



January 2016 - Not so Simple -- Mandolin

A customer asked me to fit a transducer to his newly acquired mandolin. I said yes on the assumption that he knew that it would be feasible. He duly presented me with his mandolin and a Headway transducer. I realise that it wasn't going to be an easy job because I couldn't get my hand inside. I remembered that I had this problem before and used a pull-wire to get the transducer in place. So I said yes I would do it and then put it on one side.

When I came to do the job I realised that the thickness of the body, together with the style of tailpiece, didn't allow me to fit the pre-amps/jack socket in the normal place. The pre-amps/jack socket also acts as a strap button, similar to some people who have them on acoustic guitars. These have to be fitted through the end block but in a mandolin that is a small area.

Determined not to be beaten, I decided to cut a hole in the tailpiece to the same diameter as the pre-amps/jack socket. If I had chosen to drill it out, it would have turned out ugly and I might have even lost a finger or two. I took the tailpiece off and decided that I would cut a circular hole using a carbide cutter. Eventually I was able to get a perfectly deburred, half inch hole which left me with refitting the tailpiece and drilling a half inch hole in the wood in line with it. During the process, I had to make a couple of corrections due to the original strap button hole off centre, which tried to send me off course.

Next time I take on one of these jobs I will factor in the extra work in order to achieve the end result. I'm not sure the customer realised how problematic fitting this transducer was. Still, it looks as if it grew there or the tailpiece was bought already modified!



February 2016 - Alex Lifeson - Rush Guitar

I often get customers give me projects - for instance where they have thought about a design and bought the body and the neck, together with various hardware and then asked me to put the whole thing together such as this Alex Lifeson - Rush Guitar.

The customer found a suitable Stratocaster with Floyd Rose fitted. Some of these do not have the proper full cut out, so the tremolo sits on top of the body with no back-pull, so it required the proper full routing. Because this Alex Lifeson guitar had a special pickup - Bill Lawrence model - and different controls layout, the whole scratch-plate had to be made from scratch -- pun intended.

This required making a template so that I could cut out the odd-shaped humbucker and single coil pickups in one go. You will notice that there is no five-way sliding switch but it has been replaced by a three-way toggle similar to a Gibson Firebird.

You can see from the pictures that the controls had to be re-routed. With a complete set up, the customer got what he wanted - although there was one awkward moment when I found that the Bill Lawrence pickup he supplied had a damaged adjuster tag so it would not height adjust. A little bit of repair work where it wouldn't be seen allowed this to be as good as new from the outside.

When the customer came to collect the guitar he said that he had saved himself a lot of money doing it this way and yes, he could have bought one handmade but it would cost a fortune. He added that, even if he had bought the custom-made one, he would still have brought it to me for a professional setup.



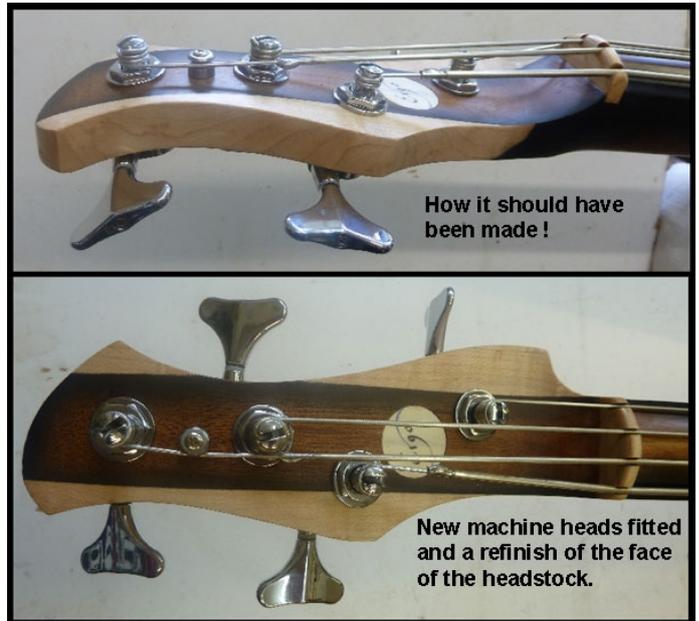
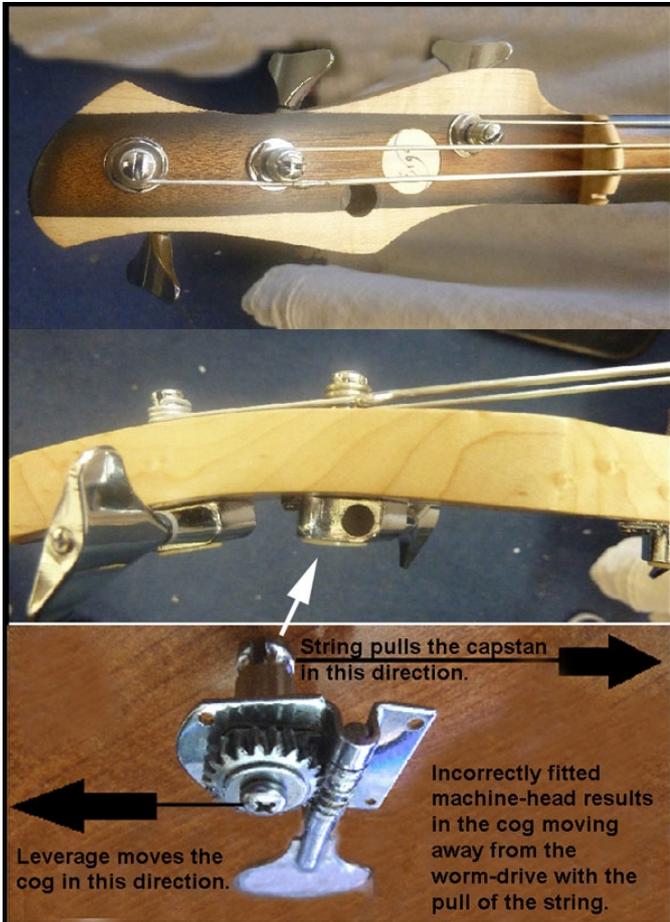
March 2016 - A Broken Stick Bass

A customer brought me an instrument called a 'stick bass'. It is nothing short of a double bass without a body and it delivers its sound through a transducer. In fact it is closer to a plank of wood similar to the original Les Paul prototype.

The customer explained that he had other people replace the machine heads because they kept breaking! WHY?

It didn't take me more than a couple of seconds to realise that the person who had built the bass had blatantly disregarded physics and geometry. He must have thought that he could fit the machine heads any way he liked OR he cocked-up drilling the holes in the head-stock and making the tuner/buttons too close to the top. Either way, fitting the machine heads in this way allowed them to self-destruct.

Regardless of the design faults (positioning of the holes), I ordered some new machine heads, refinished the damaged front face and fitted them in the correct manner. From the pictures below you will see that the leverage caused by a string should force the cog fixed below the shaft into the worm drive allowing tuning to take place. This can be seen clearly on a Fender precision bass open type machine head I have used to illustrate. If it is done the opposite way round, the cog pulls out of the worm drive, damaging the tips of the cog and the result is a mash of metal. For this reason it is always important to fit the correct machine heads -- for example left-handed machine heads on a Stratocaster will not go on a right-handed version.



Left = Before Right = After

April 2016 - The Pressure is on Fretting I

Recently I have had a spate of customers bring me guitars which they say "keep going out of tune". Sometimes the problem is simply that they don't put enough turns on the machine head capstan (3 or more is best) - I use a 'string lock method' as shown on my Standard Guitar Restring.PDF.

The second most common cause is that the strings have not been 'pre-tensioned'. Imagine what would be the situation if you were playing a gig and you bent the string in a 'middle-eight' and it went south by 1 semitone? Anything else you play is badly out of tune so the answer is to bed the strings in as soon as you put them on so it doesn't happen. This pre-tensioning is covered in the 'words' for the Standard



Fretted with normal pressure gives a typical 8% to 10% as seen here.



Too much fretted pressure and you can achieve 100% error to F# !!!!

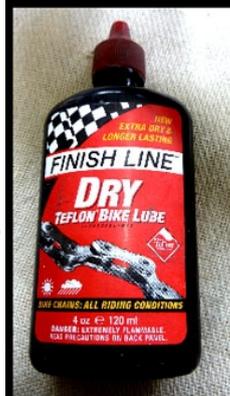
Guitar Restring.PDF. Stretching them too much will destroy the string so it needs to be a calculated stretching/tensioning.

The third and most prolific reason for tuning issues is people press down too hard on the frets when they are playing. A good guitar teacher from day one should be instructing on the amount of finger pressure needed to voice the fretted note. A friend of mine who was having guitar lessons saw a video on YouTube when it was explained that "you press down as hard as you can" WRONG! WRONG! WRONG! This problem only came to light when his guitar teacher tried to alter the intonation to suit his massive finger pressure. So why didn't the teacher notice the error in his execution of a chord? Why make guitar playing harder than it needs to be?

Recently, I had a customer with an ES335. In his case he had fitted it with Gibson Brite Wire strings. These strings are, in my opinion, one of the worst strings out there as they don't intonate properly and the stability is poor, either that or the ones I have been given are poor fakes, but it seems a coincidence they don't conform like other reputable strings. After all, the odd thing is, I see comments suggesting that these strings are what Gibson fit as standard on all their production guitars and haven't had a problem with those. If that's the case, the strings customers have provided me with are definitely fakes! Nonetheless, even with these strings on, I found the tuning was reasonable to good and stable even if the intonation was wrong.

The other thing that this customer had done was fit the strings in a 'wrap-over' way like Joe Bonamassa - however he had not elongated the string wrap by feeding it onto a spare ball end. This stops the nasty kink as it comes out of the tail piece giving it a smoother wrap over. So I tuned the ES335 guitar to pitch and give it to him to play. I have not worked on the guitar at this point. It's important to see how the customer plays a cord - but wait - after a couple of chords he then returned the guitar!

..... obviously he's not happy with perfect tuning done 15 seconds ago..... after being satisfied all is ok, he plays a few chords and then gives me the guitar back. I am perplexed with this re-tune, so I immediately re-check it on the tuner. What I found was that he had re-tuned most of the strings 20% flat in order to deal with pressing down too hard on the fretted strings. He had used that 'Bert Weedon's Play in a Day' method of using the fretted 5th (and 4th) against the open string. So here you see that if the fretted string is pressed too hard and taken as good, the end result is a poorly tuned and poor sounding guitar!



Above:
I am not a fan of the wrap-over method of stringing a Les Paul or ES335 but if you do it, then do it like Joe Bonamassa's Tech does it and use an old ball-end to lengthen the string wrap away from the back edge. This way there are no sharp wrap edges and the string sits smoothly around the corner/edge.

Side:
PTFE is one of the most slippery substances known to man - Some people know it as Teflon. The cheapest, cleanest product is this bottle of Finish Line Teflon Dry Chain Lube I use as a nut slot and bridge lubricant. Shake well before use.

The nut slots are a point that can pinch a string but this is easily checked by pressing down behind the nut and seeing if the pitch of the string on the tuner comes back to the same note. If it goes high it is snagging in the nut slot. Sometimes this will happen on the bridge too but is less easy to determine. I now use a PTFE lubrication in the nut slots to reduce friction. It's a lot cleaner than pencil lead and works better.

One comment on old strings - the intonation will become flattened in pitch, especially on the plain strings. Strings can deteriorate more quickly than normal due to any combination of hard strumming, vibrato, bending and the alkali-salts/electrolytic effect from perspiration off the hands. Each person has a different rate of perspiration - some players lose such large amounts of sweat through their hands that the tone and brilliance of the strings can be lost in one night's playing! Don't chase the intonation with adjustment, change the strings.

Finally to demonstrate the problem of pressure, I tune up and show the customer the fretted 1st fret on the bass 6th E string. My finger pressure gives an 8% to 10% sharp reading even on these suspect Gibson strings, which is about normal. I then carry on pressing down all the way to the fingerboard (wood) and the needle rises to an almost perfect F# on fretted F !!! - well, does that demonstrate the problem? I haven't said the reason for this.

Generally most frets are guitar 1mm or 0.9mm high. If 1mm is taken as 100% and we measure the 335 Gibson fret height, it comes out as 1.43mm - that is some 43% higher than standard. Now let us be clear on this, Gibson use two sizes of fret wire as do Fender.

- a normal 1mm approx and
- a tall fret wire 1.40mm to 1.50mm high

so doing this test on a 1mm dressed fret could be 0.9mm or 0.8mm high and is not going to give such poor tuning when pressed down too hard. The tall - depending on how much is dressed off the top to level - it will cause problems because the string is being stretched more with more finger pressure.

So the customer says he has a Rickenbacker and a Strat and he doesn't have a problem with these guitars. Sure! That's because the Ricky has 1mm fret wire which is then blathered in lacquer thus reducing the effective fret height to 0.8mm or less. The same would go for a lacquered Strat (unless it has tall fret wire).

So in conclusion, the massive amount of wear to the frets and fingerboard only keeps people like me in a job! I would prefer to hear a customer play chords that sound good - after all I am taking my pension now and taking the odd day off to go fishing!

May 2016 - National Town & County 1958 – Part 1

This guitars deserves its own little book: Covering May to August

I think I will have to stop taking on big projects in the future - they take way too much time! The following guitar a '1958 National Town & Country by Valco USA' is an example but one that also has some unique history attached to it. As it turns out, one of my connections with a London guitar auction house had recommended a customer bring his guitar to me for renovation. Some years ago, I renovated the Peter Green guitar which was sold at auction and an associated previous owner of this guitar was Duster Bennett - a rising star of the 60s who sadly died before his time. So when his son brought me his guitar I was privileged to renovate it back to its former glory. Apparently one of Duster Bennett's band members had kept the guitar to hand on to his family.

The picture below shows more or less the state the guitar was in when it came to me. The neck was attached but was severely dented on the back and most of the frets were badly worn. The body had no scratch plate fitted and the electrics were presented in a separate bag, so way back in the 60s and 70s it was clear that customisation had taken place but on a relatively primitive basis. Someone had tried to fit an extra pickup in the centre and the original pickups had been monkeyed around with to the point that the housings had split open and were at the wrong height. It was clear that there were several projects here all rolled into one:

Project 1: the neck needed renovating which meant doing a complete re-fret. This in itself was not an easy matter as there was no truss rod within the neck so it was difficult to predict what the final shape of the neck would be after applying the load from a set of strings tuned to pitch.

Project 2: rectifying the body was slightly simpler based on the fact that most of this work was underneath the scratch plate and would not be seen.

Project 3: rather tricky, dealing with the electrics and the pickups which required making a new scratch plate, new pickup housings and wiring it back together.

Project 4: rectification of the bridge and tail piece and setting up the guitar.

So the neck requires a little bit more explanation. This neck was described as the 'National Stylist Bolt-on-Neck'.



At its main core is an aluminium fluted casting with a wooden fingerboard and a thick wooden outer veneer and onto this was spliced a wooden head stock. The heel section was aluminium and fitted to the body with a single bolt and two screws.

Remarkably, levelling the fingerboard and re-fretting it came out very well when loaded up with a new set of strings. There were obvious problems such as the binding being loose and it needing a new nut and the back of the neck was full of dings and was worn away, so a sympathetic filling of dents and a black lacquer coat gave the guitar a new lease of life. At some point, the metal fitted decal with the word 'National' on it had gone missing and Duster Bennett's son had managed to get one of a similar size to the original to replace it from a National Amp. The only problem was that the locating pins were in the wrong place but, with a bit of clever placement of the logo, new locating holes were drilled which covered the old ones and the decal was fitted.

June 2016 - National Town & County 1958 – Part 2

Repairing the body seems a simple repair job from the layman's point of view, because it cannot be seen once the scratch plate is fitted. The problem was with the unseen aspect, though - the pickup mountings required screws to be screwed into the top but the wood had been cut away underneath so they would have only been attached to the scratch plate and this is not the way in which the guitar was originally made. Fitting a block of wood to the area was a simple fix, allowing the pickups to be screwed down into the wood. The more difficult job was recreating the original scratch plate design. The first modification was to use



polycarbonate plastic as opposed to the original Perspex. The problem with the original was its fragile nature - any undue force on the jack socket or knobs causes the scratch plate to crack or split in two. In fact, I made a template of the original by gluing back together the original pieces.

The problem I was faced with was the clever way in which the plastic had been routed on the inside underneath the scratch plate by about 1 mm to cause a line effect. So a clear piece of polycarbonate was first machined down to shape and 2 attempts made at the recessed decorative line before admitting defeat. I then made a template of the scratch plate and recessed this, which allowed me to rectify any mistakes before actually cutting. With a template now finished, I was able to machine a new one out all in one go, including the rebate line. Without taking it off the template I now sprayed the whole of the underneath black. When the paint dried it was then put back onto the routing machine and the rebate line was re-cut, cleaning out the black paint. Then the rebate line was sprayed with silver so that when the new scratch plate was taken off the template a silver line was visible on the black scratch plate. Job done - well almost!

Masking tape was then applied to the face of the scratch plate to prevent it being scratched and also as an aid to refitting the pickups.

July 2016 - National Town & County 1958 – Part 3

The Town & Country pickups that were presented to me were in bits, held together with tape. It was obvious looking at them that there was a design flaw - when someone tightened the side screws to hold the pickup in situ too tight, they split. It was a simple design but not tested - either that or the plastic became brittle with age. At the point of the screw it would actually cut the pickup in two especially when both sides had applied pressure. The pickup height was pre-set very much like the Rickenbacker with no possible adjustment, which caused the neck pickup to be louder.

I took the opportunity of increasing the height of the pickup by adding a few millimetres of wood, glued to the original to make the mould template for creating a new casting.

Having never moulded plastic components before, it was something of a trial and error process. I made several components which turned out ok but the colour was not quite right. I eventually managed to achieve the right colour before the mould started to show signs of wear!

On account of this being a poured mould, there were some elements of flashing or webbing. This was easier to deal with rather than having holes in the casting, which I luckily avoided.

When I put these pickups together it was a delicate operation. Many plastics today have a certain amount of give in them but there was limited flexibility in the resin that I use so I made sure that I didn't fall into the trap (like others before) of using too much pressure from over tightening screws. I tried to incorporate a 'closed base' but soon found that this was impossible when trying to adjust the pickup pole pieces. You will see from the pictures that I was forced to modify them with a milled slot to allow for these adjustment screws to be lowered.



And finally to explain the row of knobs - well, they are tone and volume for each separate position of Neck PU only, Both PU's and Bridge PU. Pickups selected by a rotary switch. The rotary knob had also been damaged by the locking screw and torque applied in selection because they had not thought to use a metal insert. With some of the resin that was left over from casting the new pickups, I made another knob using the original to create a mould and I fitted a brass centre. This did not have such fine detail as the original but was very passable if you

weren't told about it. My fallback position was to just use one of the cream chicken head amplifier knobs. I added my own touch by painting a small dot black dot to show what had been selected. This will be shown in the final photos.

August 2016 - National Town & County 1958 – Part 4

Like so many guitars made in the 60s, there was a bit of a slapdash attitude when it came to assembly. Not much has been said about the neck to body joint. Whilst it was a fairly simple affair it did require a small amount of shimming in order to get the right neck rake angle. In fact I got it wrong the first time, trying to match the strings/action with the bridge that I was given. This led to me cutting away at the scratch plate in order to accommodate the shallower angle. I then realised that if the neck was correctly fitted in relation to the scratch plate, it should be correct at the bridge. So, the realisation that the bridge was not original -- or at least part of it was not original. It was clear that in order for the bridge to work correctly it needed to be set higher. So, I had to make a new scratch plate and start again - Grrrrr! In trying to maintain an original theme I added a section of Rosewood to the base and reshaped it and then everything started to fall into place. The first thing I had to do after getting the neck correctly fitted to the body was to make sure that the trapeze tailpiece was fitted securely. From the pictures you will see that it had been butchered and so drilling and fitting dowels was the only answer. Because the tailpiece had been fitted incorrectly the original saddles had been hacked about with at least two notches to each string. Replacements saddles were the simple answer.

It was a pleasure to complete the setup and fire it up! The first impression with this guitar is that there are a tremendous number of knobs. The separate volume and tone of each of the three settings makes complete sense and it does allow the player to choose appropriate tones for each pickup combination and then just rotate the rotary switch between settings. All in all, the guitar is a snapshot from the past and whilst it has a certain crude nature, the guitar was a pleasure to play. I am certain that the originals never played as well as this one -- but of course I would say that!



Apologies for some of the photos as a setting on the camera was knocked and therefore the pictures were not so clear as they usually are. The feedback from the customer was

Peter,

I have now had a few days to reacquaint myself with the National Town and Country that you undertook extensive repair works on. Last weekend I put off lots of jobs that I should have been doing and spent plenty of time playing it. In a word, it's fantastic! It's so much more playable than ever before, I don't doubt it is better than when it left the factory in the 50's.

The guitar sounds great and has plenty about it when pushed a bit! The perfect package - very playable but with undoubted vintage mojo.



September 2016 - John Birch Bass Part 1

One very troubled guitar came to me earlier this year. There was so much wrong with it I do not know where to begin. This guitar is the reason that many of my customers were put on a long waiting list. The guitar in question is a John Birch bass. It may not be any consolation to my waiting customers that the owner of the John Birch guitar had to wait about 18 months before I could even think about taking the problem on board. If I had the offer again, I would have refused it point blank. But as they say 'I've started, so I will finish it'.

The customer explained to me that the neck was badly bent and that he had broken the truss rod trying to straighten it. I think I would be rich if I had money for every time I have heard this from a bass player! On first inspection the truss rods seemed tight but there was no effect from it other than to loosen it. Which ever way you looked at it Robin Hood would have been proud of the curve in the neck. As the customer was about to depart my workshop, he casually pointed out that the electrics had never worked since someone had tried to re-wire them! More bad news.

The glue used to attach the fingerboard to the neck was malleable and I eventually removed it after initially negotiating location nails for the fingerboard. There was one hairy moment when detaching it over the body because the joint was closer to the surface on one side than the other. As the truss rod had not broken, I quite expected to take out the biasing fillet or box channel but on removing the fingerboard there was no sign of either!

Now my problems got worse. I drew a line from the anchor points to the adjustment nuts, fitted a carbide cutter into the Dremel and went looking for the depth and position of the hidden truss rod.

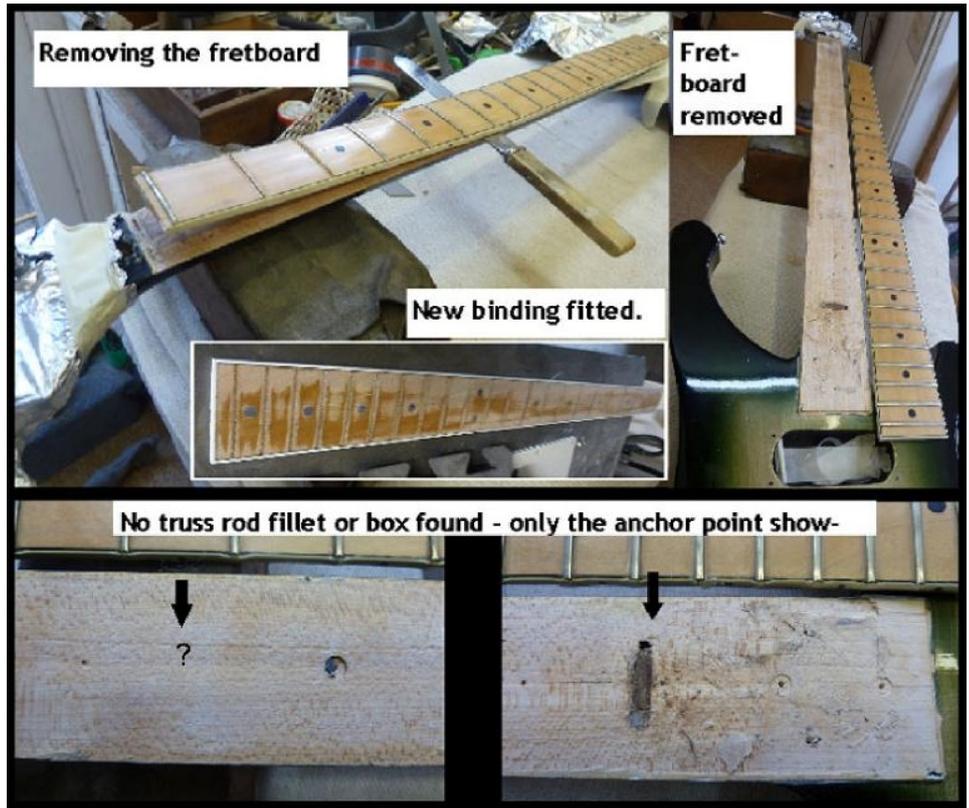
To my surprise the deflection of the rod was only 2 mm so it was no surprise that the truss rod fitting was nothing more than useless. I used a carbide cutter again to separate the anchor point and hammered the truss rod out of the guitar.

Now work could begin on fitting the truss rod properly, allowing more control over the neck. John Birch had thought himself clever in fitting the truss rod embedded sideways into the neck and then gluing the other side on before shaping and carving and fitting. There are so many things wrong with the design of this neck that I would sum it up as it should have:

- Not made it so thin,
- Been laminated for strength and to reduce dead spots,
- Had a controllable truss rod with good deflection
- Lastly, had the foresight to deal with the severe leverage of the very long neck when joining the body.

Just when I thought that I needed to fit a new truss rod, the neck stock was badly warped like an aeroplane propeller. So now I had to put the neck into a jig and, with moisture and heat over several days, twist the neck the other way in order to straighten it.

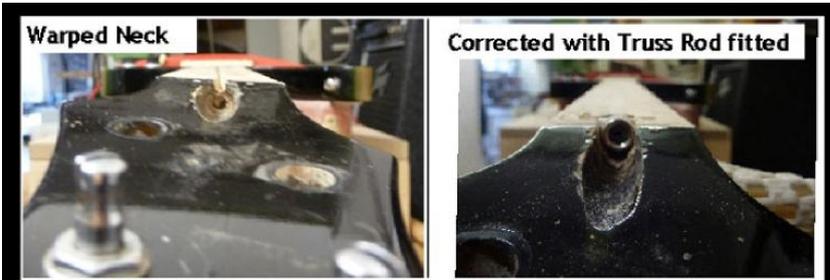
Then I could finally begin with fitting a new truss rod. Just so that I didn't get caught out, I made a double acting rod with approximately 6 mm worth of deflection, which is enough to keep any neck straight up to the point where it joins the body.



Normally fitting the fingerboard onto the neck would have been a straightforward situation except that the wood was very wet when the guitar was made and as it dried out the frets had pushed the binding off the fingerboard. In a previous life much of the binding had cracked and some of the frets had been badly mutilated. Whilst it's a long way around it was simpler to remove the frets and rebind the fingerboard and then put the frets in afterwards.

Each side was made up of one black and one white strip of binding the position dots were duly placed. A new nut was made because the old one had to be cut out and you will notice that it has a Zero fret.

Irrespective of my preparation for removing the fingerboard by putting scorelines down the sides of the lacquer, sometimes the fingerboard separated in a different place and small chipping was inevitable. This meant that time had to be taken to blend in the original paint to the edge of the binding, together with lacquering the fingerboard ready to take the frets. New frets were fitted and even though I had taken into account my usual assessments for the leverage of the neck, I was later to be in for a complete surprise!



Note how shallow the rod is below the surface - the 2 indents are where the 12th fret marker dots have been drilled. Its hard to see but between the zero fret and 1st there are no less than 4 small nails - used for positioning the fingerboard when gluing up.

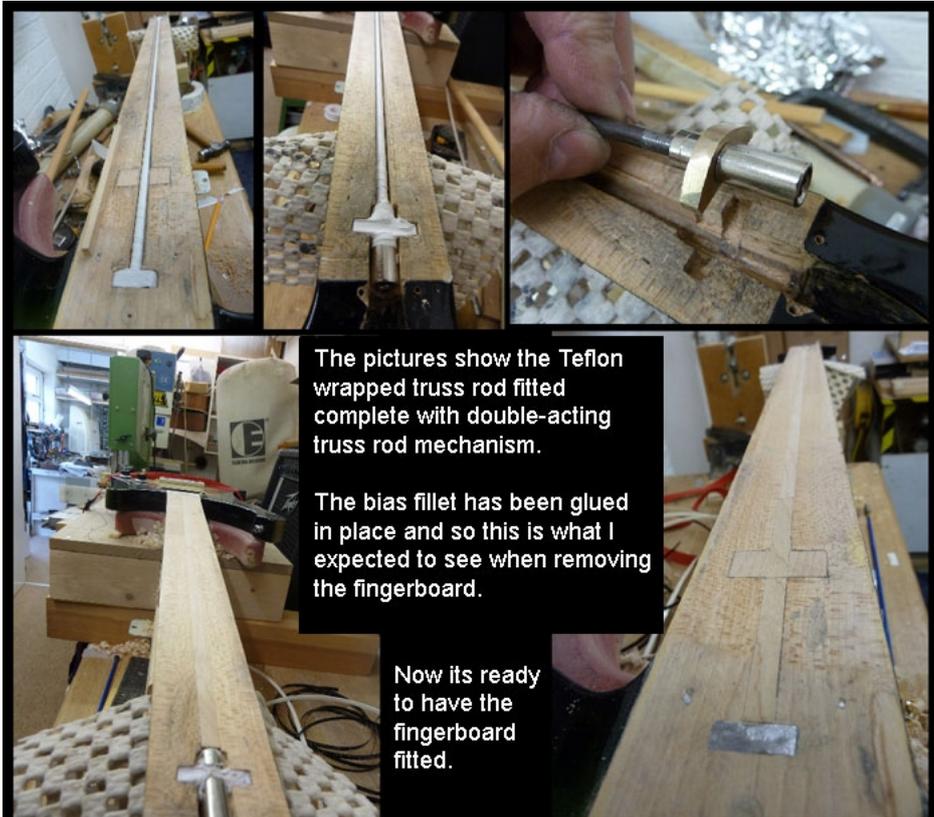
See how the wood has shrunk and frets have pushed the binding off.



Digging to find the truss rod and how deep - or shallow - it was



The fingerboard now fitted, together with new binding. The fingerboard is treated with wood bleach to remove the dirt and bring back the colour.



The pictures show the Teflon wrapped truss rod fitted complete with double-acting truss rod mechanism.

The bias fillet has been glued in place and so this is what I expected to see when removing the fingerboard.

Now its ready to have the fingerboard fitted.

October 2016 - John Birch Bass Part 2

The re-fret on the John Birch Bass went well. I loaded the strings 2 semitones below concert pitch and adjusted the truss rod to see how it would settle over 24 hours. It also allowed me to look at the bridge only to find that this had been a botch in relation to the fitted neck. Basically the neck was glued in at the wrong angle. No way was I going to be able to rectify that. The bridge had been made to run in a double flange for height adjustment. This was in addition to saddle height. I found that I could not get the bridge low enough for the low action I wanted. So with this information together with a neck that was always badly bent, one can only conclude that it always had a very high action. My trusty Myford Super 7 lathe came into action and I machined off the lower flange so that the bridge could sit flush with the body. This presented another problem because the ball end of the string would not enter into the back of the bridge without jamming on the body. I found that gluing a thin piece of brass to the rear underneath was just enough to give clearance.

The John Birch guitar is finally put back together. The pictures below show the re-fret together with the new bound edge. The edges of the fingerboard are now blended together with tints and lacquer.



As you may have gathered John Birch is not one of my favourite guitar builders and while he had become famous for making powerful pickups and Slade guitars I personally believe he failed miserably at understanding some of the principles of guitar making. I remember a Les Paul guitar came in with a neck pick up so powerful it should have been used in a scrapyard. I found that the guitar would never stay in tune unless it was 25 mm away from the string! I set it 15 mm below the actual pickup ring! Only then would the intonation be correct (within reason) as you moved up the neck. In true form these pickups were also too powerful and out of balance.

Back to the Birch Bass - just when I thought I was close to finishing, I had those darn electrics to deal with. One helpful chap on the Internet had actually posted the circuit diagram for the guitar. Unfortunately, he had not put the value of the capacitors - probably didn't know them. On the assumption that the capacitors that I already had attached to the pots were the correct ones, I wired in accordance with the wiring diagram. It became clear that the wiring to the rotary switch was incorrect. When corrected, it had 3 settings which only worked when BOTH PU's were selected - it begged belief that it gave;

- out of phase
- in phase
- out of phase.

Having two 'out of phase' is completely pointless because the sound is exactly the same when you rotate the wiring as opposites. In order not to confuse the customer more than needed, I reset the rotary so that it was either in phase or out of phase -- job done!

Getting the sound for each pickup to have separate volume with a treble to bass passive sweep tone control proved impossible. After spending hours running in to days, I decided to use G & L's treble and bass passive filters for each of the two pots. Yes, he lost one volume control but now had individual treble and bass in its place. I did experiment with various capacitors to improve the bass but as the experts will tell you, you cannot add to a passive system - only take away.

The only niggle with this stereo system was the requirement to use a Y lead (or stereo jack plug to mono) which I had to make up specially. Finally, I was able to bring the guitar up to full concert pitch and adjust the action accordingly. What transpired over the next few days was both a shock and a learning curve. I could maintain a dead straight neck with the truss rod - success. You may know that truss rods do not have any effect over the body area but I was shocked to find that the neck leverage had created a small upturn over the body. It had gone from fall-away to upturn within days. I had been well aware of how thin the wood was between the neck and the body top and also how thin the fingerboard was when cleaning up to refit. There was no room to adjust the wood so the only solution was to take the upper fret height down. This is not the correct way of doing things but reduces the problem.

The customer seemed very happy when he collected the guitar but it is one of the few guitars I was glad to see the back of.

My reluctance to remake a badly made guitar may come across -- partly because the original guitar maker takes all the credit for something that was an abomination to start with. In this case, I was caught off guard and didn't really appreciate how bad the instrument was from day one. It was only when taking the guitar apart, I could wholly appreciate my predicament.

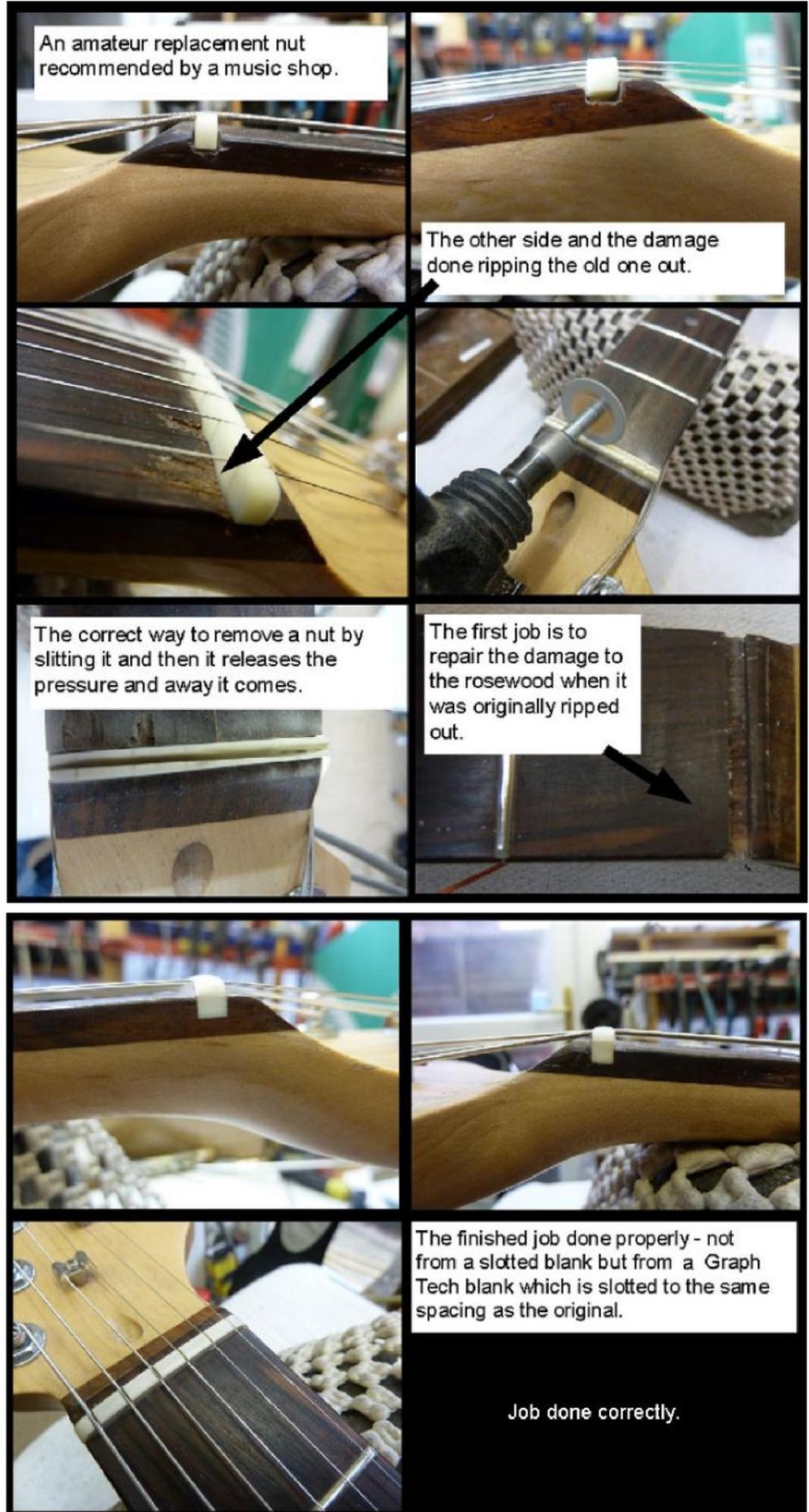


November 2016 - A Nutters Job

So I get a phone call from a chap who says his mate needs a new nut putting in a Stratocaster. I said that it would be a couple of days to do that particular job but apparently he couldn't wait and his local music shop sent him to someone to do it for him while he waited.

At the end of the week the customer brought a guitar in for a setup along with his mate who had a rather sheepish look on his face. I was horrified at the work that had been done to the friend's guitar. After drilling down on how much it had cost him, the chap replied that it had cost him nothing! I could not get my head around the idea that somebody had ruined the guitar, done a really bad job but had enough guts not to charge for the damage done. And he did this all while the chap waited and looked on! Into the bargain the strings were set really high and as you will see from the pictures, the nut was wedged in, not even sitting on the bottom of the slot. Apparently this chap who effected this repair is quite proud of the fact that he puts guitars together and sells them.

The pictures here will show you what it requires to take the nut out properly without damaging the fingerboard. I have had people tell me that "it's easy to change the nut in a Stratocaster -- all you need to do is to hammer it sideways and out it comes".



Well sometimes this happens but more often than not it is glued in place and you are more likely to take a chunk of wood out of the side or the end section of the fingerboard will split off.

So, by splitting the nut near as dammit all the way down to the bottom, pliers can be used to squeeze the nut together and take it out without damaging the surrounding area. In this case, an off-the-shelf nut would have been too thin. A new one was fashioned from a thicker piece of Graph Tech nut blank. Once the slot had been cleared out and the bank was sitting on the base of the slot, the sides could be shortened so that they were flush to the sides. It is then only a matter of setting the correct string spacings and cutting them down to the correct height. This all takes time and is not a five-minute job. So the guy with a sheepish look has had his guitar restored with a lesson learnt. I didn't charge for repairing the fingerboard but so wish that he had gone back to the guy who did the damage and asked for compensation just to make him think twice about what he was doing.

December 2016 - "They could only say sorry"

It's rare for me to buy a new instrument but by making a guitar you understand what goes into it in the cost of the materials. So at my disposal I had some bass guitar parts but after looking at the price of the modified Fender Squier I realised it just wasn't worth the effort of making something similar. I had a few of these Chinese Squiers recently and found them to be very good so, as it was coming up to Christmas, I decided to treat myself. Please note that I paid the going rate online just like many of my customers - no special deals.

I ordered the bass from a large mail order company and sat back and waited for it to arrive. It arrived the following day and I was impressed to see the courier lumbering down the drive with a big box. As he got closer the alarm bells started to ring as I could hear the instrument rattling around like a pea in a pod but I duly signed for it and then opened the box.

After having set up Fender guitars from retail shops I am well aware of how they are delivered to the retailer - double boxed. This guitar had been taken out of its original Fender box, cloaked in some thin foam and then the big box was sealed. Looking over the bass, I found that something had impacted the back of the guitar, chipping the lacquer. Grrrrr! My next step was to complain to the mail order company that they have delivered a damaged guitar. I explained that the best form of transporting the instrument would be to have one cardboard box inside another with adequate packing - dare I tell them their job. The reply back was that they would replace the guitar and collect the original and "they could only say sorry and they were surprised as it doesn't normally happen".

So, some two days later the courier arrived with the guitar. I could see straight away how much lip service I had been given because the guitar was being carried down the drive by the courier in the original Fender box -- which was unopened. An immediate glance at the outside of the box showed that it looked like someone had emptied a Kalashnikov into it! - And the Mail Order company are surprised? I refused to sign for it and opened the box while the courier waited and saw that my fears were founded with this guitar having also been damaged on the back and the sides. The guitar was returned 'unsigned for'. After an irate e-mail back to the company I got the same annoying "we can only say sorry" comment asking me if I wished for a replacement. This time the manager of their mail order department assured me that they would deliver the guitar as requested.

So third time lucky the guitar was delivered with the Fender box packaged inside another one. However, it was clear this is not standard practice as, to my surprise, I could see that to fit the bass guitar in its Fender box inside another, they had had to specially make a box by piecing two together!



After unpacking the guitar, at last I found I had got one in one piece - hooray! The footnote on this subject just outlines the poor professionalism of one of the biggest mail order companies in the UK when I noticed that the delivery note had a special box for comments. Within this box the manager had written "the customer requests that the guitar is sent with one cardboard box inside another." So if you received a damaged instrument for Christmas it was almost certainly because of poor and careless packaging on behalf of the mail-order company.

Two days later I fancied buying a lap steel from a German mail-order company and, some 4 days later, the courier arrived with a large box. The irony of this story is that the lap steel is not much bigger than a computer keyboard and yet it arrived in a box bigger than the one used by the British mail order company to deliver my bass. Sure enough the German company had not left anything to chance and was full of airbags -- almost struggling to find the lap steel nicely situated in the centre. Needless to say the lap steel arrived first time in perfect condition without any damage.

Although the British MO company had not charged for delivery, they had paid out for 3 deliveries and 2 return boxes, so 5 deliveries in all. On the basis of these deliveries costing at least £7 each way, that is at least £35 in all just because of not wrapping the product with due care and attention. In addition, they now have 2 damaged guitars to sell off cheaply. So it is a much a bigger loss to them than £35.

Just to show how narrow minded some mail-order companies can be, one company I knew would send a guitar out in the same box as the practice amp so that they didn't have to pay for two parcels and then wondered why the guitar had got rammed into the amplifier - well, I would leave that for the Who band to do.