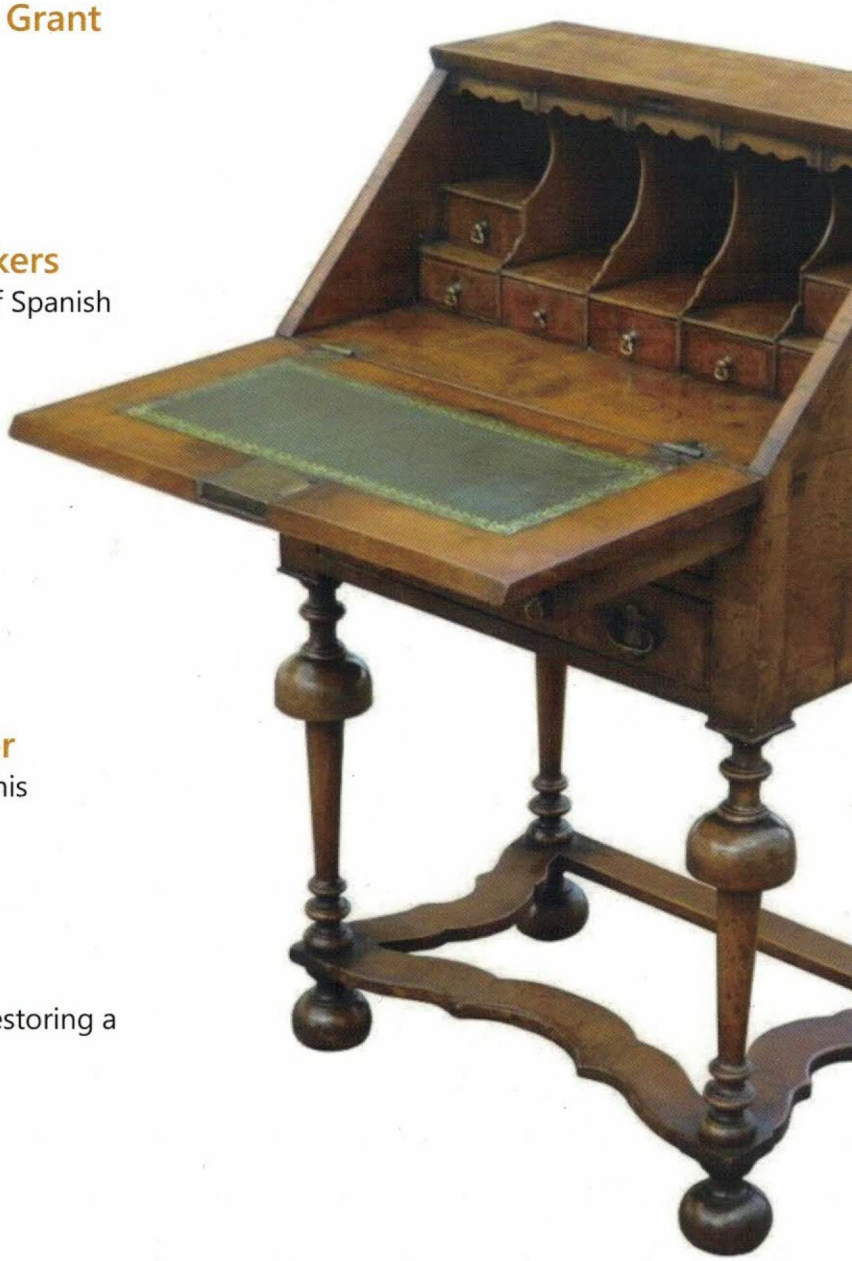
FURNITURE HISTORY SOCIETY AUSTRALASIA

Winter 2022



Dedicated to appreciating, preserving and documenting significant furniture

TAKING A STAND

Ross Ramsay and Jonathan Maze on restoring a William and Mary style desk-on-stand

Having passed into new hands at an Auckland auction house, a small William and Mary style desk has been carefully restored, not for the first time in its long life. In this article, Ross and Jonathan share some history and describe the process giving this desk a new lease on life.

Introduction by Ross Ramsay

In early 2016 I attended an auction at the Auckland branch of a leading New Zealand auction house and was able to acquire a diminutive walnut fall-front bureau 'on-stand'. Based on the construction and stylistic features, the desk appeared to date from c. 1685 – 1700, but it was in need of repair.

This account details the features of the desk and describes its most recent restoration by my co-author, Jonathan Maze.

Desks on stands

Before delving into the story of our particular project, it is worth looking at desks-on-stands more broadly.

Desks of this type appear to have evolved from desk or bible boxes with outer hinges on a sloping writing flap (Fig. 1). At times these boxes were placed on a stand (Fig. 2), and by the late 17th C the desks-on-stands we recognize today began to appear (Fig. 3). The hinges migrated to being internal, joining the lower margin of the flap to the desk body (Fig. 4).

These ideas were quickly adopted by leading cabinet makers who produced fine examples in walnut, such as the veneered example shown in Fig. 5, which with its three-drawer frontal arrangement, overhanging desk, and general nature of the stand, are very similar to our acquisition. The dimensions (55.9 cm wide by 45.7 cm deep) are also closely comparable. Describing this veneered example, MacQuoid (1905) states that the upper portion opens with two doors featuring broad cross-banding, and that this edging is repeated on the external writing flap. In his opinion, the cupped legs and tall proportions (6'10'' or 208.3 cm) give the piece great originality.

Figure 6 shows another high-quality example comprising walnut and marquetry with an overhung top, but in this case Bowett (2002, p. 217) dates the architectural pillar legs as just a little later at c. 1690 – 1710.

William and Mary style

Furniture that later became known as the William and Mary style was common from 1700 to 1725 in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Ireland and in England's American colonies. A transitional style between Mannerist and Queen Anne, it was characterised by sturdiness, emphasis of both straight lines and curves, and elaborate carving and woodturning. The style was one of the first to imitate Asian design elements such as japanning. *Source: Wikipedia*.

Description of the desk

Our William and Mary desk-on-stand (Fig. 7), is 92 cm high, 56 cm wide, and 44 cm deep. The fall-front bureau overhangs the lower three drawers and stand by 1.7 cm either side and back. Below the fall-front are two short and one lower longer drawer. All the drawers have feather-banded margins surrounded with single half round walnut mouldings on the desk body (Fig. 7).

The exterior of the fall has a central section comprising four rectangular panels of highly figured walnut, again surrounded by feather banding (1.2 cm wide) all set within an outer margin of cross banding comprising wide rectangles of figured walnut (approximately 5 cm wide) and outer half-round moulding on three sides.

The walnut used is of two major types: a highly figured walnut for the decorative veneers, and cross-banding and a straight grained walnut for the half-round mouldings and internal construction of the drawers. The half-round mouldings are in short strips of cross-grained walnut. Both walnut types appear to be European (Juglans regia). In some places, such as on the lower external drawer, the colour of the wood approaches a reddish purple.

The internal carcase of the desk comprises a white deal, possibly Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) or Silver fir (*Abies alba*). Wainscot (*Quercus sp.*) was used for the drawer bottom of the larger external drawer, the body of the stretcher, and the two loppers.

The fall opens on two oak loppers and the interior flap is veneered with highly figured walnut set around a rectangular insert of dark red velvet with gold margins (Fig. 8). The top of the desk comprises three highly figured walnut rectangular panels surrounded by a band of feather banding 0.7 cm wide, which in turn is surrounded by cross banding in walnut 2.6 cm wide (Fig. 9).

Fig. 1. Late 17th C oak bible box with hinged flap and external metal hinges. Courtesy Pritchard Antiques.
Fig. 2. Oak desk on stand, early 17th C. Notice the external hinges on flap.
Fig. 3. Oak desk on stand with ball turnings dated to c. 1690-1700. The central two front legs swing out to support the writing flap.
Fig. 4. Internal butterfly or dovetail hinge to desk above. Note the use of nails, not screws.
Figures 2, 3 and 4 courtesy Webberley Antiques.

The interior comprises a bank of drawers veneered with figured walnut with recesses to either side. The internal drawers are surrounded by single half-round walnut mouldings applied to the interior deal carcase. The lock to the fall is a triple shoot brass and steel variety while the two hinges on the flap are brass.

The appearance of feather banding around the main exterior drawers and on the exterior of the flap indicates a late 1600s to early 1700s decorative feature. Bowett (2002, p. 208) records that feather banding is rarely found in association with first phase drawer and carcase construction, as with this desk, instead becoming the common decorative feature after 1700.

The stand to the desk comprises four single-bine, twist-turned, walnut (or possibly ash) columns terminating in bun feet. These turned bun feet, which appear to have been made from a soft wood and subject to worm attack, are dowelled into the base of each leg. Two of the bun feet are composite, comprising 3 or 4 blocks now stuck together. This suggests, at some previous time, the partial replacement of badly rotten and/or worm-damaged parts of the bun foot, or possibly that these two feet were turned from composite blocks (Fig. 10).

The stretcher was originally walnut veneered onto what was most probably walnut or deal. At some stage in the history of this desk the stretcher is assumed to have been likewise heavily infested with worm and consequently has been replaced with a walnut stretcher veneered on oak (Fig. 10).

The drawers conform to first phase construction which continued into post-1700 times. Adam Bowett (2002, p. 49) sets out the criteria for this early construction phase, recording that most drawers of this period are of wainscot or deal but that in high quality pieces, as with this desk, the entire drawer is of walnut. The fronts of the three external drawers are veneered in highly figured walnut with an outer rim of feather

From left

Fig. 5. High quality walnut desk and cupboard on stand. Size: 208.3 (h) x 55.9 (w) x 45.7 (d) cms. Formerly in the possession of C. Assheton Smith Esq. Courtesy Percy MacQuoid (1905).

Fig. 6. Desk on stand with arabesque marquetry, overhung top, and architectural pillar legs. This desk is dated by Adam Bowett (2002) to a few years either side of 1700. Notice the presence of loppers, the fall-front flap fits onto of the desk body and not within, and small round drawer pulls. Image courtesy of Christies.

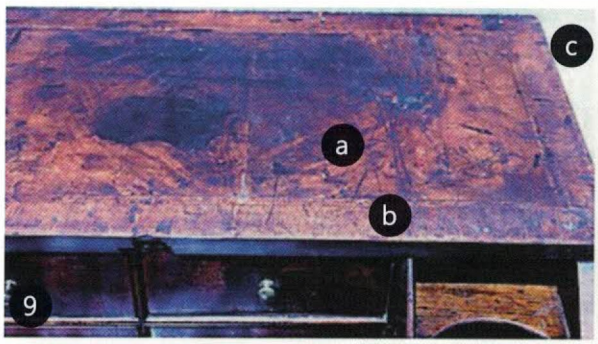
Fig. 7. Diminutive William and Mary desk on stand. The dominant wood is walnut used for both the veneers, the drawers, and stand. Deal or Baltic pine was used within the carcase. The flap closes outside the desk directly onto the desk sides. The stretcher is a later replacement with walnut veneered on oak. The brass drawer pulls look to be original and can be dated to c. 1670 – 1690 while the escutcheon on the lower drawer front is later. The prominent escutcheon on the fall is a Vigani escutcheon which dates to c. 1700 as discussed in the text. Adam Bowett (pers. com., 2016) has commented on the absence of capitals or abaci at the top of each leg.

Fig. 8. The interior comprises a bank of drawers of first phase construction with figured walnut fronts veneered on walnut. The drawer sides and bases are all in walnut with the drawer bottoms rebated up into the sides, front, and back. Storage recesses are on either side. The flap is veneered in figured walnut and the hinges and lock are brass. The brass drawer knobs all appear to be original.

banding on solid walnut. The drawer sides are in fine, straight grained walnut (Fig. 11), while the grain in the bottom walnut boards runs front to back and is rebated up into the sides, front and back. The base of each drawer lacks runners.

The tops of the drawer sides are rectangular in profile and are set some 2 mm below where they meet the drawer front. The top front of each drawer slopes inward to give a snug fit (Fig. 11). Tiny holes in the base of the drawer bottoms indicate where pins were inserted to hold the base in place while the glue dried (Fig. 12). The larger of the three front drawers, whilst of first phase construction, differs from the two smaller drawers as it has a wainscot base, with the grain running front to back. This drawer's front is walnut veneered on deal.

All three drawers have characteristic drawer stops in walnut glued in their backs (Fig. 13).



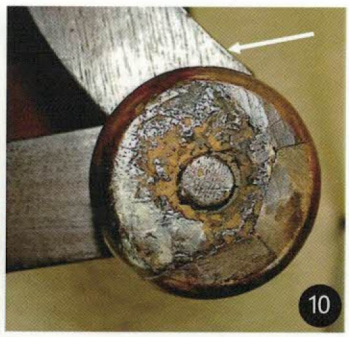
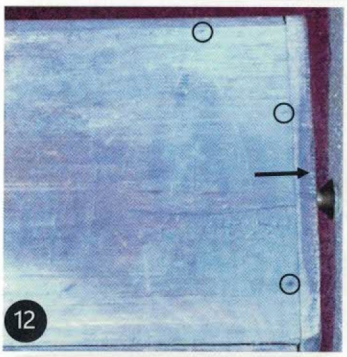


Fig. 9. The top of the desk comprises three rectangular panels of highly figured walnut (a), surrounded by feather banding (b), and a wide zone of cross banding (c)

Fig. 10. Base of bun foot showing the splicing of three additional pieces of wood to the worm-infested foot. These are probably a later restoration of the damaged foot. Note also the central screw-in dowel affixing the bun foot to the turned leg. In the background can be seen the replacement stretcher with thick walnut veneer (arrow) applied to wainscot.



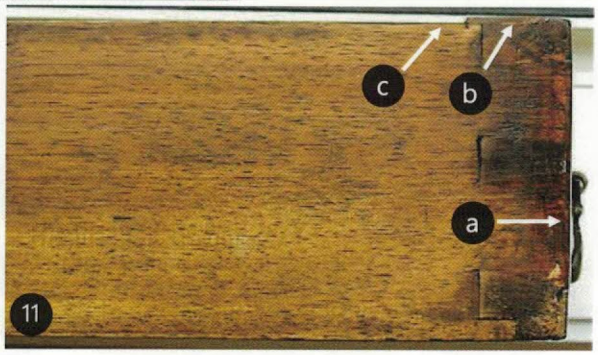


Fig. 11. Side view of one of the main external drawers showing through-going dove tails covered on the front by veneer some 2 mm thick (a). A thick piece of walnut veneer (b) has been laid along the top of the drawer front to hide the dovetail. The lower dovetail has been cut partly away allowing the base board within the drawer to be recessed into the front drawer face. The side of the drawer at the top is set down some 2 mm from where it meets the drawer front (c) while the top of the drawer front slopes slightly inward. The profile of the drawer side is rectangular.

Fig. 12. Base of one of the small interior drawers showing walnut bottom board recessed all around with small pin holes (yellow circled) where pins were inserted to hold the base board in place while the glue dried. The grain runs front to back. The edge of the thick facing walnut veneer to the drawer front can just be made out on the right of the image (shown with arrow).

Fig. 13. View of back of one of the external drawers showing the use of straight-grained walnut, through-going dove tails (yellow arrows), and small walnut back stops glued to the back of the drawer. The drawer bottom is not visible being rebated up into the drawer back, front, and sides .

All dovetails are through-going, with those at the front of each drawer, both external and internal, hidden by walnut veneer on the drawer face. The inside profile of the lower front dove tail is partially cut-out indicating the bottom board is rebated into the front (Fig. 11).

Half-round walnut mouldings are applied to the desk body around each of the main front external drawers, to the desk body around the internal drawers, and also to the external surround of the fall-flap on three sides. The flap itself sits within and under the desktop and flush with the two sides. Bowett (2002, p. 215) records that this is an early feature derived from the portable desk-box. In later examples (post c. 1700 – 1705) the fall closes within the desk carcase sides.

The internal drawers have figured walnut veneered on solid walnut drawer fronts with walnut sides and bottoms. The walnut drawer bottoms, as with the larger front drawers, are rebated into the front, sides and back.

An envelope was discovered stuck behind one of the smaller internal drawers. Postmarked Edinburgh DP/1963, it was addressed to Mrs E. Phillips, St. Wystans, Repton, Derby.

The brassware is mainly original. The escutcheon on the outer fall-front is a Vigani type (Fig. 14) named after the escutcheons on a specimen cabinet made for Professor John Francis Vigani, the first Professor in Chemistry at Cambridge University.

With our desk, each escutcheon is affixed to the fall with three dome-head pins. The outer brass drawer pulls are of the bifurcated scroll type widely used during the period c. 1670 – c. 1690 (Bowett, 2002; Plate 2.64) and appear original to the desk (Fig. 15). They are fixed to the drawers with a bolt and nut and there is no evidence of earlier internal wire fixings.

The pulls on the drawers appear to have been lacquered rather than gilded. The escutcheon on the lower outer drawer is later whilst the small brass knobs on the interior drawers and on the loppers appear to be original. Adam Bowett (2011, p. 65) records that furniture of this period with any pretensions to quality employed either gilt iron or brass locks in the most visible places. These were usually screwed and typically had three or four shoots. In this case, the brass lock is screwed in place and has 3 shoots (Figs. 8, 19). It may be original to the desk.

The Vigani cabinet

As discussed by Adam Bowett (2002, page 204 – 205), Professor Vigani's oak and deal cabinet (dated 1704) is now in the collection of Queen's College. Made by the Cambridge joiner John Austin, it has three drawers each with prominent escutcheons.

Fig. 14. View of the Vigani escutcheon found on the front of the fall. Similar escutcheons are found on the Vigani cabinet and dated 1704. Three round-headed pins affix the escutcheon (arrowed).

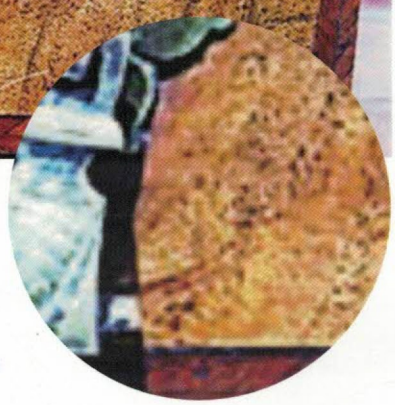


Fig. 15. Front of one of the main exterior drawers showing the highly figured walnut veneer, feather banding, and brass pull of the bifurcated scroll type which dates to c. 1670 – 1690. These pulls appear to be original to the desk and gouges on the veneer from the brass pull can just be seen (see inset).

The restoration

When bought at auction the overall condition of the desk was mostly very good — there were some loose veneers on the sides and back, some loose joints, a bad repair on the top and some other minor issues. Best of all was the superb condition of the finish and show wood on the desk section, which appeared to be in an original untouched state with centuries of scratches, stains, and fading built into it. The only major

addition was the stretcher as described above.

The top corner of the cabinet had been repaired sometime in the 20th century but although the repair was done in walnut, the timber selected was too pale and did not match the adjacent wood (Fig. 16). Also, the grain was running the wrong way in one half of the repair! It had been glued without any precision so there were gaps either side and the mitre join didn't line up. Further, the repair had not been levelled to match the height of the surrounding veneer so looked like a distracting pale bump in the corner. In short there were at least five things wrong with this seemingly simple repair.

I'm often struck by the fact that the plainest of repairs can sometimes be the most demanding. To do the repair I had some New Zealand grown European walnut with a good strong grain, and I cut some veneer slices off to use on the corner. They were glued down with hide glue and clamped flat with a warmed aluminium caul, after which I levelled them with a chisel and scraped and lightly sanded them, including rounding off the corner to replicate the original wear patterns elsewhere. After that I built up the finish with clear blonde shellac then brushed some Vandyke stain over the repair to add some oomph to the colour. The pigment in it also has the advantage of blocking some of the reflectivity of the grain in the new timber, which is more sparkly than the duller surrounding show wood. I then sealed it in with a last coat of shellac and blended it into the old finish.

Fig. 16. Composite image showing the poorly restored outer corner to the top of the desk and new corner insert veneer.

Fig. 17. Composite image showing the clamping and gluing of loose veneers.

On the sides the veneer had separated from the base timber and needed gluing down. One of the best properties of hide glue is that you can mix new hide glue with very old hide glue — the two combine happily, forming a new bond. I fed new glue underneath the edges of the veneer with a spatula as far it would go. After this I pressed down the new area, separated with a piece of plastic, using a heated aluminium caul block. The heat and trapped moisture has the effect of melting the glues into one another and creating a strong smooth bond. Once the block had cooled for an hour it was removed and the glue overflow wiped off with a warm wet cloth. The finish is undamaged by this process. I used this technique over many areas of loose veneer on the carcase and drawers (Fig. 17).

A section of cross-grained half-round moulding was missing on the rail between the external front drawers so had to be replaced. I cut up a slice of walnut, glued it on, shaped it up by hand, then refinished it with blonde shellac and some Vandyke between the layers for colour (Fig. 18).

Some of the joints in the drawers and the stand were loose, so hide glue was inserted in and clamped up. I removed the lock and dismantled it, then found a suitable 18thC key from my collection, which I adjusted

to fit. Examining the four screws securing the lock, it was a delight to find a single original handmade one (Fig. 19). Compared to a modern screw, these old screws are horribly inefficient: they do not taper to a point, the gap between the thread is too narrow so they don't grip the wood fibres and pull themselves in, and they have very narrow slots relative to the size of the screw, so you need a customized screwdriver ground down to a fine tip. But the screws are charming and you have to respect the effort that has gone into making them in what must have been a miserable occupation.

The final step was to wax the desk. I used my usual technique, which is to coat the entire piece with furniture wax then sweat the finish with a hot-air gun before buffing.

Fig. 18. Repair to half-round moulding on desk front.
Fig. 19. Brass lock removed. Original screw on right.

References

Bowett, A., 2002. *English Furniture, 1660-1714 From Charles II to Queen Anne.* Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk, p 323.

MacQuoid, P., 1905. *The Age of Walnut*. Lawrence & Bullen, Ltd, London, p 247.

2022 FHS Grant Awardees

The FHS is pleased to announce that the **Fawcett Mechanics Institute** and the **Mission for Seafarers** will each be awarded an FHS Grant to conduct their restoration project.

Fawcett Mechanics Institute

Small rural historical societies have limited funding opportunities and are worthy of support. The forms to be restored (an example of vernacular furniture) are an integral part of the fabric of the Fawcett hall and have been used continuously since the 1880s. Bill Cotton in *Scottish Vernacular Furniture* commented, 'part of the appeal of vernacular furniture is that in order to understand it one must look closely at social history and lifestyles that are at some levels primitive and at other surprisingly sophisticated. If not always high art, vernacular furniture proves beyond question that limited resources need not exclude aesthetic quality'.

If the forms are not restored, there is the risk of them being pushed aside resulting in further damage. Replacement with modern plastic folding chairs would be a disappointment.

Mission for Seafarers

The Mission to Seafarers has long provided assistance to crew members. This included entertainment in the club rooms while ship's officers were entertained in more exclusive rooms. The chaplain would often invite a captain to a private meal with his family and the oak dining furniture donated by the Harbour Lights Guild was used for these formal meals.

The sideboard, table and butler's table are in good condition. However, the dining chairs have been poorly repaired and the upholstery is well worn. The chairs need to be disassembled and the joints cleaned, reglued, and repolished. An upholsterer skilled in antique chairs needs to redo the upholstery using appropriate materials.

An initial assessment is that the inlaid design on the chapel table is veneered in Australian timbers. It has been poorly restored and requires removal of the inferior finish, repair of the joints and repolishing. A more accurate identification of the veneers will also be undertaken.