

second sitting



One of the benefits of buying an antique that has seen better days is the satisfaction of helping to restore it to its former glory. A leading expert shows how.

by Sue Elliott



THERE is something fundamentally cosy about drawing a favourite armchair closer to the fireside on a chilly evening.

But soft upholstery is a fairly modern – and constantly updating – phenomenon. Andrew Matthews is highly skilled in the restoration and conservation of antique furniture based at his workshop just outside Cambridge. He studied at the London College of Furniture and much of his work comes from Cambridge University colleges.

"If the 18th Century can be said to be the age of the cabinet maker then the 19th surely belongs to the upholsterer. Upholstery is and always has been a fashion business. No style has yet developed that has not found expression in seating," said Andrew.

Great cabinetmakers, such as Chippendale, were the interior designers of their day, taking on both upholstery and furniture making in Georgian and Victorian times, and would provide loose covers, curtains, wall fabrics and bedding too.

Indeed, it has been technical developments which have the power to make new shapes and designs possible to the trade. During medieval times the upholsterer was known as an "upholder" because most of the work involved looking after and putting up wall hangings, tapestries and making bed draperies. The job also involved all types of bedding that contained feathers.

"In the late 14th Century the Upholders Guild had the powers to seize and destroy feathers traded in the City of London suspected of disease or poor quality," said Andrew.

The population explosion and rise of the middle classes gave the upholsterers a new lease of life. In 1780 the population of the country was around 7.5 million but less than 100

years later, by 1850, it had more than doubled to 18 million.

"In the 1830s the coiled upholstery spring gave rise to a new class of goods – that were seen as the epitome of indulgence and comfort and an ultimate form of luxury for the enjoyment of the most prosperous of Victorian society.

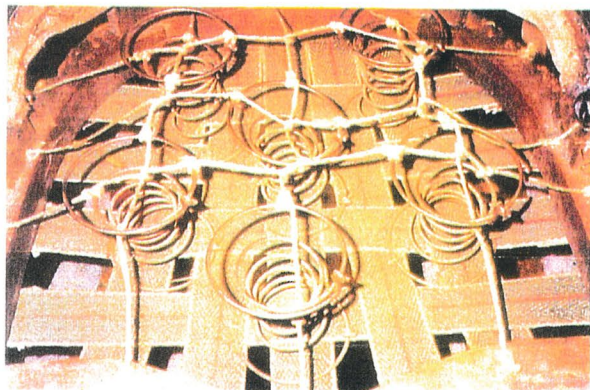
"Expansion in population went hand in hand with the Industrial Revolution, bringing such things as the mass production of springs and the rise of the middle classes. These are important facts in understanding the development of furniture in the 19th Century."

A huge variety of upholstered furniture became available, often sold in suites, with sofas or chaise longue and a pair of easy chairs and sets of six side chairs, said Andrew.

Often the gents' chair had arms and the ladies' was without arms. "This was usually lower too, with a seat and back formed in one continuous curve. The absence of arms allowed ladies wearing voluminous skirts to sit without creasing the fabric," he said.

The seats were always plain and the backs often deep buttoned. "This type of chair was immediately popular with Victorian society."

"Frames of these chairs from about 1835 to 1900 were often mahogany or walnut or sometimes rosewood, beech or birch with 'spoon' backs and short scrolling legs. Many were Rococo in style, from the French 'rocaille' or rock work, used to describe the highly ornate rock and shell shapes made fashionable by the artificial grottoes at Versailles. Other embellishments that were popular with the Victorians were trees covered with creepers, dripping



The main pictures, courtesy of Dr Rose Newson, show a Victorian ladies' spoon back chair during the stages of restoration, a similar complete project would cost about £400.

Top Left: Andrew Matthews at work. Picture by Roger Adams 17518.

Above: The double coil springs are secured to tensioned seat webbing with twine.

Left: A beech frame with mahogany show wood, the seat has a first stuffing layer of horsehair and hessian.

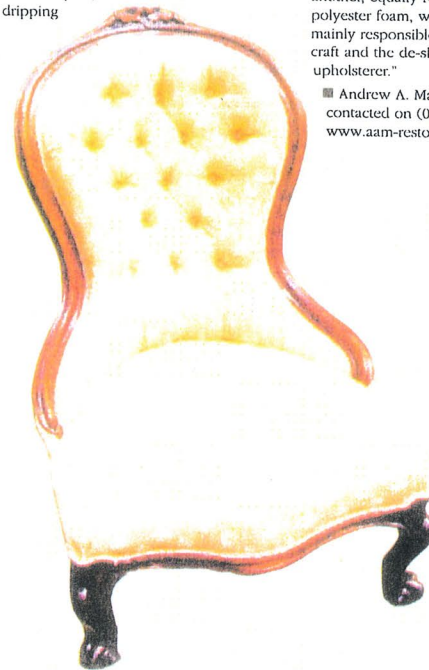


water, lattice work and peasants and even Chinese pagodas.

"Sometimes there was naturalistic carving on the knees of the legs and front rails and there were always castors, brown or white porcelain or brass," said Andrew, who is less impressed by later developments.

"The 20th century saw the arrival of another, equally revolutionary material – polyester foam, which was eventually mainly responsible for cheapening the craft and the de-skilling of the upholsterer."

■ Andrew A. Matthews can be contacted on (01223) 264963 or visit www.aam-restoration.co.uk



Above: Here the rolled edge of the back shows both stages.

Left: The completed chair with its cabriole legs ending in scrolls, featuring the deep button back, made up by buttons pulling the fabric to create a decorative effect.