Axminster benchtop thicknesser test

A first look at an essential machine from Axminster's new Craft range

Axminster took the wise decision to drop its Hobby title from many of its machines and instead put together a range of machines under the Craft badge, suitably upgraded in spec where necessary. In means a more consistent choice and better quality without compromise or the cost of bigger Trade models. Ideal for the home woodworker or smaller workshop in fact, benchtop thicknessers are a perfect example.

The AC318BT has the standard Craft livery. It is a typical model of this type of machine produced in the Far East. The manual is generally very easy to understand and worth reading before you start. The machine is heavy, care is needed unboxing and setting up – not quite portable. It lacks a few extras you might expect on a more expensive machine but it does the same job, which is simply thicknessing and nothing else. To describe it in a nutshell, the brush motor sits on four columns with a gear chain rise and fall mechanism and a pulley drive to the cutter block. The blades sit on springs and can be replaced by undoing a series of bolts that press a metal wedge against each blade. A special jig ensures correct height setting from side to side when tightening up a new blade. Any

Checking how level the beds and rollers are to each other

The cutterblock drive pulley. The height adjustment nuts are to the right

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variance in cut height from side to side can be checked and corrected by making a simple jig, as shown in the manual.

To adjust the cutter block height, change the pulley belt, lubricate the gear chain or change cutters, you simply remove the height winding knob and undo the top casing bolts so the top and end covers come away completely for unfettered access – all with the power unplugged of course. The extraction port is a rather small 50mm dia. and its plastic cutter block cover can be undone for blade changing while restrained on an aluminium link chain.

The infeed and outfeed table sit down in line with the machine bed and they can be levelled by undoing adjustment bolts.

In use

If you aren't used to a thicknesser of this type, its potential might not be obvious. I already have one, albeit a professional model, but it doesn't take up much space. With just one machine you gain the advantage of thicknessing all sorts of stock – so long as an existing sawn surface is flat this machine will take care of the rest. Once one surface is flat and smooth, turn it over and do the other face. Perpendicular edges can be flatted and squared on a tablesaw and then run through the thicknesser again if the stock isn't too wide. In other words, a compact machine with fold-up beds can efficiently and quickly produce timber ready to use and without needing an overhand planer most of the time. I have mine mounted on a low box so it sits out of the way below the nearest machine surfaces. The Craft model needed no setting up, as it cut parallel from side to side and the shiny bed didn't need any waxing first, the wood went straight through. I did start gingerly with the depth setting as I wasn't sure how capable the motor was of driving the wood through. In

The safety link for the cutterblock cover

One of the bed adjusting bolts – very easy to alter the height

Tightening up a bolt holding a blade. Note the height-setting jig

First a piece of softwood for a trial cut with rather a lot of chippings

This wide mahogany board went through perfectly

The anti-kickback pawls, rubber drive rollers and the cutter block

fact it coped perfectly, even with a wide board. Extraction is necessary as 'printing' of shavings on the planed surface occurred without it. I did get very slight 'snipe' – the step that occurs at start or finish of a board. I fiddled with the folding bed heights until I got it as good as possible considering a straightedge showed that beds and rollers weren't true to each other. Either side of the cutter block are rubber drive rollers and at the infeed side a series of anti-kickback pawls to prevent wood getting ejected. If wood does jam there is a standard rubber-booted on-off switch and a thermal reset button in case of overload.

A point to note – the cutter block cover is linked to the casting next to it, by a weak-looking aluminium link chain and two feeble little steel rings. This is done so you are reminded to refit it immediately you have done any maintenance. As there is no kind of safety interlocking, the machine can be run without the cover which is a total NO. The reason the security link seems so weak is not to do with saving money, it means if the link got caught in the running cutters, no great damage would be done to machine or operator.

On softwood there was very fine 'tramlining' from the cutter edge, but for some reason it disappeared when I put some wide hardwood through, probably a tiny burr was hanging on the blade edge which got rubbed off in use.

Conclusion

After my favourite, the compound mitre saw, a benchtop thicknesser is a must in my opinion. Being able to process timber ready for jointing is key to making a project. This machine should satisfy that requirement well in the home workshop. ■

Tech spec

Axminster AC318BT benchtop thicknesser
Motor input: 1,800W brush motor
Cutterblock dia: 48mm
Cut speed: 18000 cuts per minute
Feed speed: 7m/minute
Blades: HSS resharpenable (Axminster can provide this service)
Max depth of cut: 2.5mm
Max capacity: 318mm wide x 153mm high
Dimensions: 600 w x 360 d x 480mm h
Weight: 30kg
Price: £299.94
Visit: https://www.axminster.co.uk