

EDINBURGH CITY CHAMBERS

RESTORATION OF THE COUNCILLORS SUITE OF FURNITURE



By Hugh Haley, a BAFRA Accredited member

Towards the end of 2008 we were successful in tendering for a contract to make repairs to a suite of furniture for Edinburgh City Chambers.

The City Chambers is located in an imposing building on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Designed by John Adam and built between 1753-61, it was intended as a Royal Exchange for the use of the towns' merchants. However it was soon found that they were happier conducting their business in the surrounding taverns, so the Council took over the building and at the end of the 19th century built major extensions which were completed by 1903. This work included the provision of a beautifully constructed Chamber for the use of Councillors during their monthly meetings and it was for this room that the suite of furniture was provided.

The furniture comprises 64 Davenport style desks, slightly larger than usual, and each provided



with a leather upholstered chair with arms. There is also a large 'Throne' like chair for the use of The Provost of Edinburgh.

All pieces are constructed in walnut.

The Councillors' Walnut Davenport desk and leather upholstered arm chair



The Lord Provost's Desk and Throne

In addition there were various side tables and accompanying chairs for the use of the press and other Council officers.

At some time in the seventies the Council had stopped using the historic layout for meetings, new furniture was provided and the original items put into storage in an empty house, somewhere in Edinburgh and forgotten.

By chance they were found again just as the decision was made to carry out extensive renovations to the fabric of the Chamber and the Council further decided to incorporate the original furniture into the new scheme.

The original intention was that all the furniture would be delivered in one lot due to storage problems at the chambers but we were lucky that the Council found somewhere to keep it all and agreed to send it in three batches. We have a large shed for storage within which I created an insulated box, fitted with a conservation heating system. This gave us a climate controlled environment to store the work in before and after treatment.

Access to the Chambers is very difficult with extreme parking restrictions in the area so I gave up my original intention of using our own chap for the transport and employed an Edinburgh company, Doree Bonner, to deliver the furniture to our workshop in West Wales. The first batch arrived at the beginning of October and we were underway.

The work was fairly straight forward, being remarkable for the sheer scale rather than any interesting problems. One of the advantages of our work is that you tend to be doing something different each day so the sight of this room full of identical pieces, all requiring basically the same treatment was a little daunting to say the least!

We started with the chairs which were for the main part in good condition and needed very little in the way of repair. They all had to be permanently numbered and we settled on an engraved brass 'dog tag' which we screwed to the inside of the front seat rail.

This meant that it could be easily seen standing behind the chair and tilting it forward. This turned out to be a very important part of the job. When tendering we had hugely underestimated the impact of there being so many similar objects and the council's affinity with constantly quantifying the work in progress. The pieces had been given temporary numbers by the Architect using sticky labels. When picked up, the men had just grabbed the first ones they came to so they arrived out of sequence. You might not think this would be much of a problem but would be amazed at how complicated the paperwork got. There were three lists; ours, the Architect's and the Council's. Two chairs had been given the same number which caused utter chaos and my poor wife spent many frustrating hours struggling through a cramped shed trying to work out what was what.

To further complicate matters, we were being paid three different amounts according to the amount of work needed. The firm of Architects had given each chair a condition rating A B or C - and of course we disagreed with their decisions. This meant we had to re-rate them all, giving reasons for the changes and fight for the contract value to be altered accordingly.

With all this sorted out, our shellac man, Spencer, gave them all a good clean and polished them up using clear beeswax. He then passed any damaged ones over to me for repairs. These were limited to the odd loose joints which I managed to inject with 'Colle de Poisson' without any major dismantling being necessary. Finally those that needed reupholstering were taken to a local firm who rebuilt the seats before covering with good quality hides supplied by Andrew Muirhead, a

Scottish company that had been specified by the client. We received very good service from this firm and I would highly recommend them.

This brought me to the desks. These had suffered all the sorts of damage you would expect, mouldings smashed, castors damaged, lids falling off etc. I worked on them in batches of five, which gave thirteen phases and I have to tell you that by phase five I'd had enough! Obviously, it was important to maintain the standard of work from first to last. We had initially completed two desks and two chairs, one pair being returned to the council, the other retained with us so that we all had a reference point to refer to. Stoic persistence triumphed and I eventually found myself on the last one.

I had sufficient old walnut in my store and repairs were made to the damaged mouldings in the usual manner, cutting out the damaged sections and gluing in patches using scotch glue.

A castor was sent off to the marvellous Optimum Brasses in Devon and copies made to replace those that were beyond repair. Others were removed for small remedial works which we did ourselves.

There was a problem with the ink well sections, which had been hacked out to accommodate a



microphone system. We were asked to do something about this and also to come up with



some way of supporting a modern wireless microphone at the back of the desk. On the left hand side they were fitted with a silvered brass plate into which a name card can be slipped (see photo). We produced a copy of this but in the form of a solid plate and had Optimum

knock up sixty four copies. These were then silvered using 'Sheffo' silver solution and screwed into place covering the damaged ink wells.



These plates also served as a solution to the new microphone support. We had S shaped brackets made up in stainless steel that could be slipped into the name plate in place of the card. I had milled out the back of the ink well plates so



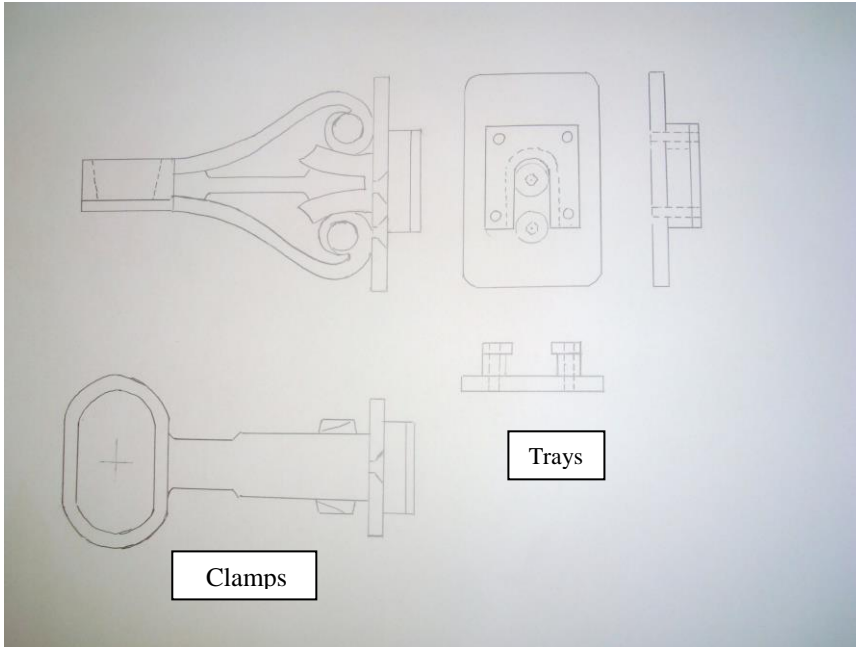
that a second bracket could be slid in there.



I then had a local joinery produce walnut 'platens', a sort of shelf, that with these brackets attached could be placed into position across the back of the desks and slid to the left, locating under the plates. This turned out to be a very elegant solution to what had been the most worrying part of the job and once the timber had received Spencer's excellent staining and polishing treatment they looked as if they had

always been there. In fact on their return not a single person noticed that they had been added.

This just left the Lord Provost's chair, remarkable for its sheer size, we were very fortunate to have double door access to one room of our workshop and it took three of my strongest friends to help carry it in. It was in good condition requiring only a few patches to the cornice and the provision of new mouldings to the lower legs.



The Lord Provost has a ceremonial Mace and sword which are fitted to the sides of the chair during meetings and we were asked to make repairs to their fittings. Each sits on a brass tray and is then held by a pair of clamps along their length. The 'trays' had been missing for some years and they had been forced to hang them within the two clamps. This was causing damage to the surfaces of the objects, so we produced two new trays using an adaption of the design of the clamps by artist blacksmith Toby Petersen. The originals were cast

but lacking such facilities we hacked, hammered and soldered them out of brass stock. The results were excellent if I say so myself and again passed unnoticed on return until pointed out (very frustrating actually as I was very proud of them!)

At this point the original contract had been fulfilled, the Council were very pleased with the results and I was on my way to meet Princess Anne who had been invited by the Lord Provost to come and see the work that had been done. I was pleased to meet the other Conservators involved in the project, various firms had been



working on wall paintings, stained glass, gilding etc and we all had a very exciting day. We had finished the work at well under the predicted costs but at a considerable financial loss so I was very relieved that the client then extended the contract and employed us to work on further pieces of furniture that would be needed for a full meeting of Council.

By this time I had got the measure of pricing the work and over the next few months we managed to move into profit overall.

The Team Leaders Hugh and Roxanne Haley

