

Tar time

We stood around the cauldron
as the wayward Sisters, prophesying
what time would tell – our white
breaths evaporated into that future.
Winter was upon us – black bubbles
of boiling pitch burst past viscosity
below our outstretched warming hands.

Now, the consistency of melted
Marmite, but blacker, much blacker,
the blackest black you can imagine.

Ink black.

Reaper black.

Fairytale black.

Its smoke strangely white, as if innocent
of its evil nature. We know better, stir
the pot and scoop the boiling concoction into
the inverted raven skull ladle – walk quick –
tar flying behind us like black feathers.

The patient seams lie waiting to be smothered.

Oakum tucked in like the folded eyelids
of sleeping children. We cover them
with a night
without stars.

It solidifies fast. They dream then
of ships and the sea. Of salt water versus oil.

Of a trillion stars
holding them tight.

Holding them fast.

Time will tell that which will last.



Time has a strange way of being two-faced here, Janus-like. And as it is January, the month named after this Roman god, it seems appropriate – January looks back to the old year, and forward to the new. However, at IBTC we seem to be constantly thrown back into that age-old, traditional past while at the same time, are uncontrollably thrust forward into the future.

Take caulking and tarring for example. We are stirring that drum of melting black pitch with a ladle that seems to be a relic used for some ancient Mediaeval ritual. It looks like a raven skull turned upside-down and it has got a beautifully handle that ends in a pigs tail curl. Using the ladle and scooping up the pitch, then working fast to pore it into the oakum-caulked seams, is a process that has not changed for years and years. In my minds eye, I see the men who were doing this decades ago, in exactly the same way; the same movements, the same recipe, the same smoke, the same smells. Suddenly, there is someone taking a video with their iPhone, and Maynard, the instructor, turning down the valve on the LPG tank. We are right back in the present.

I suppose this time at IBTC got me thinking about what time will tell. Pitch is still being used in traditional vessels and some working boats and fishing vessels. Obviously, pitch proved time its worth, whereas the young iPhone has not. Who knows what the future for an iPhone looks like? You never know what is going to happen, so I think it is good to learn skills with materials that have proved their usage over time. These are skills and materials that are often forgotten in this day and age, because we are short-sighted by the ease that technology has brought to our lives. I think it is interesting to be thrown back into time as it were, and to see and do what time has told. To know it and learn to appreciate it. To know that you can fall back on that which you know will work or that which you know how to fix without having to resort to plastics, mastics, or digital fantastics.

Caulking and tarring were just one of the things that we've learned so far at IBTC. We started with three weeks of joinery. We learned how to sharpen and use hand tools, such as a smoothing plane and a block plane. We became very familiar with our set of chisels and small gents saw. With our sharp tools and under the instructions and great expectations of Mike Tupper (who rightly adheres to the notion that 'perfection is the only standard worth working to'), we made a beech wood mallet and a bench hook. He taught how to make a tee-halving, cross-halving and mortice-and-tenon joint, which all came together in making a dimensional square. Another very useful exercise was to make a scarf joint. I also made an oil stone box as an extra-curricular. Finally, we got to the joint that I so desired to learn: dovetails. With much admiration, I had watched the full-time IBTC students make their tool chests. I promised to myself that I will also make one of those one day, even though it is not part of our course.

Did you know...

that a blob of pitch can take 13 years to drop? Natural pitch seems to be solid a room temperature but actually flows very, very slowly. The University of Queensland has been involved in the longest experiment in the world, demonstrating the viscosity of pitch. It was calculated that pitch has a viscosity of approximately 230 billion times that of water.

See video of drop [here](#)

Time will tell how long it takes for the drop to fall. Tar keeps its own

time

Next up was steam bending, under the tutelage of Cliff Williams. Steam bending wood was another magical experience and surprisingly easy to do. Building a steam box is not difficult; all you need is a humidifier, some scrap wood planks or a leftover pipe. Using gauntlets for protection is very important as steam is much hotter than water. The only thing you then need to know is the secret timing formula...

Very useful for us traditional seafarers was the 2-day splicing and knots workshop, given to us by Rob Harbord. We learned to use a fid and make an eye splice, a grommet, a back splice, a short splice and a long splice in three strand rope. We also made an eye splice in double braid polyester rope, which was a challenge but also funny as it is like operating on a snake and taking its whole spine out through a tiny hole. Moreover, we learned how to make whippings using a palm and needle, but also learned how you can make a whipping without these implements. On the second day, we focussed on knots. We went through many different types of knots, bends and hitches. For me, the most fun was the monkey's fist and the Turk's head. A few new ones for me were the highwayman's hitch and the constrictor knot. I also learned that the Carrick bend is also called the Josephine knot!

The fun never stops here, because we did even more (and we are only half-way through our time at IBTC). We did a course in laminating, where we made a beam for a coach roof. First, we made a jig to bend our wood around. We then machined up strips of wood of 7mm and glued them together with epoxy and then clamped the whole piece around the jig. We did not have to steam bend our wood prior to glueing as the curve was not too severe.

Another short course we did was on trunnels and graving pieces. The word 'trunnel' is derived from 'tree nail', and is in essence a wooden fastening that was driven through the plank and timber and wedged at both ends. Greenhill mentions in his *The Evolution of the Wooden Ship*, that,

“[t]he trunnel is a time-honoured plank fastening which will not stretch nor deteriorate with corrosion. However, trunnel stock must be thoroughly seasoned (to a moisture content of about 5%) as a driven trunnel cannot afford to shrink. Skilful sizing of a trunnel to its auger hole is all-important to achieving a tight drive-fit.”

We made the trunnels by whittling a round end on a square piece of timber and driving it through a hole in a piece of cast iron. Miraculously, the square piece came out round! Graving pieces are used to make small hull repairs. They are diamond-shaped and embedded in the hull to replace the damaged part.

By this time, Christmas songs were playing on the radio and soon our first stretch at IBTC would come to an end. I made a few presents, such as an oak serving spoon and a fruit bowl out of a beautiful piece of walnut.

I'm looking back on my time at IBTC with a smile in my heart and a big feeling of gratitude for so much learning. I'm looking forward to my second term at IBTC with a happy gleam in my eyes and a feeling of excitement.

