

The Furniture History Society

AUSTRALASIA INC.

AFFILIATED SOCIETY OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

NEWSLETTER

No. LXIII

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2012



The Totara Cradle, a cradle in the cinquecento style c1860
Attributed to Johann Martin Levien, Ferdinando Pogliani and Ludwig Gruner
It is made of Totara Knot, ivory, ebony, walnut, maple, rosewood,
mahogany, oak and many other timbers yet to be confirmed.

PHOTO: COURTESY OR CREDIT

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Newsletter

Contributions and letters are welcome
and will be considered for publication.
Please contact antonia.lomny@gmail.com

This newsletter is published quarterly.
Deadline for next newsletter is **5 March 2012**.

*The opinions expressed in the articles in this
newsletter are not necessarily those of the Society.*



FHS acknowledges the support of
The Australian Antique & Art Dealers Association

As we n[] the end of another year, I thank all
members for their continued support of the Furniture
History Society.

The support sustains a unique organisation, which
has a deep interest in heritage, focussing on the
craftsmanship and artistic skill of those who work
with wood to create well-made furniture that enrich
our every-day lives.

Thanks to you, we can continue to keep shining a
spotlight on furniture in Australia: antique, modern
and in-between. On 20 October, thanks to the courtesy
of the Governor of NSW, Professor Marie Bashir AC
CVO, we were able to inspect the furniture in the
Governor's Office, located in the Chief Secretary's
Building at Bridge and Macquarie streets.

The building was designed by the Colonial Architect,
James Barnet, and constructed between 1873 and 1880
(with later additions designed by Barnet's successor,
Walter Liberty Vernon). The Governor's suite
contains a number of pieces of European furniture,
much of it elaborately carved and ornamented, which
former NSW Premier Sir Henry Parkes bought at the
Sydney International Exposition of 1879, as well as
Australian furniture, mainly in cedar, dating from
the early 1800s, including several by Lenehan and a
number made by Alex Norton of Parramatta.

The major items in the Governor's Office itself
remain much as they were during Sir Henry's time
in office, and the Society is privileged to be given this
opportunity to inspect the collection.

On 16 November, thanks to Sotheby's Australia,
we were able to preview items from the Dale Frank

MEMBERSHIP

We warmly welcome **Stephen and Heather Berry,**
Phillip J Bridge, Kevin C Hall, Keith McCarthy
and **Jessica Wallrock** to the Furniture History Society.

*New members are invited to attend one Society event free
of charge (with the exception of Christmas parties and
country weekends). Please apply in the usual manner, but
mark the application 'First attendance as a new member'.
Do not include payment for the event.*

Schedule of Fees

Family or organisation	\$60.00	Single	\$50.00
Country member	\$40.00	Full time student	\$40.00

MESSAGE FROM THE NSW CHAIRMAN

– continued from page 2



ABOVE: DR JAMES BROADBENT (LEFT) AND THE NEW CHAIRMAN OF THE VICTORIAN COMMITTEE, RELTON LEAVER, AT THE AGM

Collection of early Australian furniture which went to auction the weekend following. This included a rare Australian cedar secretaire bookcase c1835 (which sold for \$36,000, including buyer's premium), several handsome sofas and beds, a rare set of 20 dining chairs, including two carvers, from New South Wales c1830 (which sold for \$66,000) and a casuarina, beefwood and cedar chest of drawers attributed to Lawrence Butler c1810, which sold for \$42,000. It was a very successful auction by Bonham's.

Almost 30 FHS members braved rain and wind on Sunday 4 December to attend the Society's AGM at Old Government House, Parramatta.

Historian, curator and conservationist Dr James Broadbent conducted a tour of the new furniture display on the first floor of the historic building which provided very useful insight into the collection grouped according to Governors before and after Macquarie – and the rationale for the display, which differs considerably from past practice at Old Government House.

The new office chair, constructed by FHS member Ben Stoner, which is the centrepiece of a new display in what was the Governor's office on the ground floor.

Dr Broadbent was ably supported by the former Chairman of the FHS, Clive Lucas OBE and Old Government House volunteers.

Following their tour, members gathered in a marquee behind Lachlan's Restaurant for the



ABOVE A LATE 19TH C GERMAN OAK CABINET BY R. KELLERBORN OF BERLIN, ACQUIRED BY SIR HENRY PARKES AT THE SYDNEY INTER-COLONIAL EXHIBITION IN 1879.

AGM proceedings and for wine and a collection of delicacies from the restaurant.

They welcomed the new Chairman of the Victorian Committee, Relton Leaver, and his wife Bernadette, who flew from Melbourne for the function.

Liam Bathgate was confirmed as Chairman of the Society, with John Spatchurst Vice-Chairman, Alan Perry Treasurer and Jane Vernon Secretary.

Committee members are Antonia Lomny, Clive Lucas, Ronan Sulich, Ben Stoner and Heather Flood.

Liam presented gifts to Clive Lucas and to Jill Saxon, who has stepped down as Events Co-ordinator.

Our warmest thanks to the National Trust for their assistance in making this event possible.

Liam Bathgate
Chairman

THE ENIGMATIC 'HAMILTON INN SOFA'

PART THREE

This article continues from part two of the 'The enigmatic 'Hamilton Inn sofa' which appeared in the October/November newsletter.

Warwick Oakman

FHS Member

From pattern book sources the form of the Hamilton Inn sofa was available in London for copying from 1807. It is not known what pattern books were available in Hobart during the first decades of settlement. None have survived nor have they found their way into institutional collections. While many pattern books of the time contain the basic form, I have not yet seen any such sofas of local provenance. It is possible that a local cabinetmaker relied on his memory rather than used a published book close to hand or that he copied an imported sofa. It is also equally possible that any pattern books that came into the colony simply did not survive.

As is to be hoped, stylistically, there exist a number of pieces of furniture that are likely to be made by the same cabinetmaker who crafted the Hamilton Inn sofa. The sole element of the sofa that points to a Scottish cabinetmaker is the fan-carved lunettes at either end of the back of the sofa. This detail, the quality of conception and contemporary fashion sensibilities, is also found on a Grecian sideboard in a back room of the Tasmanian Club, Macquarie Street, Hobart, and a sideboard in the Ballarat Regional Museum and Art Gallery (accession number 1998.112.A-D). The sideboard in the Tasmanian Club has original gilt brass imported 'furniture'. A further analysis of these related pieces of furniture may give clues to the origin of the Hamilton Inn sofa.

Conservation and interpretative observations

In 2006-2007, as part of a Gordon Darling Foundation grant, I was asked to provide research and conservation recommendations about the 'Colonial Icons' within the TMAG Collection, including the Hamilton Inn sofa.

The sofa exists on a number of levels to visitors to the TMAG and the interpretation of it, via conservation and commentary, is important in order that as wide an audience as possible may benefit from it. It is anticipated that the importance of the item will increase over time and that the cessation of its original function of providing seating will allow for considerably less invasive conservation work.

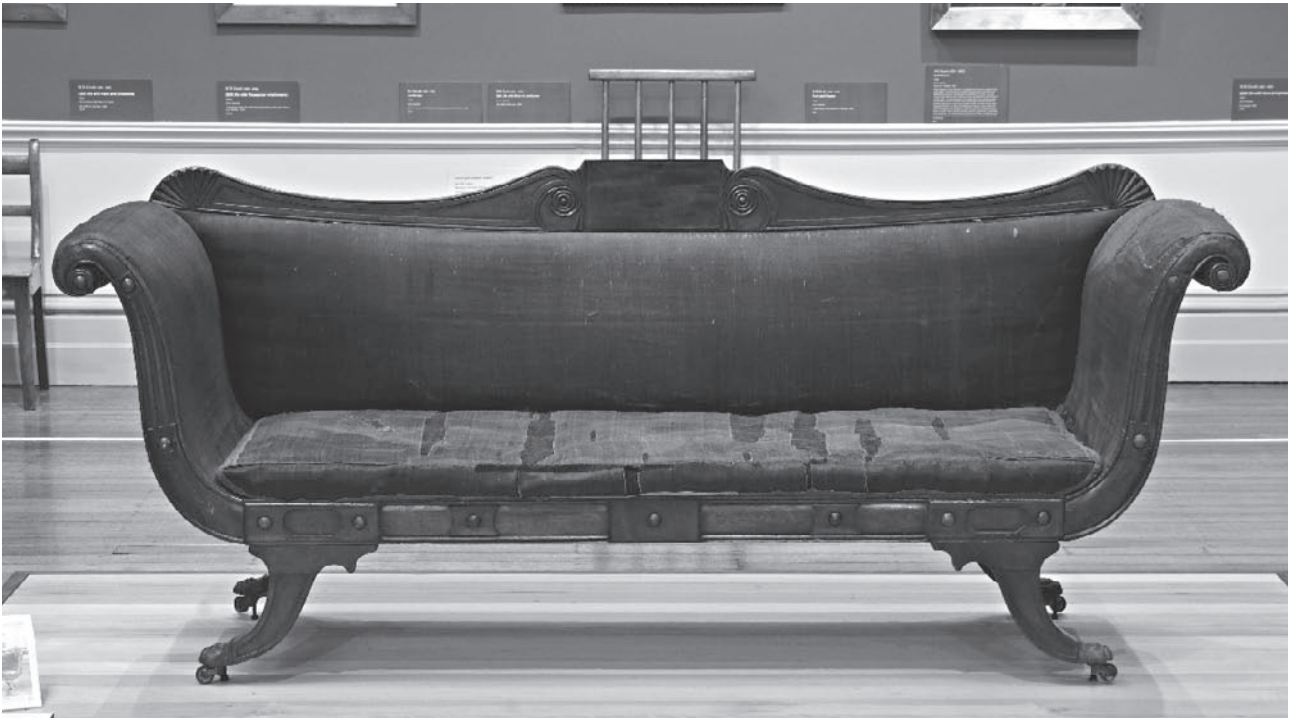


TOP: CAPTION
ABOVE: CAPTION

The frame has suffered structural loss and has been weakened through wear over time. It would appear to have been dropped, causing a piece to break away at the weakest point of the grain to one sabre leg, which now needs to be glued back on with animal glue. Animal glue is inert, reversible and would have been the type of glue originally used on the sofa. It is important for this piece be re-affixed in order that the complete form is appreciated. As there has been a 'cradle' constructed for its support, I do not see the need for any other internal strengthening within the leg such as a pin or internal steel tenon.

The legs terminate in brass paw feet, to protect the ends and provide a joint for a castor. Three of the four castors are missing. The surviving castor and four brass paw feet have evidence of the build up of soil and dirt within their moving parts. These need to be conserved by a metal conservator, who should be able to clean the castor and foot and stabilise

THE ENIGMATIC 'HAMILTON INN SOFA'



ABOVE: CAPTION

them from corrosion. However, they should not look 'cleaned' and should be re-affixed with animal glue to the stump end. It might be highly informative to keep the soil for analysis. I would bet that there would be a fair degree of animal waste, leading to an assumption that the sofa may have been stored in a barn at some time. Further, the surviving castor may be used to model replicas for the other three feet. However, I do not see this as essential as the surviving castor is enough to tell its story.

The surviving disks of turned cedar that cover the screws should be popped back in unglued. The purpose of these discs is interesting, as it shows how a cabinetmaker conceived a system that allowed for the frame to be recovered without gimp or fancy upholstery nails to hide the screws. This form of construction may point to an absence of both these products (usually imported) at the time of the sofa's construction. It would be of interest to future upholstery historians to see this unusual form of 'upholstery led' construction.

The top rail, centred by a tablet of veneered imported mahogany, which is crossbanded with pearwood, is evidence that the cabinetmaker had or had access to

the skills of a veneer cutter, or that he had a piece of veneer available at the time of the sofa's manufacture. The skill of veneer cutting is a difficult task and may help in the future to definitively identify the cabinetmaker. Unfortunately, the veneer work is water-damaged, and the top edges, the lignum to the veneer and the polish have been lost. I advise gluing the top edges of the veneer back into place with animal glue to prevent further loss and to present a neater line. It would appear that the over-rolled top edge of the back is now lost. This should not be reconstructed, as it would involve loss of original material in the process. Information may emerge from examinations of other sofas to help us understand the form of such a feature.

The timber would appear to have some form of degraded original finish on it that predates the use of French polish (lac), generally popular after c1830 (although it was used in England as early as 1815). A chemical analysis on the reverse of one of the front legs may prove rewarding. This area appears to have suffered partial or complete loss through water penetration over a period of the sofa's life. The dust (which is corrosive) should be removed from the sofa using moist cotton wool tips.

The waxing of the show timber with a beeswax-based product (which would provide an enhancement to the polish only) should not be attempted until analysis of the original finish has been carried out. It is my opinion that, even after the polish has been analysed, the polish should not be waxed as this would provide an uneven finish, given the deterioration of the original polish. It would also change the ‘as found’ quality of the sofa to a half-hearted view of the original.

The upholstery should be vacuumed. Once again, it would be interesting to see what is in the vacuum bag! I support the idea of removing the brown vinyl to the pailiasse as it is confusing. It should nonetheless be kept, as it does convey an image of how the sofa survived through the 20th century – a nice modernist layer!

Any conservation work should be carried out in Tasmania. It is my very earnest opinion that the sofa should not, and is not fit to, travel in any way. The frame is weakened by water penetration, the structure and timber has suffered damage. Repair

of these issues would cause an unacceptable level of intrusion and damage to the sofa’s original materials and would alter the overall effect of the object. It is important to keep in mind that the sofa is an irreplaceable item of Tasmania’s furniture history with, at present, no similar peers.

All conservation processes should be documented, and could form part of a presentation to the public where a symposium of people from disparate areas, such as a social historian, mainstream historian, fabric historian, forensic scientist, radiologist, timber technician, cabinetmaker, upholsterer, antique collector and antique dealer, can talk about their interpretation of, and interaction with, the sofa. Such depth in forming a holistic understanding of a piece of furniture will not only provide information about the sofa but should prove illuminating to the public about the workings and philosophies of the TMAG. Visitors will sense great confidence and a new approach to curatorship that keeps and enhances the ‘excitement of the find’.

VICTORIAN REPORT

Relton Leaver

FHS Vice Chairman

In October, Jim Peddie resigned from his position as Chairman of the Victorian Branch. As Deputy, I was appointed by the committee to fill the position for the remainder of the year.

For over 10 years, Jim has been the driving force behind the Victorian Branch. With the encouragement of Jim Martin, Jim Peddie was inspired to establish the Victorian Branch in 2000. He has been a dedicated leader and has organised and hosted many and varied activities.

He could always be relied upon to bring knowledge and humour to discussions and we have all enjoyed a glass of wine from his Merricks Run Vineyard. Over the years the membership has grown and currently totals 103 members. Jim will now take a back seat knowing that the Victorian Branch will continue to thrive.

We thank Jim for his years of dedication and hard work. We all wish him continuing improvement in his rehabilitation and we know that he will remain an active and enthusiastic member of the society.

In September, Mike Green, FHS member, gave an illustrated talk on the work of Johann Levien. The highlight of the evening was the unveiling of an elaborate cradle and a detailed discussion of the piece which he has attributed to Levien (see the article on [p 7](#)).

The end-of-year Christmas Party was held in December at the Johnston Collection with over 40 members attending. During the evening, whilst enjoying the hospitality, we were able to view the special Christmas decorations in the house. A tribute was made to retiring Chairman, Jim Peddie, acknowledging his involvement and leadership over 10 years and he was presented with a certificate of Life Membership.

Michael Green

FHS Member

I have had 20 years' experience collecting and restoring hidden treasures, and yet, two years ago I hadn't heard of the name Johann Martin Levien. Little did I know then that the name would soon become one which I would live and breathe, as no other treasure could even remotely compare to the item which has now found its way into my possession.

From the "Illustrated News of the World" (London), May 4, 1861: 'Mr Levien, we were pleased to see, is one of those quiet unassuming men whose sole pleasure consists in carrying out a favorite idea, regardless of reward, and the frowns and the smiles of the world.'

Levien was foremost a cabinetmaker, but also an artist, explorer and entrepreneur. He would become a mythical doyen in these fields to early New Zealand settlement.

The Levien story begins as a 20 year old, freshly accredited Master of Cabinetry, setting out on a mission to explore the new world and unearth exotic and undiscovered timbers. Levien's journey eventually led him to New Zealand where, in 1841, he began personally selecting timbers of unsurpassed quality and beauty. Three years later, with ships laden, he set out for London.

Funded by 'The New Zealand Company', Levien set up shop and began furnishing the homes of the European aristocracy. His clients included Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Lady Sutherland, the King of Prussia and the Rothschilds. Queen Victoria's children were treated to handmade gifts donated by Levien for significant family occasions including weddings.

Levien can be credited with placing New Zealand timbers on the map; he was of immense help to the struggling colony. In 1861, he produced a 25 page pamphlet detailing the fine attributes of New Zealand timbers. In addition, the pamphlet contained copies of the numerous articles that had been published in Art

Journals and newspapers on his work and character. The pamphlet was titled 'The Woods of New Zealand and their Adaptability to Art Furniture'.

Today, the whereabouts of less than half dozen Levien pieces are known. However, fortunately we have many drawings of his work. J.B. Waring appeared to quite enjoy spending time in Levien's workshop and captured his unique artwork by way of illustration.

As I wandered through an auction room one day I saw exactly that which the newspapers had praised some 160 years earlier. It was a cradle, a piece of utter majesty. This is where the second half of the story begins.



The cradle contains a dozen different timbers and is veneered predominately in Totara, Levien's favourite timber. The rich original patina glows though the beautiful knotted veneer that Levien had hand-selected on his journeys many years earlier. Levien employed a young Ferdinando Pogliani who was similarly destined to become a recognised master. Pogliani was the finest ivory artist to come out of Milan in the 19th century. Pogliani provided the ivory frieze and the

two incised ivory portrait medallions that decorate the bowl of the cradle. The portraits feature similarities to Franz Xavier Winterhalter's royal paintings. One is of Bertie, Prince of Wales, holding a Tudor Rose. The second depicts the Princess Royal, Vicki, Queen Victoria's eldest daughter. Vicki is holding flowers symbolic of maternal affection and tenderness.

Levien, the royally appointed master cabinetmaker was single-minded in his efforts to ensure the absolute splendour of his creation. In addition to merging the best of New Zealand feature timbers with the talents of the great ivory artist Pogliani, Levien would also commission design expertise from the renowned Ludwig Gruner.

Gruner was Prince Albert's Art Advisor and designer of many of the Royal residences and furnishings. As a master artist himself, Gruner, could reproduce artwork of the Renaissance Masters with due respect. One such piece, a line engraving on ivory, featuring five cherub faces, adorns the head of the cradle.

EVENTS CALENDAR: SYDNEY

- 16 February **Veneering Workshop, 6pm**
Our very popular Veneering Workshop is back again to be presented by Alan Perry and Ben Stoner. It will be held at Ben Stoner's workshop, 24 Queen Street, Chippendale. \$20 Members and Guests
Application form enclosed.

EVENTS CALENDAR: MELBOURNE

- 15 February **Victorian Branch AGM and lecture** to be given by Martin Purslow, CEO of the National Trust of Victoria. Martin will talk about the 19th century Scottish furniture-maker William Trotter. 6pm at the Gemological Society, 380-382 Spencer Street, Melbourne
- 17 - 18 March **Ballarat and district tour** including visits to historic properties, the Narmbool and Mt Mitchell homesteads with guided tours of their collections of important furniture. Bookings are essential as numbers are limited. FHS members only

RECENTLY RECEIVED PUBLICATIONS

Members may have a particular interest in the following Journals or Newsletters.

If you would like to borrow a Journal or require a photocopy of an article, email Alan Perry on alanjan68@bigpond.com or ring (02)9520 8382.

A charge will apply for postage and printing.

THE FURNITURE HISTORY SOCIETY (UK),
NEWSLETTER, NOVEMBER 2011

Miniature Furniture and Interiors: Introductory Remarks adapted from a talk given at the FHS Annual Symposium on 5th March 2011.

By Simon Swynfen Jervis, 6 pages

REPORTS ON THE SOCIETY'S EVENTS.

Spring Study Weekend, Ugbrooke, Powderham and Castle Drogo. Lucy Porton, 3 pages

Fursdon and Great Fulford.

Elizabeth Bisley, 3 pages

REGIONAL FURNITURE HISTORY SOCIETY (UK),
NEWSLETTER, AUTUMN 2011, NO 55

Guernsey painted chests.

John Vost, 2 pages

A Child's Gilded Chair used by John Ruskin.

Brian sley, 1 page

Churches: St Lawrence's, Folke, Holy Trinity Leweston and St Mary's, Cerne Abbas

Valentine Butler, 3 pages

Book Review: David R. Russell, with photographs by James Austin, *Antique Woodworking Tools; Their Craftsmanship from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*, John Adamson, 2010, report by Treve Rosoman, 1 page

THE AUSTRALIANA SOCIETY MAGAZINE,
NOVEMBER 2011

William Howitt, woodcarver of distinction,
Dorothy Erickson.

Magazine available from www.australiana.org.au