

# PROBLEMS IN IDENTIFYING EARLY AUSTRALIAN COLONIAL FURNITURE

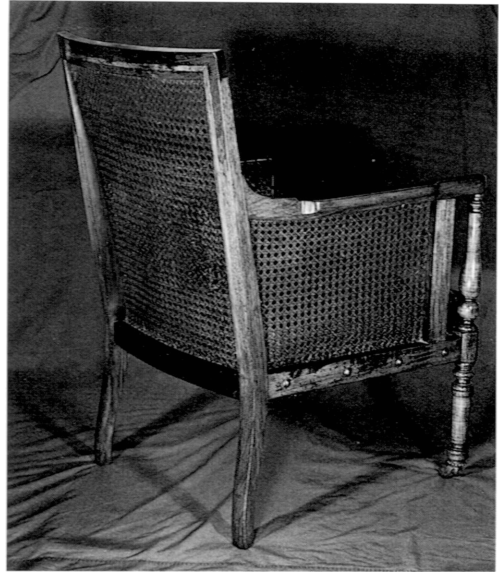
Rebecca Daniels

Colonised as late as 1788, one would expect the early history of Australian cabinet-making to be well documented and, consequently, straightforward. Unfortunately this is not the case. The complexities of dating, timber identification, labelling and the attribution to a place of manufacture are common difficulties which arise when sourcing Australian furniture. The aim here is not to provide solutions, but to highlight some of the problems associated with the investigation of colonial cabinet work.

The furniture illustrated in this article is not totally representative of Australian workmanship, which by its obvious difference is easily identifiable. The designs of most attributed Australian furniture are only loosely related to United Kingdom counterparts and the construction and finish is generally coarser. The focus here will be on two types of furniture. Firstly, articles made in Australia which have strong affinities with United Kingdom styles, not necessarily direct copies from pattern books or catalogues (although these also existed), but generic examples. These pieces closely resemble United Kingdom workmanship and have been constructed out of Australian timbers chosen because of their similarity to woods used in England, Scotland and Wales. Consequently, many of these pieces have remained undetected since it has been assumed that they are English, Scottish or Welsh. The second type consists of pieces made in the United Kingdom using Australian timbers. They are evidence that cabinet makers did utilise some of the wood imported from the new colony. In addition, it shows that even if an item contains Australian timber it is not necessarily a guarantee of Australian manufacture. To add to the confusion, further evidence will be cursorily addressed which suggests furniture was made in Australia using timbers popular in the United Kingdom. The traditional method of dating Australian furniture was to place it in a period corresponding to English history and then add a decade, or two, for the time in which a design would take to reach the distant colony. That approach is now discredited for a number of reasons. The recent publication of early shipping records shows that the frequency of ships arriving in Australia was greater than previously thought. In 1846, for example, approximately twenty-four ships docked in Melbourne Ports from the U.K. alone,<sup>1</sup> which indicates that there was steady contact with the mother country. Secondly, settlers brought furniture with them and often such pieces reflected current taste.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a constant flow of immigrant cabinet makers with knowledge of the latest designs in the U.K. must have provided some first-hand account of the current whims of the furniture trade. Therefore, the fact that Australian furniture design lagged behind that in the United Kingdom was more likely to have been the result of the conservative taste of the purchasers. A late reference, of 1872, suggests these new immigrants 'would have brought tools and furniture pattern books and designs with them'.<sup>3</sup> The number of design books in the Australian Colonies shows the importance of designs from the U.K. on the formation and development of Australian cabinet making. The diversity of styles in use is apparent



1. Bergère chair, Australian, c. 1825,  
blackwood

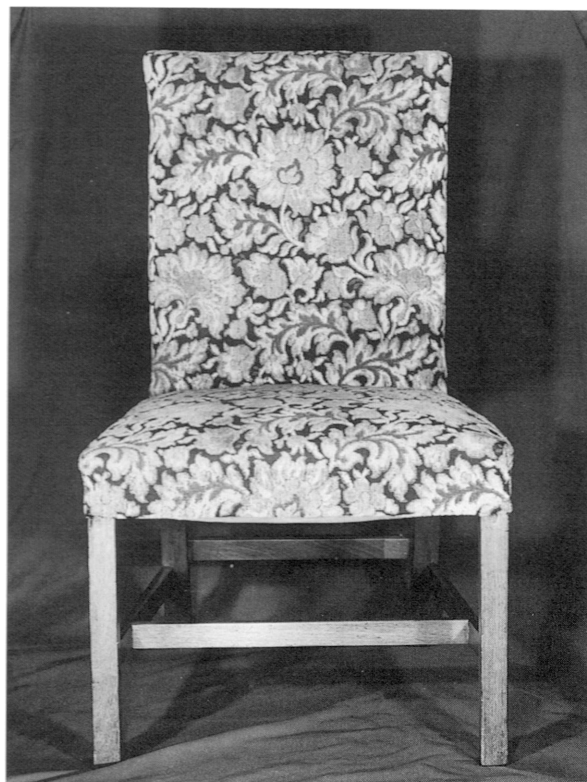


2. Side view

from the years in which the following design books were known to be in the colonies; the first recorded dates appear in brackets: *The Cabinet-makers' London Book of Prices* (1802), *Builders' Price Book* (1806), Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (1840) Blackie and Sons' *The Cabinet-makers' Assistant* (before 1857), William Smee and Sons' *Designs of Furniture* (inscribed on the cover of one copy, "William Hamilton and Sons", a firm of Tasmanian cabinet makers), George Smith's *The Cabinet-maker and Upholsterer's Guide* (c. 1855), and some Thomas King pattern books, which were auctioned in Sydney in 1848.<sup>4</sup>

Furniture imported from the United Kingdom had a large market in Australia from the earliest days. In fact, it was always considered more fashionable to have imported pieces than locally made examples. In March 1846, the *Sydney Morning Herald* complained that 'it was no uncommon thing to have ship after ship arriving in this Colony laden with furniture'.<sup>5</sup> These imports, although fluctuating, continued throughout the nineteenth century. In 1870, the total value of all English exports to Australia was £58,596, only just behind the combined total value of those to Europe, which amounted to £59, 555.<sup>6</sup> The constant arrival of this furniture was, therefore, another important source of contact with the newest overseas fashion.

The importance of timber in developing a new country cannot be overstated, and evidence reveals that finding suitable varieties, not just for building houses but also for furniture, was an early priority. The first reference to an Australian timber appears in the *Journal of Lieutenant William Bradley* in October 1788. The wood described is cedar, which he considered to be 'a bastard kind of mahogany . . . [that] makes tolerable



3. Upholstered side chair, probably Australian,  
1800–60, cedar

good furniture'.<sup>7</sup> Cedar became the most popular timber used in early Australian cabinet making. Its versatility meant that an entire piece could be constructed out of it, without requiring any secondary timber, even for the lining. The reference to cedar resembling mahogany is important as it indicates that the settlers searched for timbers that were close in texture and appearance to those used in the United Kingdom. Subsequently, this has presented problems with identification as polished cedar and blackwood, in particular, can be so similar to mahogany that some varieties can only be identified scientifically. When used in conjunction with, say, an English or Scottish design and high quality craftsmanship, establishing an Australian origin can be extremely difficult.

An example of this is a bergère chair of Regency style of c. 1825, (Figures 1 and 2) which was thought to be of English origin. Its manufacture suggests English construction in quality, although there are differences in the execution. For instance, the decoration consists of scratch carving used to simulate moulding, a very primitive technique considering the sophistication of the chair. The linear decoration ceases around the centre of the arm area which has been enlarged to accommodate padded armrests,

although the even patination and untouched timber indicates that these were never upholstered. These inconsistencies suggest that the chair was based on a design in a pattern book and made by a skilled chair-maker who was inexperienced in library seating and who compromised technique in order to achieve the desired effect.

The timber of the bergère resembles a delicately figured mahogany with mellow patination, but when streaks and fiddle-back in the wood were illuminated by the sun, the distinctive features of blackwood (often a dull dark brown offset by a brilliant orange) were revealed. This was later confirmed by scientific analysis. Provenance to the Western District of Victoria, a wealthy grazing area that was home to some of the early pioneering families, raises another complication associated with trying to locate the place of manufacture within Australia. Victoria was settled by many former inhabitants of both Tasmania and New South Wales and so it could have been made in either of those regions. It is one of the only known bergère chairs of Australian manufacture.

An upholstered-back side chair (Fig. 3) is another example of mistaken English origin. Its timber has a very faded, finely textured grain that was assumed to be mahogany. On closer examination it was revealed that it was actually cedar, and of Australian origin. An oddity in the construction of the H-stretchers provides another clue. On the top of the joint a v-shaped tenon has been made, but underneath it appears like a fine dovetail, suggesting colonial origin. Indeed, it could also indicate manufacture by one of the many Chinese working in Australia as cabinet makers, many of whom remained in the country after the Gold Rush. The use of v-shaped joints was a standard method of Chinese construction. Unfortunately, there is virtually no chance of locating the state, ethnicity, or identity of the manufacturer and, in this case, dating is also problematic because there are no fittings on the chair and its conservative structure places it anywhere between 1800 and 1860.

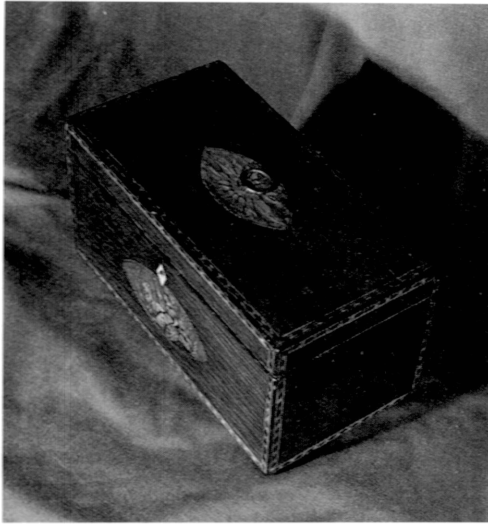
Considering that this chair would have been unfashionable by the nineteenth century, it poses the question of why it was made during that period. While it may be a piece of outmoded design reflecting the conservative taste of its patron, a common occurrence both in Australia and the United Kingdom, its simple structure suggests that it is more likely to be a replacement chair for a set brought out by a family. This practice was probably fairly common as the cost of importing a replacement could have been prohibitive, so the obvious solution was to have it copied locally.

One could assume that if the wood of a piece of furniture is scientifically identified as of Australian origin the item must have been made in the colony. The records of timber exports explode that comfortable theory. In 1795, the Captain of the *Experiment* took a cargo of cedar to the United Kingdom. This was described as 'much used in building, and also by turners, for bedposts and other articles of common household furniture'<sup>8</sup> A year later, the Chaplain of New South Wales sent a friend 'a four inch plank of cedar', which he feared 'will be scarcely worth your acceptance — it will serve however to make a table or some other little furniture, as a specimen of the wood which we here deem as valuable as any that grows in this country'.<sup>9</sup> If this article was made, it is an extremely early example of English furniture made of Australian timber.

As alluded to, the main timbers used in Australian cabinet making were cedar and blackwood (also known as lightwood). Of these, blackwood was noted for excellence in turning. Blackwood is usually associated with furniture from Tasmania, although it also



4. Pembroke table, English, c. 1790, casuarina, or 'bull-oak'. A note in the drawer states that this table was made from the first shipment of timber taken back to England from Botany Bay



5. Tea caddy, English, early nineteenth century, casuarina or 'bull-oak'



6. Caddy opened to reveal painted chinoiserie scene

grew along the east coast.<sup>10</sup> Other timbers frequently seen in furniture include huon pine (Tasmania), which can be mistaken for yew; musk (Tasmania), which resembles walnut, and the casuarina family (eastern States). Casuarina is often confused with partridge in Britain and indiscriminately labelled he-oak, she-oak, beefwood, New South Wales wood or Botany Bay wood in early references. These woods are highly figurative and were used both for furniture and as decoration, such as cross-banding or inlay.

While considerable amounts of Australian timbers were exported to England from the earliest days of settlement, in most cases their subsequent use is unknown. The occasional reference to the timber's fate can be fascinating. For instance, blackwood, which was exported in very large quantities during the second half of the nineteenth century, was used extensively by English piano makers<sup>11</sup> and by Scottish bagpipe makers.<sup>12</sup> Another tantalising reference, which appeared in the *Hobart Town Gazette* of October 1825, suggests that the cedar exported on the *Surrey* was used for 'repairing and ornamenting Windsor Castle'.<sup>12</sup>

Two pieces of furniture made in England in the late eighteenth century are extremely early examples of where Australian timber has been used. The first of these is a small Pembroke table (Fig. 4) which was recently donated to the National Gallery of Victoria. In the drawer an old note claims that the table was made from the first shipment of timber taken back to England from Botany Bay, which suggests a date shortly after 1790. This table appeared in an advertisement for Liberty's in the May 1947 edition of *Apollo*. While it is fascinating historically to have a documented piece, certain features of the table point to British manufacture, regardless of the note. The sophistication of the design, with its finely cross-banded oval top and slender proportions, make Australian manufacture unlikely at such an early date in the colony's history. In



7. Sofa table, English or Scottish, c. 1830, casuarina or 'bull-oak'

*Private collection*

addition, cabinet makers' accessories only started to become available after 1800 and it is unlikely that fine brass castors, as are used on this piece, would have been imported at a time when establishing a basic standard of living was the priority.

A tea caddy (Figs. 5 & 6) is also attributable to English manufacture, again based on the sophistication and early date. The use of an Australian timber combined with the subject of the inlaid scene, Britannia with the lion, suggests that the caddy may have been made as a souvenir of the discovery of Australia, probably by someone who had been there. The elaborate embellishment includes early Tunbridge stringing, an inlaid sunburst and, on the inside of the lid, an elaborate chinoiserie painted scene in the 'japanned' taste. All this indicates that the piece was considered special at the time of manufacture.

It is known that some of the earliest officials had furniture made in England from the Australian timbers they had possibly taken back themselves. An example of this is William Balmain, Assistant Surgeon, who sailed with the First Fleet and who died shortly afterwards, in 1803. His Will lists a 'wardrobe bureau made by Mr Lyns (sic) of Moore Lane of the New South Wales wood' and also, interestingly, a 'tea caddy and low chest of drawers of the New South Wales wood'.<sup>14</sup> The discovery of the Pembroke table

and tea caddy proves that at least a small quantity of the timber exported to England was utilised by English cabinet makers.

Both the Pembroke table and tea caddy are made from the same variety of casuarina known as bull-oak (also casuarina luehmannii). The use of this species is interesting as it is a desert fringe dweller and this poses the question of how far the early parties travelled inland to procure botanical specimens. While its appeal would have been obvious since it grew to enormous heights (due to longevity and bushfire resistance), it is uncertain how the trees were felled and recovered as bull-oak rates twenty on the timber hardness scale (ebony rates nine) and even an axe of modern quality is unable to cut it. A wood possibly fitting this description was recorded by Sheraton, under the generic title of Botany Bay wood, as early as 1803<sup>15</sup> and this must have gained some popularity amongst cabinet makers, since a recipe for its imitation appears in Moore's *The Cabinet-makers Guide* of 1827. Indeed, a handsome sofa table of U.K. manufacture was made of it as late as 1830 (Fig. 7) showing that the timber was still desirable at that date.

The snobbery of the wealthier settlers resulted in a desire for furniture currently fashionable 'at home'. Apart from buying imported furniture the other option was to have a piece made in Australia of timber used in the United Kingdom or Ireland. Two advertisements were taken out in January and August 1845 by the prominent Sydney cabinet maker, Andrew Lenehan, announcing the arrival of a shipment of rosewood and satinwood, respectively.<sup>16</sup> These could be made into any item the customer required, which suggests that there was a large quantity of timber in his shipment. The implication of this advertisement is that the settlers sought to deceive visitors by using expensive imported timbers and the highest quality local cabinet makers so that they could pass their furniture off as being from the United Kingdom or Ireland.<sup>17</sup> An extension dining table, made by Lenehan for Government House, Sydney in 1857, shows the high quality of his work. The table is copied from a design which appeared in Blackie and Sons, *Cabinet-makers' Assistant*, published in Glasgow, 1853.<sup>18</sup> If this table had not been fully documented as of Lenehan's manufacture (and made of cedar), the piece could easily be mistaken as being of perhaps Scottish or English origin. The extreme rarity of furniture attributed to Australian manufacture but made from imported timber highlights that, without the aid of documentation, it is almost impossible to identify such pieces. Many rediscovered items, featuring both Australian timber and manufacture, were found in the United Kingdom. Other examples of furniture made in Australia (using imported timbers) may exist in England, Scotland, Wales or Ireland and may be thought to be original to those countries.

Faced with these problems of attribution, furniture historians may turn to stamped or labelled pieces as a starting point. This is not straightforward in respect of Australian furniture for a number of reasons. Firstly, Australian furniture was considered inferior in some social circles and owners seem to have removed the labels to disguise the origin of manufacture, thereby destroying important provenance. Secondly, stamping and labelling furniture was a not a common practice. Furthermore, a labelled piece of furniture does not automatically mean it was manufactured by the firm whose name appears on the label.<sup>19</sup> Most cabinet makers also imported furniture and sold it through their warehouses, where some affixed labels to indicate that a piece was sold by them. Unfortunately these labels may have been the same as those used on pieces which were



manufactured by them. Thus, one of the most important tools used to establish the identity of British furniture needs to be treated with extreme caution when approaching Australian pieces. A recent example highlights the difficulties of attribution when a collector purchased an Australian cedar chair stamped with a hitherto unknown maker's name and later discovered that the firm was Indian and that the chair was made there from Australian timber.<sup>20</sup>

This article has highlighted the complexities of attributing Australian furniture. Little investigation has so far been made of Australian-related pieces of atypical design, with the exception of those which are documented or signed. The ability to identify timber scientifically and to locate specific species should expose a hitherto neglected area of cabinet-making, the style and construction of which is difficult to distinguish from United Kingdom furniture. Such study will not be simple, however, and will have to consider that pieces were made in the United Kingdom from Australian timber and vice-versa.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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3. Fahy, Simpson and Simpson, *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture*, David Ell Press, Sydney, 1985, p. 150.
4. *ibid.* Whether or not these early nineteenth century English publications were advertised in the Australian press remains to be ascertained.
5. *ibid.*, p. 52.
6. Joy, E. T., 'The Overseas Trade in Furniture in the Nineteenth Century', *Furniture History*, Vol. VI, 1970, p. 63.
7. Earnshaw, J., *Directory of Sydney Cabinet-makers*, Wentworth, N.S.W., 1971, p. 14.
8. Fahy, Simpson and Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
9. Earnshaw, J., *op. cit.*, p. 15.
10. Fahy, Simpson and Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
11. *ibid.*, p. 122. Collard and Collard is noted as being one of the firms who used Blackwood.
12. See Jones, D. 'The Laburnum Tradition in Scotland', *Regional Furniture*, Vol. VI, 1992, p. 1.
13. Craig, Fahy and Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
14. *ibid.*, p. 37. It is likely that the maker of these items was William Lyus who is listed in the D.E.F.M. as working from 14 Moor Lane, London.
15. Sheraton's description in *The Cabinet Dictionary* of 1803 is worth quoting in full: 'BOTANY-BAY-WOOD. That there should be such a vast quantity of different species of wood from this island is not surprising, when we consider its great extent, which is estimated to exceed the whole continent of Europe. The whole length of this island runs about two thousand miles from north-east to south-west; and receives the name of New South Wales from Capt. Cook. On this vast territory, Sir Joseph Banks, who accompanied the Captain, found an ample field for botanical researches; and in compliment to him, one part of it was called Botany-Bay, which is the seat of our colony.'

All the specimens of wood imported from thence, that I have collected, are of a hardish texture, and some of it very ponderous; but as that island remains in general still uncultivated, uncivilized, and in a great measure

unexplored, there are no materials to assist us in giving a botanical description of the woods; nor scarcely any distinction of names, except those which have been suggested, either from the smell or particular figure of various sorts of it. All that I can pretend to do, as to this wood, is to describe the colour and figure of such species as are adapted to cabinet work.

At the time when Capt. Cook explored its coast in 1770, they found only two kinds of trees useful as timber; the pine, and another, producing a kind of gum, which afterwards, at the settlement of our colony by Governor Philips, was found to possess medical qualities, for the removal of the dysentery, with which the first settlers were afflicted, owing to their want of fresh provisions. Yet it appears, that the country adjacent to Botany-Bay produces very many and large trees, requiring the work of 12 men of the colony for three or four days, to grub out of the earth so as to clear them away. At various times since the first settlement, we have brought to England a variety of woods that have been acceptable in ornamenting cabinet work — some of which I shall notice, but with some doubt as to their being the produce of Botany-Bay or New South Wales. But if further certainty of information present itself, the result will be found under the article of WOOD; where the most perfect lists of woods I am able to collect shall be inserted. I have been favoured with only four specimens of different species at present; one of which is of an olive hue, intermixed with faintly dark strokes, not much unlike some of the Virginian walnut tree. The water colours which give this tint on white paper, is verditer green and Venetian red. The grain is close and straight, and may be used for small tables; but it would require very lively banding wood to set it off. Another of a dirty orange hue, tolerably well figured, and a very fine grain, which might answer for some bandings, and in other cases for the body of a piece of furniture; it is moderately hard in texture, and may be imitated in colour by Venetian red and gumbouge, more inclining to the red.

A third sort is extremely beautiful, and nearly as hard as tulip wood. This wood is finely dappled with rich entwining strokes, on a high flesh-coloured ground. Indian red, thinly washed on paper, will give the hue of the ground; to which, add a little lake and umber for the dapple. The last of the four is nearly of the same figure and texture, but having a darker ground; and the same kind of dapple, inclining more to a deep brown. It is not so hard as the preceding sort, but being of a darker and more strongly contrasted figure, it will make handsome cross banding. The common name for all these, is Botany-Bay wood; but as they are now described, may be thus distinguished — the olive — the orange — the flesh — and brown Botany-bay wood. There are a greater number of non-descripts, of a hard, plain, straight grained quality, which, like other very hard woods, runs small in the log, only 10 or 12 inches in diameter.'

16. Craig, Fahy and Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

17. A chess table by Lenehan exists with rosewood and other Australian timbers which shows that woods from both countries were used in combination.

18. Blackie and Sons, *The Victorian Cabinet-makers' Assistant*, 1853 Dover Reprint, 1970, Pl. XIX.

19. Craig, Fahy and Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

20. Cedar was also exported to India from as early as 1795. (Fahy, Simpson and Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 37).