

# REUPHOLSTERY OF ANTIQUE SEAT FURNITURE

By Bert Chapman MBE

...and the tacks or staples controversy!

"What on earth am I going to do with this?" is often the cry of an upholsterer confronted with a rather down-at-heel looking piece of seat furniture, obviously of some age, and a client whose wishes are that the item is to be used regularly.

It is assumed that the upholsterer, in addition to his upholstery skills, has an understanding of the upholstery techniques and profiles of the varying styles of upholstered furniture from the 16th century to the present day.

The purpose of this article is to set out the methods we do use. I do not claim they are the only method, or the best method, but they do fulfil the following criteria.

- The wishes of the client.
- Pictorial record of the treatment.
- The reinstatement of the piece with any original stuffing preserved.
- The profiles of the upholstery accord with the style of the piece.
- The least damage to the frame.

Chair circa 1827 with collapsed upholstery.

Having recorded instructions from the client and before commencement of any work, it is of the utmost importance that the chair is photographed from all angles, for future reference if required, and as part of the before and after record. The removal of each layer of cover is photographed and the sequence of the covers (this could be two or three) carefully recorded and retained. Each layer of upholstery must also be photographed with particular attention to the manner of the stitching.

The type of webbing and colour can also be significant and must be photographed. At this stage it is easy to discern whether or not the upholstery is the original by the number of tack holes in the frame. More often than not the tacking section of the rails are full of tack holes and are dry and brittle, but nevertheless there still may be parts of the stuffing that are original and are worth preserving in the restored piece.

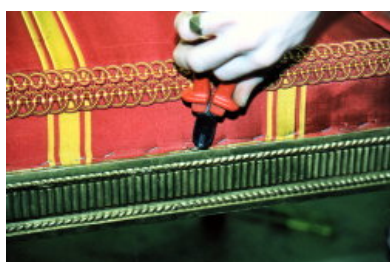
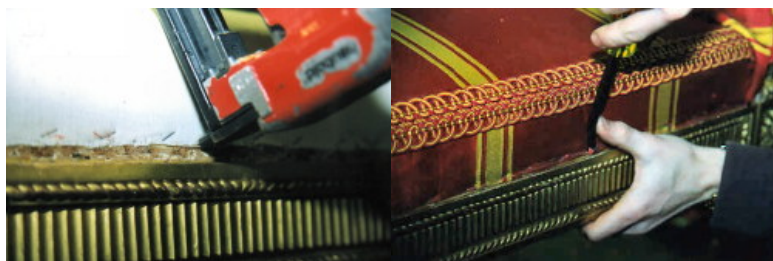
The frame is the most important part of the chair and as aforementioned, the tacking sections of the rails are generally in poor condition and need treatment before re-upholstery can commence. Whether the tacking section of the rail is replaced or built up with sawdust and glue is a decision that needs to be taken in consultation with, or undertaken by, a competent furniture restorer.

The upholsterer at this stage must have a complete picture in his mind of how the finished piece should look, taking into account the age and style of the frame and the profile of the upholstery that conforms to that style.

Tacks or staples?

To many people the use of staples in antique furniture is unthinkable; I will confess at once that I am not of this school of thought and providing I can gain the acquiescence of the client, I advocate their use at very stage for the following reasons.

- They cause much less damage to the frame:
  - two tiny pinholes
  - one hit and they are home
  - because the staple gun is placed in position before firing, there can be no damage to the gilded or polished show wood.
- Staples can be easily removed
  - By hand, using a staple remover and pliers. No jarring of the frame by the use of mallet and chisel.
  - Placing well-spaced staples at an angle, the staple remover can be inserted without damaging the show wood.
- We are not trying to prove that the upholstery is anything other than a 21st century reconstruction.



## Re-upholstery of 1827 chair

Photographs should be taken to capture the techniques used at each stage.

New webbing should be attached to the top surface of the seat rail. Any of the original webs should be laid on top of the new web and secured in position by sewing only. New hessian, or original if available is then stapled over the webs. The first stuffing is constructed and stitched to the required profile. If the original first stuffing exists, then this is to be replaced complete with stitching and covered with a new layer of scrim and restitched to give a firm profile to match the original. It is important to state at this time that the seat rail must not be chamfered to accommodate the first stuffing. This is a later adjustment and not applicable to furniture of the 1920s and earlier.

The second stuffing now takes place. If the stuffing is new it should match the original, if it is original, it should be cleansed, teased and replaced. A new Holland cover should be placed over the second stuffing, (if Holland was the original covering and not able to be re-used).

Cotton wadding. There was no wadding between the Holland and the cover on the few chairs of this date with the original cover and upholstery we have seen. Nevertheless, owing to the inferior quality of the stuffing materials today, I believe it necessary to use a layer of skim wadding for safety's sake. The finish cover is applied with staples and placed at an angle (shown in the first picture above).

Chairs of this period often had open basket gimps of various sizes placed around the sharp stitched edge of the upholstery as well as to cover the fixings. These require to be sewn with a fine circular needle so that all the loops are caught as well as the more solid section. Gluing is neither practical nor desirable.

Finally, it is important that a copy of the set of photographs showing your work on the furniture should be sent to the client for future reference.

It is an alarming thought that over the years upholsterers of undoubted skill have thrown away stuffings and covers as rubbish without any consideration as to the whether the stuffings are original, or without noting the techniques the upholsterer used. So much of the history of the development of upholstery techniques has been lost through this lack of concern. It is well to remember that upholstery techniques did not stop developing on the advent of mass production and foam.

If any of our members are fortunate enough to receive an item of seat furniture of possibly historic interest and they are not too sure how to deal with it, please ring the AMUSF for advice.