

# RESTORATION OF A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY INDIAN IVORY INLAID CABINET TABLE

By Peter Brazier



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This cabinet, which was approximately 30" x 20" x 20" with a fall and small drawers inside, came to us for restoration.



Inspection showed the carcass was split in several places and the end joints had significantly moved. Not surprisingly it was apparent that over the years it had been repaired, sometimes well but frequently indifferently. The lock on the fall was a replacement, a smaller till lock, and the carrying handles were cheap modern wrought iron ones. Unusually in a cabinet of this origin, all the inlaid surfaces except for part of the back were covered in a relatively thick veneer. There was an immense amount of inlay missing and much of what remained was not secure and was curling up. A great amount of the banding was missing and the outer row had been completely removed and replaced by veneer.

## Banding

The extent of the restoration needed made this a challenge in itself but the repair and replacement of the banding in a cost-effective manner was daunting. The banding was of a Tonbridge Ware type pattern enclosed between ivory and ebony stringing. No less than 70ft of this banding needed making up in two different patterns! The internal pattern was only 5mm wide and the pattern repeated itself every 5mm. This 5mm square of pattern was a mix of no less than 15 pieces of different sized ivory and wood arranged in a specific manner. It was barely discernible to the human eye.

It was photographed with a digital camera and greatly enlarged. This enabled us to see that down the length of the banding the pieces were all of uniform width however across the banding they were alternately single and double sized.



Before starting the work we turned to the engineering trade and bought two 6" slitting saw blades which were about 1 1/2 mm thick. These we had ground down to 0.4mm thick. As so much banding was needed it was essential to reduce the waste of ivory to a minimum by using the finest saw blade. We also had a mild steel gluing jig made up. The side and top were tightened on threads and came up on steel stops. Each 5mm x 5mm "pattern" was made up in 12-inch lengths. After the jig was tightened the whole was placed in a low oven (70 deg.) so the excess glue could flow freely out of the perforated drain holes at the top and bottom of the jig.

When several lengths had been made they were side glued together and then "bacon sliced" off and the slivers glued up between the outer stringing. The jig proved of enormous value as everything came out precisely to size and the banding was relatively quickly assembled.

## Carcass

Before work could be started on repairing and replacing the ivory inlay, the carcass had to be repaired.

The corner joints were injected with glue and many of the wooden pegs which had failed in shear, were replaced. Then splines were carefully shaped precisely to fill the splits in the carcass. Several areas where the veneer cladding was completely missing were made good as well as those edges of the cabinet, which had been split away.



## Ivory Inlay

All the ivory was calibrated for thickness by gluing temporarily onto boards and passing through a thickness sander. Before any new inlay was applied much of the existing inlay had to be removed, flattened where necessary and the cavity cleaned out before re-laying. All the missing motifs were cut out to size in packs of three with a Hegner saw, then fitted; using the finest blades, three were found to be all it could handle. Motifs, which were incomplete, were repaired. Just under 900 pieces of ivory alone had to be cut out, fitted and applied! When completed the missing banding already made up to length was similarly applied. All the replacement ivory and wood had then to be scrapped down to a true surface avoiding the old ivory motifs, which were engraved. Only then were the replacements engraved themselves. The outer moulding was then re-worked around the edge of the cabinet. Finally the whole piece was given a rubber of shellac and waxed up.

## Hardware

A new lock was fabricated to fit the original pin position and back plate. We cast suitable contemporary handles and had them and the lock plate silver-plated. The fixing of the handles presented us with a particular difficulty. Originally the pommels would have been either of the strap variety, bent over and nailed inside or more likely made from half round bar and squeezed together inside the cabinet, having previously been threaded and then hove up on a nut and the surplus cut off. We could not do this without removing the whole inside of the cabinet. How we overcame the problem was to make up solid pommels, cut exactly to length and bolted inside; even this was not easy. The handles we cast without the conical pieces on the end, thus allowing the handle ends to pass through the pommels.

The end pieces were then hove up on threads which had already been drilled and tapped as we could not silver solder them without destroying the silver plating.

