



sticks & crooks



what are they?

A stick is a walking aid, the effectiveness of which depends on its weight, length and the shape of its handle. A crook is a stick traditionally used by shepherds, the handle of which is the right shape to hook a sheep by the neck or back leg. A crook tends to be longer than a stick for this reason. A basic stick might be something you find on a walk in the woods, or can be something designed and crafted much more carefully.

A walking (or market) stick is 'nose in' - i.e. the nose of the handle faces in, whereas a crook is 'nose out' (see photos). A thumb stick has a V-shaped handle that your thumb slips through.

Sticks may well have been humans' first tools - as hammers / clubs and for defence as well as for walking. They can still be used for self-defence, of course - and the Irish shillelagh, for example, is definitely as much weapon as walking stick. Sticks became fashionable for gentlemen in the 17th century when it no longer acceptable to carry swords in public. Crooks almost definitely would have been first made by shepherds; rams' horns would have been available for handles - the perfect shape to hook sheep - to catch them or to rescue them from bogs etc.

The main shaft, or shank of the stick is wooden, and the handle can be crafted from the same piece of wood, or be attached separately. There can be a collar between the handle and shank, for more stability at the joint; and there is usually a ferrule or boot at the bottom of the shank, for contact with the ground. Handles can be of wood, bone, horn or antler. A good stick will be both light and strong.



'Nose-in' stick and 'nose out' crook.



Straightening a shank with a stick press.

what are the benefits?

- a stick is an invaluable aid for walking. It can be used to pull yourself uphill, and take pressure off knees and hips when coming downhill
- you don't have to be old to use a stick. It will make life a lot easier for your joints, and you'll be up and down mountains to a ripe old age
- they can be works of art - and that is generally the aim of professional stickmakers; and no two hand-made sticks are the same
- they can be made from natural, and often found materials, with minimum environmental impact in their manufacture
- it's a great craft skill that could be turned into a small business

what can I do?

You can buy a stick from a stickmaker (or stick dresser), or you can make your own - in which case a course might be a good idea, and there are several good books. A well-made stick can last several generations. The most common wood for sticks is probably hazel, due to its durability and flexibility. Willow, pear, crab apple and blackthorn are used too, but you can make a stick from any species.

Cutting & preparing the shank

Choose a pole for your shank carefully - as straight as possible and less than 1¼ inch (32mm) diameter or it won't straighten well. The standard joke is that the best time to pick your shank is when you see it, otherwise someone else will - but really, the best time is November to



Sticks can be works of art.

February, when the sap is down and you'll do less damage to the tree. Coppiced trees will produce straight poles, and cutting your shank is really a bit of coppicing, and will lengthen the life of the tree.

Let your shank season for 2-3 years under cover - so you'll be working on sticks that you harvested at least a couple of years previously. If you're going to be making more than one stick, tie a bunch of shanks together before storing / seasoning - it keeps them straighter, and you can steam / straighten them all at the same time, reducing your work load.

The first task is straightening. First you apply heat via a steam box, which you can make yourself from a metal pipe or a long wooden box. It needs to be around 4ft 6in (1370mm) long, or 5ft (1500mm) for crooks, and 4 in (100mm) wide / diameter. Close one end, make a small hole in the top to release pressure, and put 3-5 shanks in. Insert the tube of a steam wallpaper stripper in the open end and steam for around an hour. Then to straighten them, either bend them with your knee or use a stick press, which comprises two pieces of wood and a vice (see photo on page 1).

Fitting the handle and ferrule

You can find what you need for a handle from the wild - be it wood, horn, antler or bone - or you can buy it from a specialist supplier. Soft wood is preferable for a handle as it's easier to work. Horn goes through a process of boiling and pressing to make it flat.

Drill into your handle, measure precisely the length drilled and make a round peg at the top of the shank by whittling away the wood until it makes a perfect joint. Glue the handle to the peg with epoxy resin. You can fit a brass, copper or other type of metal collar too, for extra stability. Then shape the handle after it's fitted to the shank, with files and sandpaper. Shape against the grain until it's exactly what you want, and flush with the shank. Then use oil or varnish to finish it, or if it's horn, polish it with metal polish or even better - it's possible to get special horn polish! Finish the bottom of the stick with a rubber or metal ferrule, or boot. You can get one to fit the exact diameter of the shank and it's fixed with a brass nail.

Indulge your creativity

You can carve anything you like for your handle - animal heads are popular, including pets. If you don't rate your artistic ability, you can give a picture of your pet to a stickmaker to carve for you. You can carve your name, a slogan or pattern on to the shank using pyrography (carving with fire). You can embed a coin or a compass into the handle or carve celtic knot-work into it.

You could also find a pole around which has grown a climbing plant like ivy or honeysuckle. If you remove the climber, you may find that the pole is beautifully grooved, and will make a very interesting, twisted shank. You can achieve the same effect by winding copper wire around a coppiced pole as it's growing.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/sticks for more info, courses, links, products and books, including:
- Leo Gowan, *the Craft of Stickmaking*
- Clive George & Andrew Jones, *Stickmaking Handbook*
- David Grant & Edward Hart, *Shepherd's Crooks & Walking Sticks*
- thebsg.org.uk - the British Stickmakers' Guild
- woodworkersinstitute.com/page.asp?p=1808 - instructions on how to make a basic stick
- allgoodideas.co.uk/Correct_Stick_Length - how to work out the length of stick you need
- <http://onlineborders.org.uk/community/scm> - Scottish Crookmakers' Association
- [youtube.com/watch?v=Bw2aknkli88](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bw2aknkli88) - video on how to make a stick

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