



**RESTORATION REPORT FOR
THE GRAND MASTER'S THRONE
AND A PAIR OF WARDEN'S
CHAIRS
PROPERTY OF THE UNITED
GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND
By Ray Dudman
a BAFRA Accredited Member**

Historical Background

The first headquarters building for the Grand Lodge of Freemasons was designed by Thomas Sandby and built in Great Queen Street in 1776. Apart from portraits of Grand Masters on the walls, there were no other furnishings. In 1790 George, Prince of Wales was elected Grand Master and, in February 1791, Grand Lodge resolved that chairs and candlesticks for the use of Grand Lodge should be provided.

Designs, specified by the Grand Lodge, for a Throne (to cost from £50 to £70) and a pair of Wardens Chairs were submitted by Robert Kennett who was an established cabinetmaker and upholsterer with a workshop in New Bond Street. He had already supplied chairs for Badminton House for the 5th Duchess of Beaufort (her husband had been Grand Master from 1767-1771). It took less than three months to make the suite of furniture and Robert Kennett submitted his bill of £157 10s for the three chairs (slightly more than allowed for) on 10th May 1791.

At this date, Freemasons' Hall was also hired out for non-masonic dinners and concerts, and it seems likely that the chairs were moved out of the Hall or at least kept covered and stored at one end on such occasions. The throne was originally decorated with Prince of

Wales feathers but was altered for a ducal coronet in the early twentieth century when the Duke of Connaught was Grand Master. The throne was last used in 1992 on the occasion of the 275th Anniversary of the United Grand Lodge.



*HRH The Duke of Sussex in
Grand Master throne*

The Library and Museum of Freemasonry approached us in April 2005 to provide proposals and estimates for the restoration of the three enormous giltwood chairs from the Freemasons Hall. The Grand Master's Throne alone measures over nine feet in height. Work commenced in July 2005 and the chairs were finished and returned to the museum in June 2008. A total of 3,765 hours were spent on the restoration project and 190 books of extra thick 23½ carat gold leaf applied.

Construction

The chairs are made in lime wood and are designed and constructed to slot together so they can be easily dismantled. Most of the joints have two short mortice and tenons, which are then secured with large bolts passing through the joints and threading into nuts, which have been housed in the adjoining sections. Screws have been used to secure the arms to the chair back and also for the smaller decorative elements at the top.



Condition – Prior to Treatment

The upholstered seat drops onto the seat rails before the arms are fitted and the upholstered back slots down between the two columns before the top is applied. Alterations have been made at some time to the upholstered backs which mean they now have to be screwed to the columns to keep them in place.

Gilding

The existing visible gilt finish was a mixture of oil and water gilding, probably carried out in the late 19th Century. This had been laid onto a prepared gesso base, which had been applied over previous water gilding and gesso. Much of the oil gilding had perished and was in poor condition. It had been repaired with more oil gilding and a clear lacquer had been applied to brighten up the appearance.



There were a number of previous gilding schemes beneath the visible finish and scrape tests were made to establish these layers. It was clear that the original surfaces remained although little or no gold could be found.

The culmination of so many layers of gilding and gesso had obliterated the carving, especially over the areas of finer detail.

Gilding Analysis

The scrape tests carried out on the gilding have revealed that there are three major gilding schemes (see page 16 – Summary of Finishes). The third gilding scheme is mainly the current visible finish, with the addition of later oil gilt repairs and a clear varnish. This third scheme has been applied with a thick gesso base which has filled up, and in places obliterated, the finely carved detail.

Removal of this gilding scheme can only be carried out using sharp metal tools to scrape away the layers. The gesso is adhering strongly to the first and second schemes of gilding, mainly because there is virtually no gilding remaining from the early schemes so the gesso has secured itself strongly to the earlier clay bases.

The second scheme of gilding is very similar to the original and it is difficult to determine the difference. A very thin layer of gesso has been applied over the original surface and then brown clay, again similar in colour to the original. There is very little gold remaining from this second gilding scheme. This was probably washed off before the third gilding scheme was applied.

It is possible to remove the second gilding scheme, however, there is virtually no gold remaining underneath. This presumably has been washed off to allow the new gesso to grip the surface.

The cushion, crown and globe stands do not have any traces of the 1st and 2nd gilding schemes. The carving to the crown and cushions appears to be of a later date than the rest of the chair.

Carving

There were many unsightly repairs that had been made with composition. This included leaf work on both front rails on the Warden chairs and many of the paterae



around the seat rails of the throne. The leafwork on the central cresting had missing elements including the central turnover and there was generally damage to many areas.

Joinery

The chairs were in sound condition overall but there were splits and cracks in some of the larger pieces of wood, due to shrinkage and defects in the timber. One of the globe stands had broken rails and the tassels on the cushion had been repaired poorly on many occasions previously.

Restoration Proposal

A number of options were considered including cleaning and patching up the existing finishes, to stripping entirely back to the wood and re-applying all new gesso and gilding. Both these options would have been considerably less time consuming and costly. However, by only cleaning and patching the gilding we still had the problem of very poor surface detail and lack of any quality due to the build up of previous layers of gesso and gilding and poor existing finishes. To strip back to the wood entirely and remove the original surfaces, which we knew remained, could not be justified on pieces of furniture with so much history and we felt it would be un-ethical to follow this method.

We therefore, agreed that the only option was to remove all the overlayers from the remaining original gilded surfaces, remove all previous unsightly composition repairs and replace with newly carved lime wood to match the original elements. Repairs to the gesso would then be carried out and due to the fact there was little or no gold remaining, we would completely re-lay the original surfaces with gold leaf. The new gold would be left fairly bright rather than re-creating an old antique appearance.

Treatment

The chairs were first dismantled and labelled, taking care to mark the individual bolts and screws to ensure correct re-fitting. A special spanner had to be made to fit the notched head of the bolt, which after re-assembly was screwed to the underside of the throne for future use. The upholstered panels were individually wrapped and stored for safe keeping.

Stripping off Overlayers from Original Surface

This was by far the most time consuming part of the whole procedure. Because we were removing and separating layers of mainly water based products, chemicals had no effect in softening the surface and anything water based would also penetrate the original surface which we were endeavouring to preserve.

The overlayers had to be scraped and carved away, using metal spatulas, scalpels and French dragging tools.

It was extremely difficult to remove the second gilding scheme, which had been applied in very thin layers. Problems also occurred in places where the newer gesso layers were harder than the original softer surfaces, causing some flaking and crumbling of surface.



Repairs

Joinery and Carving

Previous repairs that had been made in composition were removed from all the chairs. Cracks, splits and timber defects were all cleaned out and fitted with limewood slips and wedges secured with animal glue.



Areas of missing woodcarving were first drawn and then transferred onto lime wood, the outline was then cut out on a jig-saw and glued into position. The new wood was then carved to match the original decoration.



Gessowork

Loose and flaking gesso was consolidated using a thinned out PVA adhesive, which is more penetrating than rabbit skin glue or parchment size. Areas of missing gesso and bare wood were first scraped thoroughly clean using scalpels and carving tools.

All bare wood was brush coated with a hot thin mixture of rabbit skin glue and whiting to seal and prime the surfaces. Gesso was then applied in thick coats to build up the surface ready for re-carving. On smaller areas of decoration the gesso was mixed into a thick putty and applied with spatulas and modeled to shape the carved profiles.

Once dry the new gesso was carved into shape and fine details cut into match the original surface decoration which included sharpening the carved outline of leafwork and veins on the waterleaves.



Preparation

The new gesso was finely smoothed with 320 and 400 grit garnet paper to remove tool marks.



The dust was vacuumed from the surfaces and each piece was cleaned with Industrial Methylated Spirit to remove all remaining dust and grease prior to applying gilding clays.

Size (rabbit skin glue thinned with water) and yellow ochre was mixed to match the original colour and then applied to all bare areas of gesso to seal and prime the surface.

Coloured 'bole' was mixed from various gilding clays to match the colour of the original 'bole' and then applied with size in very thin coats on top of the yellow ochre and also to the very worn areas of the remaining original bole to achieve an even surface coverage.

When these layers had dried they were polished using a natural short haired bristle brush to achieve a smooth surface.



Gilding

When each element of the chairs had been bristled they were water gilded using 23½ carat extra thick gold leaf.

After two hours drying the new gold was burnished with an agate stone on the highlights to achieve a solid shine.



The background areas were left unburnished to create a contrast and feeling of more depth to the carving.

Finishing

The new gilding was lightly washed with water, using a hog hair brush to take the brashness off the fresh gold. Once dry, it was dusted with rotten stone and buffed to a shiny finish using cotton rags.



The brass castors were cleaned and re-laquered before re-fitting to the feet.

New braid was fitted to all the drop in seats.

The cushion and crown were cleaned and re-painted and the globes were restored by a specialist restorer.

The chairs were then completely re-assembled and calico dust covers made to fit each chair.

The two globes are not fitted to the Master's Throne (Centre)



T



