

SOURCING & STORING PERIOD TIMBER

By Alan Hessel

Finding period timber has always been a problem. Managing and storing it is an even bigger problem. We talk much of the conservation of furniture and in order to achieve this it is necessary to conserve our period timber stock and arrange it in a logical order, often within a limited space.

When starting out on a restoration career there are few guide lines as to which timber one may need in the future. I set about collecting everything that came my way and amassed a large hoard of timber, some of which has been a blessing, the rest a curse. A large millstone which has been expensive to store and to access. In my opinion it is far cheaper to buy new than to store old but for us that is not an option. I am sure that I am not the only restorer who never realistically takes this hidden timber cost into account when charging for commissions. Once the collecting bug has taken hold it is very difficult to discard items. The old saying "as soon as you throw something away you will need it the next day" lurks around in the back of the mind. Time and space are expensive so the more compact and well categorised the collection, the better.

I have not always been as organised as I am now. One of my epic timber moving traumas was when I had to vacate a rented store at short notice. It took three men a week. A lot was sold cheaply to an architectural salvage firm, some came to my workshop and the remainder filled two skips. Although a painful exercise it has probably been for the best in the long term.

Students have asked "what's best to buy and where can it be found?" Following is a list of some acquisitions and their sources:

- A pair of large mahogany Georgian doors. These were bought from a dealer who only wanted the brass furniture. They are 1 1/2" thick and in ten years we have used every bit of one and have just started on the other.
- Table leaves, over 50" long from a country auction.
- A Campaign trunk which turned out to be solid satinwood from a customer.
- The major part of an oak wall from a Welsh house, said to be 15thC from a farmer.
- A quantity of cedar wood panelling from the cellars of a country mansion gained for clearing it out.
- Pianos from auctions which if in poor condition can be bought for practically nothing and then take a day to dismantle.
- Odd parts of period furniture like the top halves of linen presses donated by appreciative clients.
- Crates of offcuts from retiring cabinet makers.
- Caddies and boxes which are too damaged to warrant conserving but can sometimes yield small quantities of the rarest veneers. These can still be found in junk shops, I never walk past one.
- Period oak floor boards from a builder.
- Wainscot panelling from an architectural salvage firm.
- Lumps of burr wood found lying around sawmills.

This list rolls on and on.



Thirty five years on from the start and with the help of various employees we have developed a storage system that works for us. Leaning timber against a wall is about the most inefficient use of space and always spreads and becomes a total frustration. We have created stalls (photo A) so that the larger pieces of timber can be leaned from side to side, without having to re-stack.. Provided these are not overloaded, they work well. For general stocks i.e. drawer linings and medium sized pieces there is an open fronted cube system (photo B). Easy to manufacture they must be kept small 12"Hx18"Wx18"D is our smallest.



Anything larger makes hunting laborious and there is the risk of avalanches. These cubes have purposely been made freestanding because in the event of re-organising space or moving workshop they do not have to be dismantled. The depth of each cube is known, so provided that everyone pushes each piece of timber to the back it makes it very simple by sight to gauge the length of each piece by its overhang. This saves hours and hours of wasted searching time. Longer not weighty pieces slide lengthways across the top of the cubes and smaller blocks of wood are kept in boxes which slide into the cubes and can be removed to the workbenches for sorting through. (photo C). Smaller pieces still are kept in small drawer units, anything left is, sadly used for kindling. Small pieces of rare exotic timbers are kept in old travelling chests which are fitted with lift out shelves. Table leaves are stored face to face and are graded from 1 - 10 according to quality. This

number together with the length and width are clearly marked on their ends. (photo D)



Veneers have their own system. Smaller pieces are kept in the salvaged slides from linen presses (photo E) which are built into old pine cupboards. Larger pieces are kept in a portable veneer rack (photo F). Each shelf has a series of thin plywood sheets which act as pallets. The corners and every sharp edge have been rounded off so that removal of these does not damage the veneers. Kept with this rack is a large and clear legend of where the different veneers are kept. It is so easy to wheel this contraption into the light of the workshop and lift out pallet 4 from shelf 3 to reveal the rosewood veneer.

The advantages of our system are that the timbers are kept close to hand in a warm airy environment and not collect too much dust. The time spent searching for the right pieces for a job is kept to a minimum, and saves falling into the trap of quoting for a small two hour job and then spending three hours looking for a veneer match. It is an instantly visible and self explanatory method of which everyone enjoys the benefits. Re-stocking is made easy because as soon as a particular cube begins to look empty we can concentrate our buying efforts in that area. Lastly at the end of the year when the accountant says "what is the value of your second hand timber stock". It is easy to make a calculated guess by the cubeage. Provided that the system is not overloaded it really works very well indeed and adds greatly to the efficiency and profitability of my business.