

In Praise of the Slow Pot

Or Why I use the “Leach” style treadle kick wheel.

The Leach treadle kick wheel was built in Australia by J. H. Wilson. Under licence to the Leach Pottery in England. I first came across this most excellent potters wheel in 1970 at The National Arts School, East Sydney Technical College, Ceramics Dept.

When I first sat on this wheel, I was at home. It was like it had been custom built for me. I wasn't aware at the time how significant this encounter would be for me. Firstly, I would be spending the rest of my life with one. Secondly, I had already been using a J. H. Wilson wheel for the 3 years previous, while I was at high school.

The school where I first learned to throw on the potters wheel was equipped with a stand-up, front action treadle wheel and a motorised electric potters wheel, both built by J. H. Wilson of Canterbury. These wheels were OK but nothing in comparison to the Leach designed sit down treadle wheel.

Before the end of my first year at Art School, I had bought a second hand, early version of one of J. H. Wilson's Leach designed wheels. It was painted Government green, (not a good look) But, it had a beautiful action, a full copper tray, was perfectly comfortable and turned out to be virtually brand new. I loved that wheel and used it exclusively for the next 12 years in several potteries as I grew-up, or at least older, and moved from one rented workshop to another. They were light to carry, and being triangular, were easily manoeuvred through standard doorways. The seat and left hand side of the tray were eventually polished to an exceedingly fine glassy finish from the several pairs of Levi's that I wore out on the inside left leg seam. The only part that I ever had to replace was the leather strap that acted as a bearing on the crank shaft. I finally lost that wheel in a fire that destroyed our pottery in 1982.

That was when I started to look for a replacement. I have never seen an original early model wheel like it since, but I have found several very good later model wheels, I now have 4, and although excellent, they are not quite like that original wheel. Is there ever any love like a first love? Especially when it is lost tragically.

If you have never been lucky enough to try one of these wheels I strongly recommend them to you. You should at least experience it once in your life. I believe that it is the very best way to teach beginners how to throw. The

speed is always just right, slower than you might throw on an electric wheel, but just right. Throwing just that little bit slower gives the pots a lovely rhythm and feel that is so hard to achieve at the high speeds that are inevitably encountered on an electric wheel. Because the wheel can go fast – students just can't help themselves. It is so very common to find students cylinders, mugs and bowls all spun out and collapsed to flat discs due to the huge centrifugal forces generated at the higher speeds.

Throwing on a kick wheel has a limited upper speed due to the treadle action. This makes for a more considered pot, there is enough time to ponder the emerging form and make timely corrections so that the form evolves in its own way from your hands. There is never any need to think about the speed of the wheel, because as your leg is always moving, there is a tendency for you to adjust the speed unconsciously, as needed. On an electric wheel, your foot is stationary and a conscientious decision has to be made to move the foot the required amount to get the wheel to the speed necessary for the next step. This of course can be learnt, but it takes time to get students to think that way, the result is often that the pot is made in jerky steps and generally too fast.

The great beauty of this design is its suitability for small domestic items. The fly wheel, being made of wood, is quite light and is easily spun up to full speed with one kick. The weight of the fly wheel is appropriate for these small items and it is easily stopped with the right foot on the fly wheel as a break. I have seen these wheels with altered fly wheels, having had a layer of concrete added to make them heavier. This was not an improvement in my opinion. I liked the speed of the lighter wheel for domestic ware. I found them excellent for weights of clay from the smallest pot up to 3 kg.

I now have both an electric potters wheel, a Harrison electronic control heavy horsepower wheel (only the best after all). And several others to boot, but there is nothing quite like the treadle wheel for small domestic pots.

Steve Harrison