

Trend Routasketch

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Launched a couple of months ago as part of Trend's range of new products for 2002, the Routasketch is a device that gives yet more flexibility to light-duty routers. Designed as an aid to the freehand cutting of words, patterns, shapes and sketches, and for the writing of signs in timber, it can be used in conjunction with most routers (not just Trend's) with either a 1/4" or 8mm collet.

Like most good ideas, its secret is its simplicity. The router is attached to the base of a stylus arm, so that when the stylus (which is double-ended) is used to follow a drawing or template, the cutter will move in line with it. In this way, an exact replica of the template is routed on to the workpiece.

Now, this is the kind of set-up that can be elegant and effective, or incredibly flimsy

and Heath Robinson. And it's certainly true that the unit, which is made mainly from plastic, seems a little flimsy when fully assembled, with the drawing plate in particular tending to dip down and requiring adjustment of the stylus height to compensate. Overall, however, quality is not unreasonable, considering the relatively low retail price of the package.

This might suggest that the Routasketch is a bit, er, sketchy to set up, but in fact it fits together well and comes with a really good user manual. This combines a wealth of illustrations with clear text, all of it in English, as well as a comprehensive list of spare parts. The only improvement I would suggest is that it could do with a few photographs of the Routasketch in use, along perhaps with a little more text on this subject, but even then you'll find that from breaking

the seal on the box to using the equipment like an old hand won't take more than a hour.

Basically, the unit has two main parts, each of them made up from a base, a U-bar and a height-adjustable arm. The copy stylus is fitted to one of these arms, while the drawing plate is clipped to the other.

The router base can accept no less than 41 different models, including most of the well-known brands, and you get a range of fixing screws to cover most eventualities when mounting your own particular machine. Trend even supplies a neat little concentricity kit, with which you can check that your collet is accurately set up in line with the stylus.

Also included in the package are 20 A4-sized drawings, of subjects varying from twee teddies and cutesy animals to a decorative fleur-de-lis, to help get you started. What you have to supply for yourself is a

Routasketch gives yet more flexibility to light-duty routers

suitable router and cutter – as Trend recommends the use of nothing more exotic than one of its 60 or 45-degree V-groovers, or a 3mm diameter straight bit, chances are this equipment has already been in your workshop for some time.

Using it

Once the workpiece has been prepared (it must be flat), it is secured to the workbench. Trend suggests using double-sided tape or clamps, but I found non-slip matting a more convenient option. The drawing plate must be positioned directly over the work and, once set, is clamped to the workbench, before the drawing to be replicated, along with its protective acetate sheet, are held to it by three table clips.

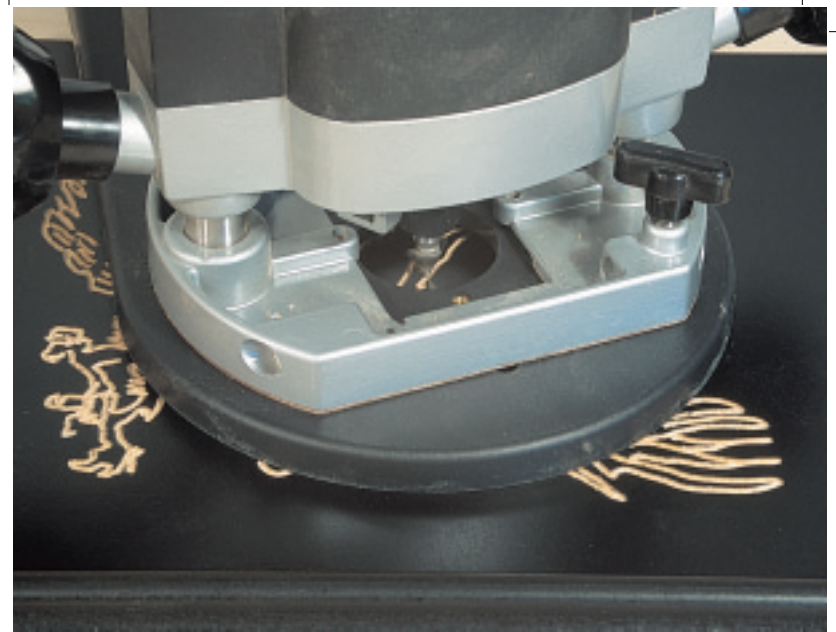
I found that it was worth employing a couple of strips of masking tape as an additional precaution. If you're routing a small workpiece, it's also advisable to use a piece of timber of exactly the same

thickness, as a support to keep the router base from tipping.

Once the plunge depth stop is adjusted and set, routing can begin. With the stylus aligned to the starting point on the drawing, the router is switched on and plunged into the workpiece. The knack of using the Routasketch is to watch the stylus, not the cutter. This feels a little odd at first, but keep hold of the handles and no problems should occur.

I found it best to start with the stylus at the furthest point away on the drawing and always try to pull the router towards me. Progress can be readily checked, but do not do what I stupidly did. Overly keen to check proceedings, I removed the work from the non-slip mat long before I had finished, for closer scrutiny... Realigning the drawing plate to the workpiece caused surprisingly few expletives, but that was probably just down to good fortune!

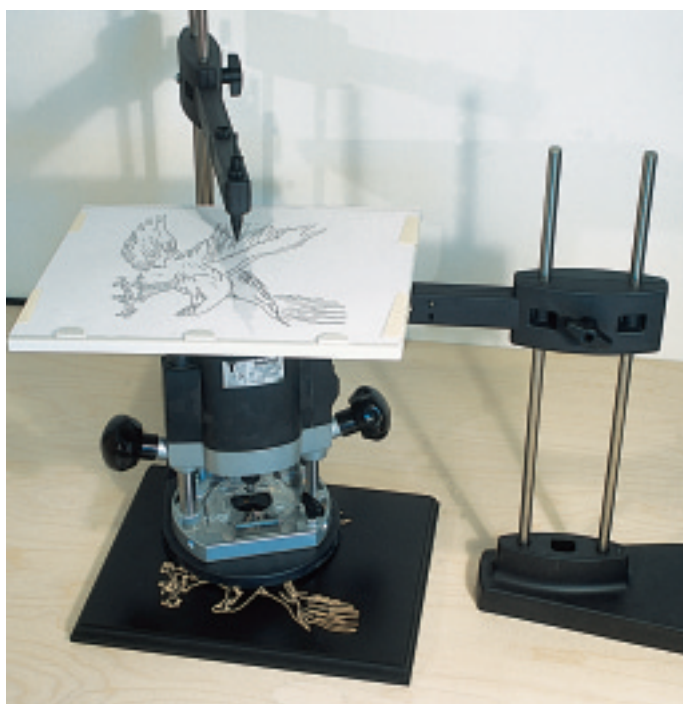
Operating the Routasketch is very straightforward indeed. Of course it helps if you have a



You can use any one of no less than 41 different routers with the system. If your unit has a 1/8" or 8mm collet, it's probably among them



Some of the pictures supplied by Trend look like refugees from a child's colouring book – but the effect at the cutting edge is impressive



While routing, the trick is to keep your hands on the machine and your eyes on the stylus – it takes a bit of getting used to, but works well

good router with a smooth plunge action: I used Trend's own T5, which proved a perfect companion. Line thickness can be varied for a less 'machined' look if you use a V-groove cutter and plunge it to different depths – the deeper you go, the thicker the line will be.

At first, I was disappointed with the line quality of some of the drawings supplied. They are a little wobbly and erratic in places (akin to the type you might find in a child's colouring book), but in fact they turned out to be well suited for use with the Routasketch, on which exactly uniform and symmetrical lines are much more difficult to produce.

For this reason, I found that complex routing projects seem to be best replicated with the pointed stylus-and-sketch method. On the other hand, very basic symmetrical and geometrical shapes are probably better suited to the

stylus edge follower and relief template system.

Either way, after an initial play with the system, the speed with which effective results can be achieved comes as a pleasant surprise. For this reason alone, the retail price of £29.95 plus VAT represents excellent value for money.

Costing so little, of course, the Routasketch is not to be confused with much stouter systems employed by professionals who, for instance, use them every day in the manufacture of signs. But for a hobbyist or tradesman who just needs to make a one-off item, or would like to explore the possibilities of enhancing his projects with routed designs, Trend's latest accessory should fit the bill nicely ■

INFORMATION

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