooden sign on the side of the road. It simply said 'DEAN MALCOM WOODTURNER'. As I had been very keen on woodturning in high school and had a marvellous manual arts teacher by the name of Barry Grainger, I made a quick decision to go and see what this bloke did.

After travelling down a rough old gravel track, we came to what was little more than a clearing in the forest with a few rough wooden buildings scattered around. We went to the shed that looked and sounded like a woodwork shop and met a young bloke called Dean Malcom. What he was doing on a wood lathe that he made of a few beams of timber and powered by a washing machine motor from the local tip, mounted on a bit of tin, with a home turned wooden pulley all just hanging off the back rail was just brilliant. The whole contraption shook and rattled and I was amazed that Dean was turning beautiful little pieces made from local jetty timbers full of worm holes. After a pleasant visit with Dean, we headed off and I made the comment to my wife Marilyn, "Well if he can do that amazing work on that lathe, I can too."

Little did I know...

I found a broken-down old metal work lathe near where I lived and proceeded to strip it down and rebuild it for wood turning. Tough engineering's number one man Ivor Bridges and the Chamberlain tractor factory helped advise me and also made some of the bespoke parts for my project. That lathe was so heavy you needed a crowbar to slowly push it around the floor to position it. No problems with vibration there! WAWA was just getting started at the time and I was lucky enough to be in on the first meetings at Liddelow Homestead in Kenwick. It was at that meeting that I first met a bloke by the name of Keith McQueen and was really fired up to take this hobby further.

Around this time, I also found out about a shop in Myaree called CROSS ELECTRICS run by an amazing lady Lyn McKimmel (I'm not sure about her last name). She knew everything about every tool in that shop, was friendly and helpful to us customers and gave really good advice. Much later I asked her how long she had been doing woodturning only to be told she had never done any at all! All her knowledge was obtained by listening and reading.

I had the great good fortune of spending time with Keith McQueen at his home in Glen Forrest where we had to lean over to reach the lathe so deep were the shavings on the floor. He taught me the correct way to use and care for each chisel and how to sharpen them to the best advantage. I will always cherish those times spent with Keith and Pam.

I was working for Telecom Australia (now Telstra) at the time. I met the owner Brian Cross of Cross Electrics at one of our famous woodturners weekends and suggested that he would do well to open a branch of his business in Midland as it was a great crossroads and serviced a huge area of the wheatbelt. His reply was "Well, if you think it would be so great, why don't you set it up and manage it for me?" My reply was "No way, I'm in Telecom and will be there for life."

Three weeks later I was the second Technician in WA to accept a voluntary redundancy and became the new sales assistant at the Myaree branch.

After some time learning the ropes, we found and set up the Woodworking Centre in Stanhope Gardens. My first customers even before we officially opened were Eric and Pat Trown. We quickly settled into our new life and gathered a loyal customer base. Marilyn and I quickly realised that these people were more our friends than just customers and we have stayed in touch with some over the years. The shop was very busy and the many WAWA weekends we attended were a real highlight of our time in the business.

We soon were approached about holding classes in the back area of the shop and after gathering a few lathes and other sundry necessary equipment classes became a feature of the weekly life for us. Our instructors were the cream of the crop and included, but was not limited to, Keith McQueen, Ivor Bridges and Eric Walker. We also conducted some woodturning masterclasses which ran for 2 or 3 days and were run by Keith, Dean Malcom, Jack De Vos and some others including a Canadian bloke. These classes inspired and contributed to the amazing standard of work seen over the years in the WAWA members. About this time 1990 or '91 we built and moved to the new premises on Farrell Road. What a beaut facility that was! Many of our customers would come in and offer to make me a coffee as they made a beeline to the kitchen. I drank far too much coffee!

Classes continued to be a major focus for us and over the 15 years we trained just over 550 woodturners. Another part of the shop-life was the monthly meeting of the Midvale woodturners group with a steady following over the years of about 15 - 30 members. These were great times of learning and mateship. Many nights were spent watching demonstrations of new or different tools, jigs and techniques. Some amazing work was 'turned out' and we could then get on any of the lathes dotted around the workshop and have a go at it ourselves. Keith McQueen was a gifted metal worker as well and made many accessories for us to sell including live centres and various drive centres and specialist chucks and faceplates.

Ivor taught me how to join bandsaw blades and was always on hand to show and teach how to shape and sharpen all the different tools and I still sharpen tools and make bandsaw blades for various people today using those same instructions. Thanks Ivor!

After 15 years with almost no time off Marilyn and I decided to close the business and that part of our life sadly came to an end. We hold the best memories of the many wonderful characters who came across our doorstep and enriched our lives during that time. One of our most treasured possessions is the wonderful 'seed pod' crafted in sheoak by Jack De Vos as a farewell gift from the Midvale Group.

Written by Colin, 2021