

# John Wood, a gentleman turner

JOHN HAWKINS

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The construction of the complex and difficult-to-make oval cedar case for the Woodstock Challenge Cup (**plate 1**) illustrated in my article “Essie Jenyns and her Australian Terriers” has prompted me to wonder how and why it came into being.<sup>1</sup> Recently I purchased for my reference library a complete set of the *Bulletin of the Society of Ornamental Turners* (SOT).<sup>2</sup> In *Bulletin* vol 25, no 125, September 2011, there is an article on surviving Birch twin-mandrel lathes, giving as an example the Wood family and its Birch lathe.

Ornamental turning lathes used by amateur gentleman turners were supplied by two specialist British firms, Holtzapffel in London and G. Birch & Co of Manchester.<sup>3</sup> Between them they seemed to have had almost a duopoly in the manufacture of these immensely complex and expensive machines. The firm of George Birch & Co operated from the Islington Tool Works, Salford, Manchester, and supplied a series of expensive and complex ornamental turning lathes to the super rich with a mechanical bent.

Shortly after his marriage on 5 December 1888 at St Andrew’s Cathedral, Sydney to the actress Essie Jenyns (Elizabeth Esther Helen Jennings, 1864–1920)<sup>4</sup>, John Robert Wood, the son of a wealthy Newcastle brewer, ordered a lathe from G. Birch & Co.

Documentation still with this machine, Birch’s lathe no. 5504, is the invoice dated 2 March 1899 for

**1**  
Woodstock Challenge Cup in oval turned Australian cedar case, 1906

£112/18/6 (plate 2). The invoice suggests that the lathe was purchased in 1898, however detailed examination suggests that the basic lathe was purchased earlier and that the invoice refers to an expensive group of additional new turning accessories to convert the Birch lathe to full ornamental turning (plate 3). This implies that Wood bought the lathe second-hand, had it completely refurbished, and then fitted with the additional equipment, as illustrated in *The English Mechanic* of 17 March 1899. The lathe was shipped to Australia in 1899.

Later, the lathe returned with Wood and his wife to London in 1907. By 1923, the lathe was installed in John Wood's house "Holmwood", Putney Hill, Wandsworth (plate 4). On his death on 14 February 1928, the machine passed to his son Brigadier John Morton Devereux Wood (b. 1898), who lost a leg during the Second World War. The lathe then passed to his son Brigadier Christopher Wood of 'Meadowfold', Peaslake near Guildford, who died in 2006.

The machine and its equipment and tooling for milling and metalwork are extensive, being stored in two matching cabinets illustrated in the SOT article. It has spherical slide rests, a medallion device possibly a Birch original and unique, as well as a group of very substantial ornamental turning chucks (plate 5).

Through this purchase, Wood becomes a figure of considerable interest as an ornamental turner, probably using Australian timbers. The oval turned case for the 1906 Woodstock Cup is an exceptional example of turning for to turn an oval, the turner needs to own an expensive and difficult-to-master oval chuck. In my collection of over 500 items of ornamental turning in ebony and ivory, only some 1 per cent of the items were oval in form, due to the expensive equipment required.

This poses the question: was the box containing the cup turned on the Birch ornamental turning lathe no. 5504 before the couple departed with their 'Seven Little Australians' for England in 1907?

ISLINGTON TOOL WORKS.  
SALFORD, Manchester, March 2nd 1899

M. John R. Wood Esq

**Bought of G. BIRCH & Co.,**  
ENGINEERS AND TOOL MAKERS.

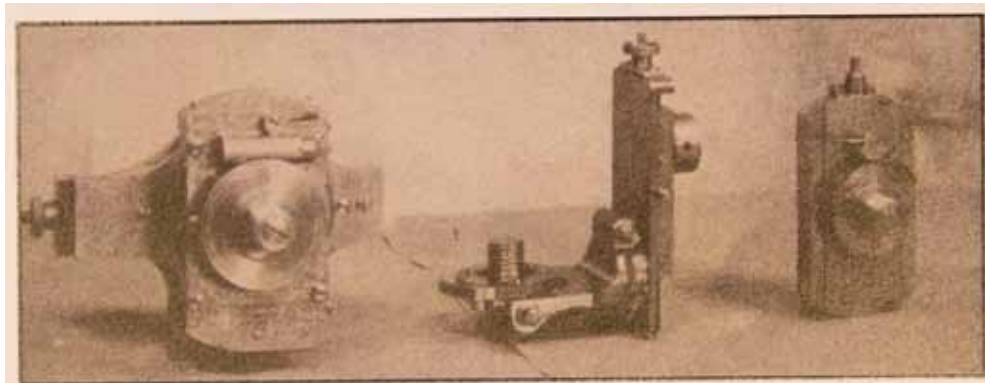
To One Oval Chuck complete	£ 16 10 0
One Eccentric Chuck	13 10 0
Patent Spherical Chuck	16 10 0
16 Additional Index plates interchangeable with Spherical & Eccentric chucks 1 each 72, 84, 96, 100, 108, & 112 teeth	at each 12/6 3 15 0
Ornamental Turners 3 jaw Ornamental chuck, gunmetal body & hardened steel jaws 4 1/2" size.	5 10 0
Fitting to lathe by back plate.	8 6
One Spiral chuck fitted to mandrel with new swinging frame, 8 gunmetal change wheels & 1 Steel ditto of 20, 25, 35, 45, 55, 60, 70, 90, 100, & 120 teeth extra wheel studs & one stud fitted with 30 wheel for reversing the spiral connecting rods, hook joints etc-	25 0 0
Intermediate arm for long spirals.	2 10 0
Set of 6 gunmetal male & female Screw chucks as follows:- 1 1/2", 2", 2 1/2", 3", 3 1/2", & 4" dia fitted to lathe.	12 0 0
Set of 8 gunmetal Cup chucks as follows:- 1 each 2", 2 1/2", 3", 3 1/2", 4", 4 1/2", 5", & 6" dia	7 5 0
Compensating Index pointer for Equally dividing the Ellipse in oval turning fitted to lathe headstock.	10 0 0
	£ 112 18 6

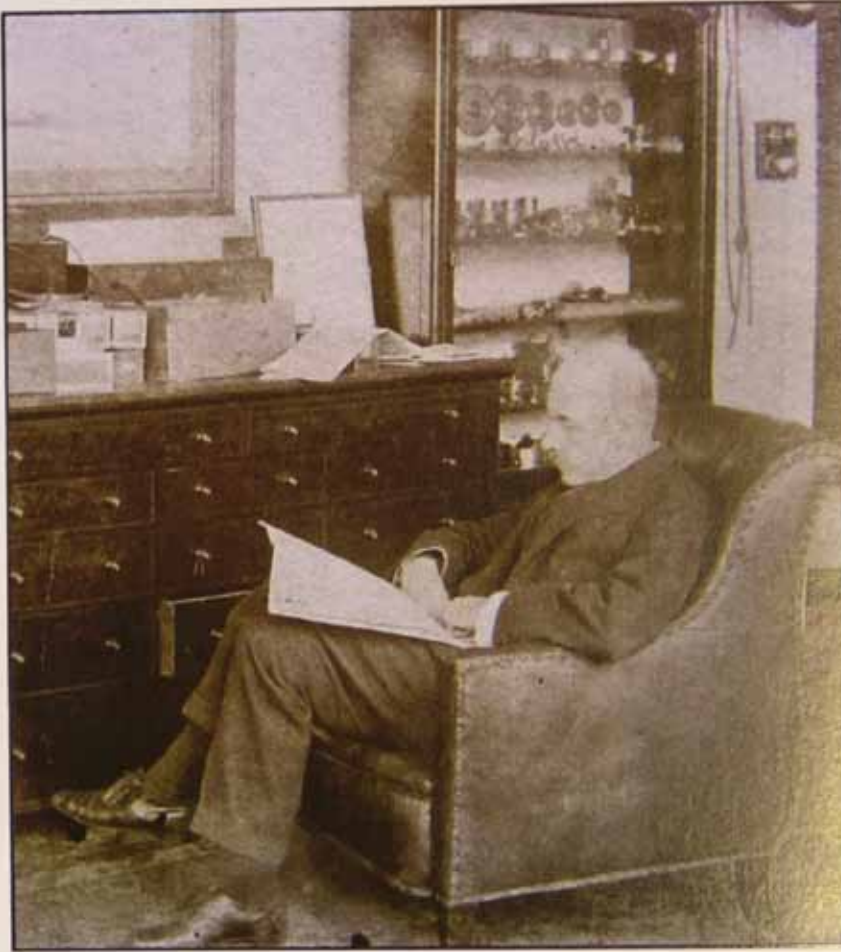
**2**

G. Birch & Co, Manchester, invoice for lathe equipment and accessories purchased by J R Wood, 1899

**3**

Lathe equipment photographs from *The English Mechanic* of 17 March 1899

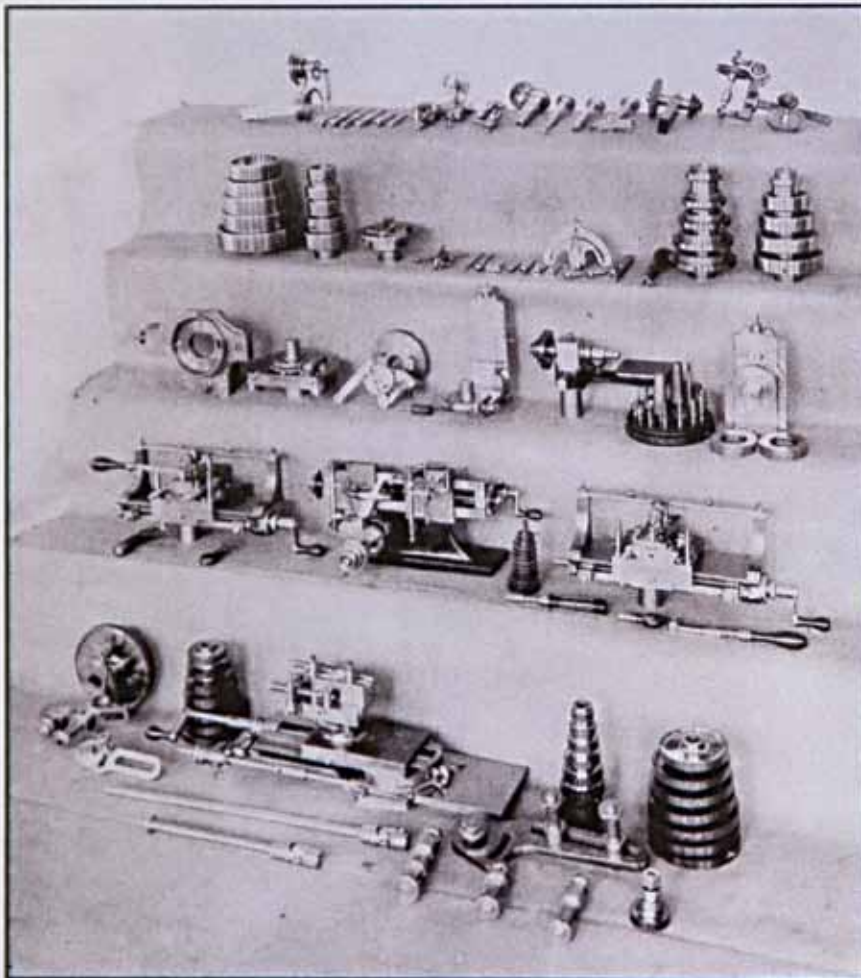




In the Powerhouse Museum collection is Holtzapffel lathe number 754, a 5-inch Screw Mandrel lathe originally sold in 1811 and updated in 1888 at a cost of £210 for a Mr I.M. Purves. The museum records show that this lathe was once owned by Charles Francis Smith, a Newcastle carpenter and cabinetmaker. Is this lathe the connection between Wood, Smith and/or Purves and did either Smith or Purves induct Wood at Newcastle into the art and mystery of engine turning?

#### NOTES

- 1 J B Hawkins, 'Essie Jenyns and her Australian Terriers', *Australiana* November 2011, pp 16-19.
- 2 [www.the-sot.com](http://www.the-sot.com)
- 3 In 1981, Douglas M. Smith gave Sydney's Powerhouse Museum an 1811 Holtzapffel & Deyerlein, London, ornamental lathe (registration no. B2413), which had belonged to his ancestor, Charles Francis Smith (1857-?1946), a carpenter and cabinetmaker, who had also lived and worked in Newcastle NSW. I am indebted to Des Barrett, Curator of Technology at the Powerhouse Museum, for providing this information.
- 4 Helen M. Van Der Poorten, 'Jennings, Elizabeth Esther Helen (1864-1920)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/jennings-elizabeth-esther-helen-3855/text6129>, accessed 1 October 2013.



**4**  
John R Wood with his Birch lathe equipment cabinet in his UK study

**5**  
Ornamental turning chucks and change wheels from the Birch lathe No 5504