

History DETECTIVE



Andrew Matthews restores fine furniture but likes nothing better than discovering the stories behind the objects. Lisa Millard meets the story-telling craftsman.

Pictures by Warren Gunn



Andrew's tools of the trade and the new feet he fashioned, after exhaustive research, for a 17th century Dutch marquetry cabinet

Time stands still around Andrew Matthews. While the world around him moves with ever-increasing haste, Andrew's workshop runs to a slower, more pensive pace.

Restoring antique furniture is not speedy work; it requires a considered and careful hand. Andrew is a highly qualified, skilled and experienced craftsman who regularly restores antiques that grace the colleges of the University of Cambridge, and undertakes commissions from significant national collections, including the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettle's Yard. Testimonials to his work are impressive.

"Look at this," Andrew says, tilting his head while appraising a long-case clock made from glowing mahogany, currently missing a hood and clock face. "I've got the whole chap here, but I don't touch the movement as it's a specialist job. It was made by John Benson, who was known for the paintings of moon and star faces on his clock faces. Look - that's all been hand-made. Ah, it's just beautiful."

Despite a long career restoring antiques, Andrew is still awestruck by the pieces he works on; explaining the history and workings of the long-case clock he has the enthusiasm of Caractacus Potts: "Listen to the chime, you've got to hear this," he says, carefully placing a bowl-shaped piece of mechanism on the cloth-covered workbench and flicking it with his fingers to release a pure peal of sound that rings around the room, making Andrew grin from ear to ear. "It sounds like a Tibetan singing bowl doesn't it?"

The clock, which dates back to 1760, is undoubtedly lovely, even dismantled and in disarray, but came to Andrew in a sorry state. Previous repairs had been badly executed, incorrect timbers used and traces of insect/bird droppings were visible.

Originally, the clock was bought by one Dr John Dalton, a Fellow of the Royal Society, chemist, meteorologist and physicist from Cumberland - also home to John Benson. Over the years, the clock has travelled far and wide to reside with various generations of family Dalton. In 2013 it was shipped from New Zealand to Cambridgeshire, where the current family live, and will be installed chez Dalton once Andrew has worked his magic.

chasing history

"It's what I love about all this stuff - the sense of history," says Andrew, who relishes the detective work that accompanies his craft. "I consider myself more an artist/craftsman. It's actually not so much the making that's interesting, but the history."

He says that authenticity is key and loves chasing down the providence of a piece to discover its story and confirm the precise materials, colours and textures required to restore something to its original glory. When the Benson long-case clock came under his care, Andrew's first port of call was the University Library where he traced details about both Benson and Dalton. "Back then there were lots of clockmakers. They all designed the mechanism but didn't make the clock's casing - that was woodwork and made by another specialist. I love taking a piece apart and discovering the traces left by the original maker, their initials or the mark of their saw."



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One of Andrew's favourite commissions sent him on a voyage of discovery. "I repaired a 17th century Dutch marquetry cabinet from the Master's Lodge at Trinity College, which had pieces dropping off and bits lifting due to glue fatigue. I needed to make new feet for it," he says unfolding a roll of paper showing the to-scale drawings he created before turning a block of wood into bun-shaped feet. "When I got the cabinet to my workshop, I realised the cabinet's feet were not the original style. I looked in lots of books but there was nothing and I contacted the Fitzwilliam Museum and V&A, but they didn't have anything useful.

"Then, because it is a Dutch piece, I contacted the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, spoke to the head of furniture conservation there, and found the museum had about 15 of these cabinets and were able to supply me with the plans for one showing the original feet so I could get the exact sizing. It's important to me to be as authentic as possible, which also meant sourcing the right wood. In this case, it was olive, which was very popular in the 17th century as the Dutch East India Company was out and about all over the world and picking up all sorts of different wood." Andrew even did a dummy run

on the bun feet using a piece of walnut.

"I love the detective part of what I do," he says. "To me that part is as interesting, or even more interesting, than everything else. Each cabinet would have slightly different shaped bun feet as, back in those days, there were lots of craftsmen who would just be turning the feet for these pieces, so they would all be a slight variation on the same theme. After bun feet came bracket feet – the fashion changed – so many Dutch cabinets were updated with this new style of feet."

the unexpected

Despite a stellar line-up of commissions, including a 19th century Queen Mary sideboard from Marlborough House, a Chesterfield sofa from the Vice Provost's rooms at King's College and a 400-year-old oak angel lectern from All Saints' Church in Landbeach, Andrew is not precious about the work he undertakes. "A job's a job," he says. "I specialise in 17th, 18th and 19th century fine furniture, but I repair modern pieces as well. I was called out to see a lady in Newnham, many years ago, who turned out to be Lady Rothschild. There were six chairs needing repair and I was expecting something really decent and interesting. »



For more information about Andrew A. Matthews Restoration, see antiquefurniture restoration.net. Contact Andrew on 07808 590370.

» The chairs were actually from Ikea and I was asked to re-seat them as the caning had worn away. But it was quite a nice story because Lady Rothschild's husband – I think he was a former Master of Trinity – was using two walking sticks after having an operation but was able to hook these particular chairs with one stick to pull towards him and sit down. So I repaired them. You see, a job's a job. It's just not always the job you expect."

While Cambridge has its fair share of antique treasures, Andrew says his trade is not an easy route to making a fortune. "It's what I do. It suits me and I get by, but I wouldn't say I've made a good living," he says. He mostly works alone, occasionally inviting an assistant to help with projects, but they work for the experience and skill rather than hard cash. Andrew doesn't think it's a young person's craft – he used to work with students at the British Antique Furniture Restorers' Association (BAFRA) but they tended to be, like him, mature, often retired or pursuing a career change in later life. "I think a lot of the courses once run in colleges and universities stopped as more students became interested in computers."

The Stranglers, Culture Club, The Human League, Whitesnake, Judas Priest and Mike Oldfield.

"My first job was with one of the biggest stage lighting companies in the country and they just needed somebody to attach 300 plugs to 300 lights, but it gave me a foot in the door. I was on the road touring for eight years and I worked on Marvin Gaye's last UK tour."

Life on the road ended when Andrew met his former partner, and their daughter Bryony came along. He decided to enrol at The London College of Furniture; he'd always enjoyed making sculptural objects from beachcombed wood but lacked the skills to design and construct functional pieces. It was here he developed his interest in furniture conservation and restoration and studied for three years. "It was a good course," Andrew remembers. "You started by learning how to sharpen a chisel and ended up designing and making a piece of furniture." A stint working for a posh furniture restoring company based in Ladbroke Grove followed, before Andrew started to freelance, re-located to Cambridge and set-up shop here.

workshop workings

His workshop, which he moved to five years ago, has a stretch of windows overlooking fields, a wall covered neatly with hundreds of tools and shelves of books, journals and papers documenting the providence of antique furniture, and catalogues filled with pages and pages of pictures of hinges, brackets and plates designed for fine period furniture. There are pots of brushes, racks of CDs, jazz playing in the background and incense burning. Andrew makes us a cup of coffee and my eyebrows rise anxiously as he swerves the full cup between numerous treasures dotted around the workshop: "Don't worry," he smiles. "I can sort any repair out. It's what I do."

Making furniture, Andrew admits, is not as satisfying as restoring it. "I can make pieces and do, but I lose interest too easily." To prove a point he shows me a small, almost finished, coffee table he made for his daughter Bryony, promised to her when she started studying at university. Bryony has graduated and is now working in Brighton but the coffee table remains in her father's workshop. "I will finish it," says Andrew, stirring a bain-marie filled with warm Scotch glue (also known as animal or hide glue), ready to return to the long-case clock repair. "This type of glue has been used for hundreds of years," he says putting the pot under my nose and inviting me to smell it. "All the old pieces of furniture have been glued with exactly this. There are more modern and stronger formulas these days but, from a conservation point of view, you're looking for reversible techniques because, as custodians, we have to think of the people who come after us."

There's more conservation work on the horizon, but Andrew is not certain exactly what the restoration project will be. "You never know what's going to crop up next and I like that."



Andrew came to antique restoration later in his life, having previously qualified as an electrician when he was living in London. "I worked on some really big installations around the city, re-fitting offices. It was grimy, dirty, hands-on work and I learned an awful lot. But at the same time I felt like a fish out of water. I enjoyed some of the banter with the other electricians but, at break times, when they were reading *The Sun*, I was reading Charles Dickens. It wasn't really me."

One of Andrew's mates had contacts in the music industry, so he changed his environment from office blocks to rock 'n' roll, spending the next few years working on stage lighting with performers including



The 17th century Dutch marquetry cabinet complete with bun feet