

Made to work

The standard of the work you create can be a direct result of the quality of your tools, and the workbench is no exception. Find out more about a truly southern African bench that beats the best.

The workbench is probably the most important 'device' that any DIY'er could possess. Fair enough, the tools do most of the cutting, shaping, moulding and joining, but all of this takes place on a workbench. A workbench is an essential tool for a woodworker who uses hand tools, and it can be useful for power tool woodworkers as well.

There are many styles of woodworking benches from which to choose. Some styles reflect a craftsman's way of working, some are dictated by the work he does. Most benches have these two features in common: they are heavy and rigid enough to keep still while the wood is being worked, and there is some method for holding the work in place at a comfortable position and height so that the worker can use his tools with both hands.



🔧 A teak 2m-long versatile cabinet-making workbench.

Webster's Dictionary defines a workbench as 'a table at which work is done'. That is quite a broad description - by that definition, any horizontal flat surface, except maybe the ground, could be considered a workbench. The definition of a workbench as a table with vices for holding wood while the craftsman works it with hand tools works better. The main thing that distinguishes benches is the way the work is held in place. Most benches have more than one way to do this, depending on the operation being performed.

So where can a woodworker purchase a quality workbench? With the size and weight of superior benches, it doesn't make sense to import one from overseas, and many benches which are made by DIY'ers are never flat to start with. Bymore South Africa, formerly based in Central Africa, is providing the solution for serious woodworkers.

Having exported European style workbenches to USA for 25 years, and selling many benches in the United Kingdom, Bymore, led by John Cochrane, are now hoping to introduce South African enthusiasts to a new woodworking experience.

Reviewed by a woodworking authority

In January 2002, renowned British woodworking magazine, *Good Woodworking*, featured an exposé on the top workbenches on the market. Up against established manufacturers from Sweden, Germany and Britain, the southern African bench took top honours, walking away with a final rating of four and a half out of five for value for money, and five out of five for overall appearance and workability.

"As far as I can remember, this is the first time *Good Woodworking* has tested a product from Africa," started the bench analysis. "Axminster's Deluxe bench is built in Zimbabwe entirely from Rhodesian teak. It was apparently used for making railway sleepers before the days of concrete. I'm told the timber is plantation grown.

The bench comes carefully wrapped in polythene inside its carton. Heaviest of the lot at 82kg, you'll need help to put this beast together. The end frames are made up from 65mm x 35mm legs and 65mm x 44mm cross members. These are morticed and tenoned together. Stretcher rails measure 65mm x 32mm and have grooves into which the various side and end panels fit. These are a mixture of 7mm chipboard and 6mm ply. End frames are drawbolted to the stretchers, but the bolts are poor quality. It's worth buying some decent coachbolts from an engineering stockist.

Once you have assembled the storage unit and end frames,



📌 The Axminster Deluxe, a southern African workbench which was rated higher than any other bench by the United Kingdom's Good Woodworking magazine.

you get some idea of overall solidity. Rebates and grooves are very clean, and everything fitted together neatly on the test bench.

The laminated worktop is 40mm thick, built up to 90mm around the perimeter. Corners are finger jointed, and there's a deep 150mm wide tool well. This is 62mm deep and there's a slope at one end. There are two rows of 11 dog holes, plus a pair in the tail vice. Four sprung hardwood dogs are included, and these can be retracted below the top.

Vices are identical, with 350mm wide jaws, 90mm x 70mm in section. Their steel guide rods slide inside steel collars. Threads are heavy. The bench is provided with five drawers and a double door cupboard. There is also storage between the underside of the bench and the top of the cupboard for small, often-used tools. Drawer components are 13mm thick, and slide together easily with aluminium corners. Bases are chipboard. The cupboard doors are 20mm thick, and unique in having pegboard inner facings for mounting tools.

Apart from the hardware, the Axminster Deluxe is a superb, heavy bench. It's beautiful to look at and has plenty of cramping and storage facilities. Maybe it's just too good to use, though..."

In the same review, the closest competitor to the southern African entry was the German-built Anke 29, a beech unit

weighing in at 42kg, almost half that of the Axminster Deluxe. The Anke 29 scored four out of five for value for money and four out of five overall.

"Having been involved in selling workbenches in North America for 25 years and in Europe for 10 years, I realise that cold countries are our ideal markets," says John Cochrane from Bymore.

"Woodworkers have to spend long periods inside during winter and they find it necessary to have hobbies such as woodwork. South Africa (and Australia) are not good DIY markets for that reason, because most of us spend our leisure time outside. However, there are still many woodworking enthusiasts here who will enjoy working on a heavy workbench which has a flat top, bench dogs to hold workpieces and really strong tail and shoulder vices. Our workbenches are made to last a long time so they can be passed down from father to son," he adds.

"We are using exotic and stable African woods such as Rhodesian teak, African rosewood, blackwood and karri. Our benches bolt together and can therefore be tightened up at any future date to remain firm," concludes Cochrane. 🛠️

For more information, contact John Cochrane on 021-783-1214, email: teakbench@telkomsa.net or visit www.bymoresa.co.za