

How I made my bokken

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There are several sites with detailed instructions to be found on the web, www.aikidofaq.com being, in my opinion, the most useful. Here is the process I went through. Remember the 8Ps alliteration. Proper prior planning and preparation prevents p-poor performance.

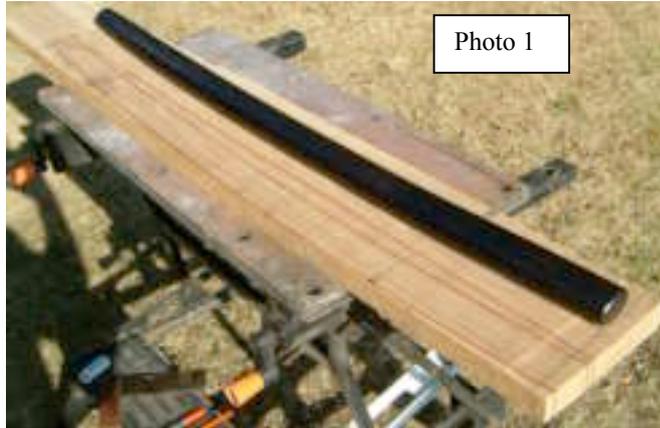


Photo 1

The template.

I found a ken that I liked the shape of, by sight, feel, and experienced advice and drew a template.

The ebony ken in the photograph was roughly the sixth I made from that template and is now my 'three-dimensional' template.

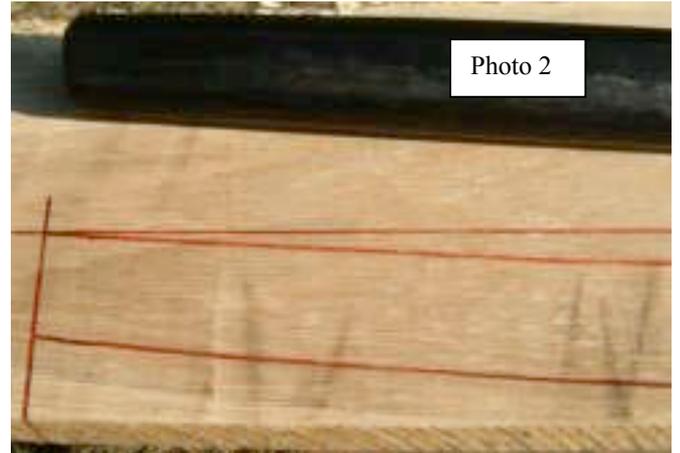


Photo 2

Finding a source. Having read the advice on wood selection, which was a little confusing and daunting, I found several Timber Merchants from the telephone directory. By phone I narrowed the list down to those that kept a selection of "Seasoned English Hardwoods, Exotics and Imported Sustainable Hardwoods" in a temperature and humidity regulated store.

Choosing the type of wood was dictated by the advice I had gleaned from the web; most importantly concerning "crush resistance" (the ability of the wood to dent without the fibres breaking causing splintering), and by what was available.

Choosing the actual piece of 'plank' was time consuming. However getting it right meant everything going smoothly and getting it wrong meant a waste of money, effort and, most significantly, time.

The minimum requirements of the plank were;

- The dimensions. In this instance, 110 cm x 10 cm x 3.5 – 4 cm.
- A grain-to-template match [photos 2, 3 & 5]. The match at the blade end is the most important.
- Minimal and correctable warp (aka "movement") [photos 5 & 6].
- Not even the smallest visible defect (knot or split), especially in the ends.
- The price. The plank of oak pictured cost £15, (I could make two ken from this piece), the piece of ebony £45.

Once you have bought a plank **store it horizontally** in a non-extreme environment (ideally where, as a bokken, it would normally be stored) for a couple of weeks. If it did not come from a "temperature and humidity regulated store" this is essential for, say six to twelve months! Because it is going to 'move' (warp), and if it 'moves' after it is made it is expensive firewood.

I transferred the template onto the plank [1], cut it out, and sanded the curved faces as square as possible [3].



Photo 3



Photo 4

Straight and squared.

This particular plank ‘moved’ quite a lot [5 & 6]. But it demonstrates quite nicely the point that starting with a bit of ‘extra’ thickness allows for correction. The ebony plank, as bought, was slightly spiralled.

Photo 4 shows the method of getting all the lines in photos 5 & 6 straight and square.



Photo 5

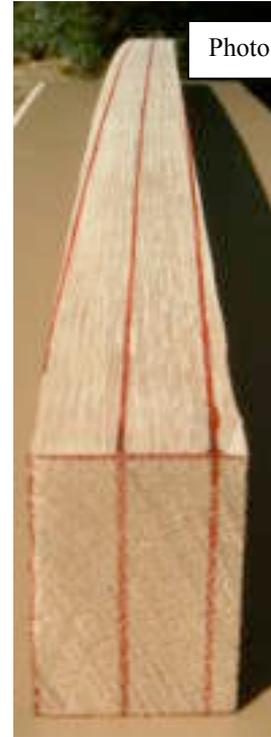


Photo 6

I then belt-sanded the plank until happy that I had it straight and squared off [7]. At this point the dimensions of the bokken (excepting length) should be virtually as required. Especially the top to bottom dimension, or to be more ‘correct’, the ha to mune dimension from kissaki to tsuka and throughout the length of the tsuka.



Photo 7

Then I re-marked the plank with the **definitive guiding lines**.

- a) First a centre line along top and bottom and at each end [8].
- b) Then I marked where the blade becomes the handle [9], across the top and half-way down each side. Then continued from this point to the butt with central lines on the handle sides [10], and then drew the spherical shape I wanted the handle to take [10].



Photo 8

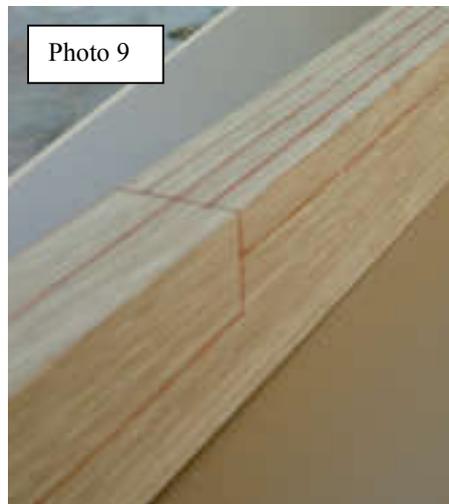


Photo 9



Photo 10

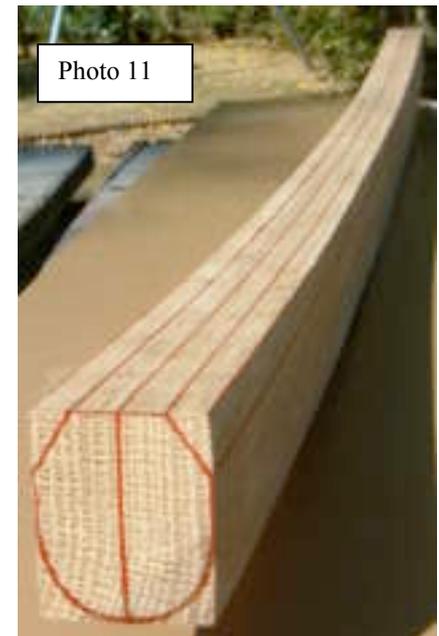


Photo 11

- c) Lastly I drew the outline of the blade end and then very precisely parallel lines on the top to the handle and corresponding lines following the curve of the top of the blade [11 & 9].



Photo 12



Photo 13

Shaping.

Now the fun begins. This is the bit that I found most fulfilling. **The only rule is do not rub out any lines.**

I started with the back (mune) of the blade. This is very satisfying as the lump of wood suddenly takes on the appearance of a bokken [12].

The junction between blade and handle is tricky, start like this [13]. I reached this stage and had to continue straight on with the handle so that I could start feeling the weight and balance of the bokken [14 & 15].

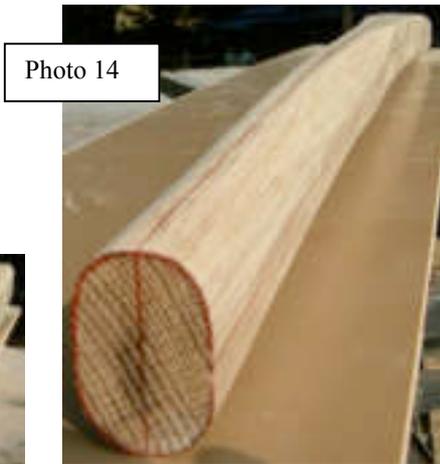


Photo 14

The final effect at the handle-blade junction is made when finishing off, when the fine sanding is done. I found a tendency to overdo the rough sanding at this earlier point. Once I was aware of this the blend of angles appeared to just happen as the corners of the handle were gently rounded off.

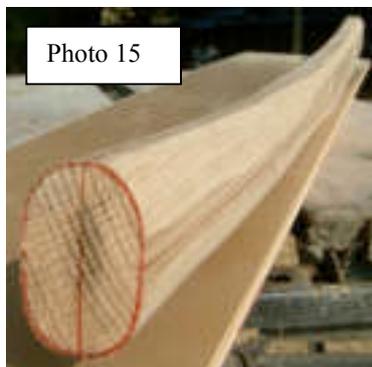


Photo 15

Next shape the blade edge [16, 17 & 18].

At this stage touch becomes equally as important as sight to judge where the bokken needs more sanding. Each bokken is going to be different. At this point forget about other bokken and get this one right. I feel that the handle



Photo 16



Photo 17



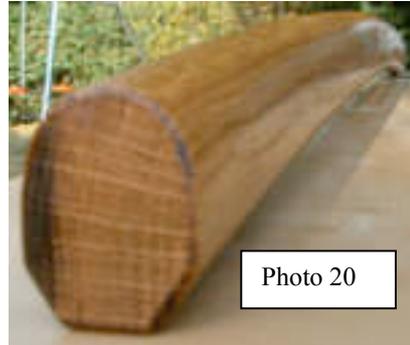
Photo 18

should be large enough in the hand so that the finger-tips don't touch the palm. Accepting this I aimed for balance. The balance point is not at any specific point but the feel whilst doing suburi. If major changes in balance were required I achieved this by making either the handle 'rounder' or by decreasing the 'thickness' of the blade edge.

Resist the urge to rub out any of the guiding lines until absolutely happy with the shape. **Take your time.**

The finishing touches.

Once I was completely satisfied I decided on the final length of the bokken and having trimmed the ends I repeated the whole sanding process with the finest grade of belt sandpaper I could buy (280). Again not going over any of the lines until the end of the process. The last belt-sanding was the ends and then gently the end edges. Then I gently go over the whole bokken with hand-held sandpaper.



Finally I coated the bokken with linseed oil [19 & 20] (see web advice for do's and don'ts of treatments). Which ever you use it must allow the wood to soak up sweat from the hands when practising.



The odd word.

Tools. The sanding dust from some woods, notably the exotics, with their resins, are at least irritant and at worst carcinogenic. I wore my ex-military respirator [21 & 22]. I still managed to get a couple of nasty rashes. And backache because my workmate bench is not the correct height for me to work on.

Tip shape. Leave the point blunt.

The weight of a bokken should be such as to allow the completion of practice without suffering arm pain at the time or over the following days. However arm pain is also due to incorrect practice whatever the bokken's weight.

A typical bokken weighs 500g – 600g , a typical heavy bokken weighs 700g – 900g . Both are typically 102cm long. Suburi bokkens weigh 1000g – 1500g and may be 120cm in length.

This oak bokken weighs 896g and is 104cm in length; the ebony bokken weighs 1354g and is 107cm in length.

If the bokken feels good in your hands and has the right weight and balance, imperfections are not important. It is after all merely an aid.

The last word.

Remember your bokken must be safe; in other words it must never harm anyone; by accident.