

THE UPSIDEDOWN KEYWAY

By Fletcher Madden

PART 1- THE UPSIDEDOWN KEYWAY

I saved the message and smiled. I enjoy helping people, especially when they sound as polite and straight-forward as the message on the voicemail had. The man on the message was a friend-of-a-friend who was house-sitting and he needed the services of a locksmith. Returning the telephone call, I learned that a lock needed picking. 'Mat' had accidentally left the keys to the front door inside when he left that morning. After gathering the needed information: building location, number, and brief door and lock description, I set a time to meet.



upside closeup

The weather was bright and sunny, with little wind when I arrived at the house. I knew from experience that the cold would numb my fingers if it took more than a few minutes picking the lock. "Mat" was already there. There were two entry doors with different locks on each. The front door was opened with a Weiser Powerbolt keypad and the door at the rear of the building used an unidentifiable key-in-knob lock. I find older, generic locks are often made with less quality and are simpler to open, so I began with that one. I looked at the first pin inside the keyway and saw that it was sitting on the bottom. "Hmmm", I thought to myself, "This keyway is upside down". The pins resting on the bottom needed to be manipulated downward. I tilted my head sideways and thought about my next move. Using a small hook, I applied a little pressure onto the tumblers. The response was smooth and unobstructed.

I applied light, top-keyway tension with the wrench moving from a ten o'clock position upwards. This was awkward, considering I am used to opposite, bottom –keyway tension at four o'clock downwards. When the sheer line was finally aligned and the plug rotated, I was pleased, but only temporarily. I very carefully applied increasing pressure on the keyway with a thin flathead screwdriver, so I would not bend my tension wrench, and the plug would not turn. Convinced I must have picked the lock in the wrong direction, I attempted to use my plug spinner. I winced with anguish as I heard all the pins re-set inside, confirming my unsuccessful attempt at using the plug-spinner.

'Mat' knew the keypad combination on the other door, "but", he told me, "The owner of the house never used it. I went to look at the other door and saw a deadbolt and a Weiser Powerbolt keypad. The deadbolt was not engaged. After 2 attempts to enter the code on the keypad, and hearing the motor inside whine with both attempts, the door still remained closed. I very casually picked the lock with the same tension wrench and small hook I had been using on the other door. When the door opened inward, "Mat" thanked me kindly.

The Powerbolt was making contact with the strike in the frame. This was the reason why the electronic keypad was not working. I explained the problem to 'Mat' and he was eager to correct any problems with the lock mechanism. I quickly preformed the strike plate correction as I describe in the following section.



SPF corpped closeup

PART 2 - THE STRIKE PLATE CORRECTION

Canadian weather is particularly harsh on door frames. The fog of St. John's, the rains of Victoria, the winds of Winnipeg, the Ice of Iqaluit and the snows of Ontario will each expand and contract a building. Some of the possible problems that can arise from extreme weather conditions are frozen locks, broken keys, weather stripping complications, loose door hinges or latch misalignment. I have been contacted several times this winter to correct door misalignments.

Frames often misalign under Mother Nature's slightest movement causing door latches to stop working as intended. Contact between the strike plate and latch causes a door lock to change from a smooth and free rotating lock cylinder to a stiff and difficult-to-turn keyway liable to bend and break over time A common repair on faulty doors is strike plate filing. Strike plate filing can be preformed with a dremel or a hand file. Discovering the exact location to apply the file on the contacting metal is a simple, yet carefully performed procedure.

The space between the latch and the strike plate may be wide enough for you to see where contact is being made, however sometimes a tightly fitted door will not provide enough open area for you to observe contact. If you are unable to see where friction is being made, look for markings on the strike plate itself. The abrasions might be on the bottom, side or top of the strike plate opening, or on two perpendicular sides as found on a corner. I lightly mark the strike plate with a pencil before filing.

The removal of the strike plate must be done delicately. A powerful drill will easily strip the screw drive. Place the strike plate in a vice, and only remove the marked area. Similar to impressioning, the filing, setting, re-filing and re-setting are necessary steps to creating the final product. A properly installed lock works smoothly and has uninhibited movement. The wood frame behind the strike plate may also need to be re-drilled or chiselled to stop contact with the latch. A hammer and sharp chisel are essential members of a locksmith's tool family.