

# Australiana

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RESEARCHING, PRESERVING AND COLLECTING AUSTRALIA'S HERITAGE



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RESEARCHING, PRESERVING AND COLLECTING  
AUSTRALIA'S HERITAGE

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## COVER

*York Street Synagogue Ark*, Sydney, c 1844, cedar (*Toona ciliata*). Attributed to the cabinetmaker Barnet Aaron Phillips (1792–1862). H 269.0 w 207.5 d 55.5 cm. Collection The Great Synagogue Sydney.

# Reclaiming a suite of Queensland colonial furniture

The Royal Historical Society of Queensland (RHSQ) undertook an ambitious project to research, conserve and exhibit a locally made drawing room suite in 2023. Owned originally by the Pollock family of Gympie, the suite in Queensland yellowwood reflects the transformative impact of Queensland's first major gold strike at Gympie in late 1867. *Australiana* and RHSQ members David Bedford and Judith McKay oversaw the project, believed to be the first of its type in Queensland, and share the suite's story here.

## DAVID BEDFORD AND JUDITH MCKAY

Robert and Alice Pollock, proprietors of a rich gold mine in Gympie, south-east Queensland originally owned the Pollock drawing room suite. It comprises eleven pieces – a tilt-top loo table, six balloon-back side chairs, a state chair, two easy chairs, and a couch or *chaise longue*—made from Queensland yellowwood (*Flindersia xanthoxyla*) elaborately carved, and upholstered with deep button upholstery (plates 6, 7, 8 & 10). The very decorative suite came to the RHSQ, the state's oldest historical society, in 1969 as a gift from the Pollocks' youngest child, Vivienne (1887–1976), then in her 80s, along with a pair of portraits of Robert and Alice Pollock by the itinerant artist Joseph Backler (1813–1895).<sup>1</sup> The suite represents the most significant group of Queensland colonial furniture in public hands, apart from the original furniture of Parliament House, Brisbane.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to a paper published in 2011 by historian Marilyn England in the RHSQ's *Queensland History Journal*, much is known about the Pollocks and their Backler portraits<sup>3</sup> (currently being conserved), but until now the drawing room suite has attracted little attention. Recent examination of the loo table revealed the remnants of a paper label (plate 1) from the Brisbane furniture maker Terence Rorke, who has not been well documented.<sup>4</sup>

## The Pollocks, the original owners

Scottish-born Robert Arthur Pollock<sup>5</sup> (1838–1910) and his elder brother



**T. RORKE,**  
(LATE MILNE & RORKE)  
**CABINET & CHAIR MAKER,**  
**UPHOLSTERER,**  
**AND BEDDING MANUFACTURER,**  
**QUEEN STREET,**  
(OPPOSITE JOINT STOCK BANK),  
**BRISBANE.**  
45



1. Terence Rorke's printed oval *paper label* found on the loo table.
2. Terence Rorke's advertisement, *Pugh's Queensland Almanac*, 1874.
3. Carving on the back of the couch.

4.

Advertisement, *Pugh's Queensland Almanac*, 1882. 'Established 1866' refers to the foundation of the partnership of Milne & Rorke, dissolved in 1872.

5.

Designs for drawing room chairs, Blackie and Son's *The Victorian Cabinet-Maker's Assistant*, 1853 figs 1, 2 & 3 on plate LXV.

"In every case it will be safer to pay a fair price to a respectable tradesman and take the benefit of his experience in the selection of the Articles, than to purchase from the self styled 'cheap warehouses'; for though the articles may be of elegant enough design and look as brilliant as French Polish can make them, yet in a very short time they will become WARRAS, DISJOINTS, and RICKETS."—See Chamber's "Household Hints" on Furnishing.

PATENT  
Extended Footrail Bedsteads.



AUSTRIAN  
Bent-wood Furniture.

All them who contemplate Furnishing, and would like to profit by the above advice, should go to T. RORKE'S, 167, QUEEN STREET, BRISBANE, where you can rely on getting good sound well-made Furniture, from thoroughly seasoned timber, and in most cases at the same price as you would have to pay for inferior goods at the "self-styled cheap-warehouses."

No Steam Slop-made or Chinamen's Goods kept at this Establishment.

**T. RORKE,**  
Cabinetmaker, Upholsterer,  
AND  
BEDDING MANUFACTURER,  
(Three Stores from A.J.S. Hall, and next to Messrs. Brookes & Foster's)  
**QUEEN STREET, BRISBANE.**  
69  
PUGH'S ALMANAC, 1882.

Alexander (1835–1896)<sup>6</sup> joined the rush to Gympie soon after the discovery of gold in October 1867. They were penniless following the failure of their butchery business in premises in Stanley Street<sup>7</sup> Woolloongabba, South Brisbane in Queensland's economic crash of 1866–67. Their two-storey business premises at 617–619 Stanley Street, forfeited to a mortgagee in 1868, is now on the Queensland Heritage Register.<sup>8</sup>

The Pollock brothers' arrival in Gympie changed their fortunes, just as the Mary River goldfield was to be the economic salvation of the young colony. With practical experience gained on the Kiandra goldfields in the NSW Alps, the Pollocks were quick to identify a rich reef on their Lady Mary claim about 9 November 1867.<sup>9</sup>

A quartz reef was discovered to-day, and one hundred ounces of gold taken from it. I saw some of the quartz. It was like Christmas pudding loaded with gold. The prospector's name is Pollock. It seems to be the reef that has supplied all the gullies with gold—What the diggers call the 'mother reef'.

Pollock was identified as a Brisbane butcher in another report:<sup>10</sup>

This afternoon there is great excitement on the field; at the

corners of gullies and in front of the stores men are gathering together in groups and talking to each other earnestly, for there is a rumour about the town that the quartz reef whence the gold in the creeks has been washed is found at last, and one hears on all sides that the richest reef yet seen in Queensland has been discovered by one Pollock, a Brisbane butcher, and his mates.

After raising enough capital to develop their Lady Mary mine, the Pollocks became very wealthy. A visitor to the mine commented 'the quartz bristled with gold'.<sup>11</sup>

On 23 July 1869 Robert Pollock married Alice Harte (1850–1926), commissioning Backler's portraits about this time. Robert and Alice later raised eight children and were residing at Gympie, probably in Mountain View Villa, Calton Hill, when they purchased their drawing room suite.<sup>12</sup> Robert was active in public life in Gympie until his death in 1910. About 1921 Alice moved south to Booval (Ipswich) to live with her daughter, presumably taking the suite and other items with her. When Alice died in 1926, Ipswich undertaker George Dowden handled that part of the funeral, which proceeded from St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Gympie to the cemetery.<sup>13</sup>

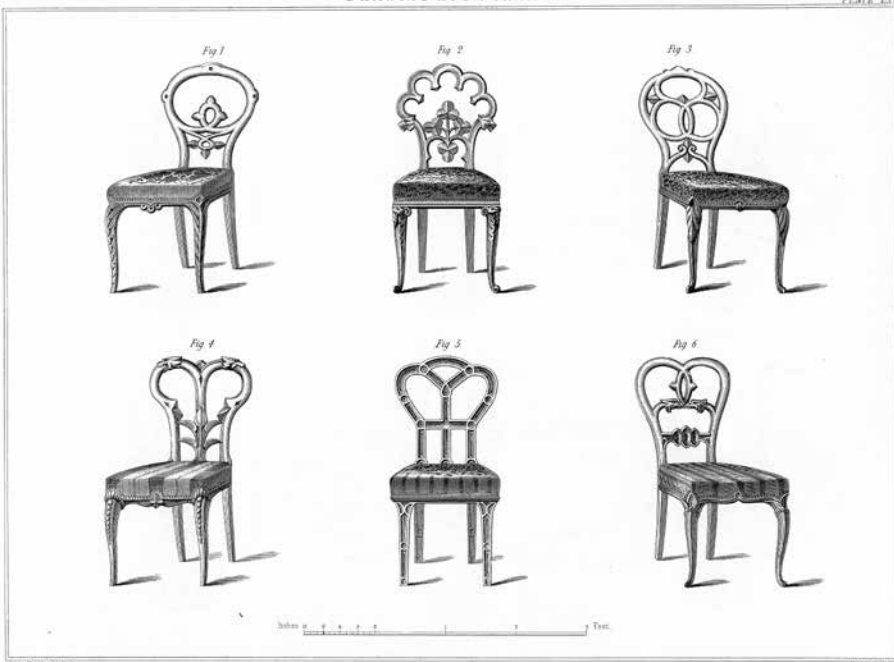
### Terence Rorke, the maker

Terence Rorke was born in Ireland c 1843, the son of Hugh Rorke and his wife Catherine, née McAuley. By the 1860s he was in Scotland where he presumably trained as a cabinetmaker. Soon after his 1865 marriage to Margaret Hacket in Hutchesontown, Glasgow, Rorke migrated to Brisbane. He worked initially in partnership with Donald Milne, establishing their business Milne & Rorke in 1866.<sup>14</sup> The partnership was dissolved on 25 May 1872<sup>15</sup> and within a fortnight, both were advertising businesses in their own names.<sup>16</sup>

Besides manufacturing furniture and bedding, Rorke imported Austrian bentwood chairs and British-made furniture, which arrived in pieces, to be assembled and upholstered in his

DRAWING ROOM CHAIRS.

PLATE LXV





establishment.<sup>17</sup> He also sold carpets, linoleum and window blinds.<sup>18</sup> In 1882 he assured patrons of ‘No Steam Slop-made or Chinamen’s Goods kept at this Establishment’,<sup>19</sup> (plate 4) reflecting the growing undercurrent of anti-Chinese resentment that culminated in a racial riot in Brisbane in May 1888.

Rorke’s premises and stock were badly damaged in a fire of March 1884,<sup>20</sup> but the premises were soon rebuilt, and he resumed operations.<sup>21</sup> In 1888 he is said to have produced the first billiard table made in Queensland, using local timbers.<sup>22</sup> In September 1892, probably due to an economic downturn overtaking eastern Australia, he went into liquidation, selling much of his stock.<sup>23</sup> Several months later he suffered another blow when his remaining stock was damaged in Brisbane’s Great Flood of February 1893.<sup>24</sup> Despite such setbacks, he maintained his business until his death on 21 July 1896. Predeceased by his wife and survived by children, he was buried in Toowong Cemetery.

While the loo table is the only piece in the Pollock suite to bear Rorke’s label, the other pieces are almost certainly from the same source as they are closely related, and advertisements of the time show that drawing room suites were generally sold as sets. The suite consists of pieces made of the same timber, of

similar design and with a similar style of carving and decoration.

The high-backed or state chair is taller and more ornate than the others. This can be explained by Victorian-era etiquette, which required that this chair be reserved for the person of highest rank in any gathering, whether a visitor or the head of a household. As such, a state chair was meant to stand out from the predictable arrangement of furniture and paraphernalia in a drawing room of the time.<sup>25</sup>

### Rorke’s workshop

The attribution of the Pollock suite to Terence Rorke is exciting because he has been virtually unknown until now, lacking an individual entry in Fahy and Simpson’s ‘bible’ of early Australian furniture.<sup>26</sup> Our research shows that he was a major Brisbane furniture maker of the late 19th century.<sup>27</sup>

Terence Rorke’s liquidation sale of September 1892 indicates the scale of his business before its decline. He offered ‘a magnificent collection of costly household furniture and effects’, including 20 drawing room suites, each comprising nine pieces; 50 bedsteads; 36 child’s cots; 18 overmantels; 200 toilet mirrors; 250 Austrian bent chairs; 80 camp stools etc.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, Rorke had a substantial workshop and employed

### 6.

Terence Rorke, Brisbane c 1872, three repaired and restored *drawing room chairs* reupholstered in green rep. H 88.5, W 46.6, D 54.3 cm (with slight variations).

assistants. In August 1882 he had advertised for ‘good cabinetmakers’, adding that ‘no rough carpenters need apply’.<sup>29</sup> While he may have employed carvers capable of basic work, he probably engaged journeymen carvers or specialist outworkers to work on more ornate pieces like the Pollock suite. Its components would have been produced in numbers, if not mass-produced, as shown by an almost identical *chaise longue* at Brisbane’s Newstead House as well as a *chaise longue* and side chairs in private collections in Brisbane.

Fellow Queensland researcher Glenn Cooke attributed the carving on the Pollock *chaise longue* (plate 3) to the Scottish-born Brisbane woodcarver Matthew Fern (1831–1898), based on its perceived stylistic similarity to Fern’s



## 7.

Terence Rorke, Brisbane c 1872, gentleman's open-arm *easy chair* before reupholstery. H 104, W 70, D 80 cm.

## 8.

Terence Rorke, Brisbane c 1872, *easy chair* without arms before reupholstery.

known carving on an exceptionally fine quality davenport in the collection of the Queensland Women's Historical Society (plate 16)<sup>30</sup> and the Glengallan sideboard in the Queensland Art Gallery.

However, other carvers should be considered. Searching Trove online, we can point to records of other specialist local carvers in the late 19th century, including members of the Ockelford (often mis-spelt Ockleford) family. The senior member, Albert Ockelford (c 1841–15.8.1907), worked as a carver and gilder in London before arriving in Brisbane and establishing his business by August 1871 in Elizabeth Street, premises shared with other specialist woodworkers – 'T. Lawless, French polisher; W. S. Mackie, turner; Simpson, cabinet-maker'.<sup>31</sup> In 1873, 'Albert Ockelford, from London, Ornamental Wood Carver' advertised several times for an apprentice.<sup>32</sup>

Ockelford's work included carved puppets for a Punch and Judy show, newel posts for stairs, and carved cherubs for a Gympie hearse.<sup>33</sup> Although an ornamental woodcarver, he admitted that 'at one time he earned his living by making cabriole furniture',<sup>34</sup> suggesting that he may have once been a journeyman in a workshop like Rorke's.

Albert married Eliza Frances Renton in Brisbane on 29 April 1872. Two of

Albert Ockelford's sons, George Albert (1872–1895) and William Edward (b 1878), were also notable carvers, winning awards at National Association exhibitions in Brisbane<sup>35</sup> and, in George's case, at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.<sup>36</sup>

Ockelford worked with, and apparently instructed, another carver, Henry Smith, on shop fittings for a new shop for Moses Ward in 1874.<sup>37</sup> Ockelford taught carving to apprentices, his sons, and others, including the wife of the Minister for Public Instruction.<sup>38</sup>

Mr. A. Ockelford, well known as one of our oldest Brisbane woodcarvers, has a pupil who has, after eight months' tuition, produced an exquisitely carved back for a head dining chair, in the Renaissance style. Mr. Ockelford is also teaching Mrs. Dalrymple, wife of the Minister, another very apt pupil.

Other carvers, such as Cuthbert Vickers, also operated in Brisbane in the late 19th century, in addition to several 'carvers and gilders' who made picture frames. The style of carving in the Pollock suite is, to our eyes, notably freer than the stiff and formal carving of the QWHA davenport by Matthew Fern. In the absence of documented work

by Ockelford or other carvers, we are reluctant to attribute the Pollock suite to a specific carver without further evidence.

## Construction of the suite

During the recent conservation and repair work on the Pollock suite we were able to examine its original construction closely. Surprisingly, despite the high quality of the carving, Rorke's craftsmen at that time were not very competent woodworkers and would be classified, at best, as joiners rather than cabinetmakers. On the loo table, the join of the four legs to the turned, solid timber centre column was made only with dowels, whereas sliding dovetail joints would have been the usual and much stronger joint. In fact, all the joints in the suite were made with poorly fitting dowels made of yellowwood, which meant that much of their strength, such as it was, relied on the collagen glue used. This may explain why Rorke specified in his advertisement that he wanted no 'rough carpenters'.<sup>39</sup>

## Dating the suite

The fragmentary label (plate 1) found on the top of the column of the loo table provides evidence to date the Pollock suite. The words 'RORKE / CHAIRMAKER' indicate that Rorke was no longer in partnership as Milne &

Rorke. The partnership between Donald Milne and Terence Rorke was dissolved on 25 May 1872, after which both operated independently as cabinetmakers in Queen Street, so the label dates after that.<sup>40</sup> Neither Milne nor Rorke maintained the 'late Milne & Rorke' tag in their newspaper classified advertising beyond mid-October 1872,<sup>41</sup> though it is retained in Rorke's advertisement in *Pugh's Queensland Almanac* in 1874 (plate 2).<sup>42</sup> What can be seen of the wording and layout of the label closely matches this advertisement. The last legible word on the label is 'Bank', indicating that Rorke's premises in Queen Street, Brisbane's main street, was opposite the Australian Joint Stock Bank.

A further clue to the dating of the suite are the advertisements Rorke ran in the *Brisbane Courier* on 3, 5 and 7 December 1872, specifically for drawing room suites.<sup>43</sup>

#### DRAWING-ROOM SUITES. in Walnut and Yellow Wood.

From £25 upwards.

T. RORKE,

CABINETMAKER,

UPHOLSTERER, AND

BEDDING MANUFACTURER,

Opposite Joint Stock Bank,

QUEEN-STREET.

Hence, the earliest date for the drawing room suite is 1872 and, while we cannot be definite about the latest possible date, it can be only a few years.

### Design sources

The concept of copyright or acknowledgement of the original designer does not seem to have existed for furniture designs in the 18th and 19th centuries. Cabinetmakers and publishers copied one another's designs and published them under their own names. It is a common misconception that the designs published by many authors originated with those publishers or authors. In fact, many designs were developed in-house by major firms such as Gillows of Lancaster and London, but once the furniture was installed in residences the designs were appropriated by others. Likewise, makers such as Gillows copied others' designs and published them in their own sketchbooks.<sup>44</sup> It is not therefore

possible to determine the first designer for many common items.

The design influences for this suite are from the mid-19th century, mostly from the 1850s. But some of the characteristics seen in the Pollock suite can be traced back to the beginning of the Victorian era. For example, T King's *Cabinetmaker's Sketch Book* of 1835 illustrated a balloon back chair with a carved mid-rail but with slightly curved instead of cabriole legs<sup>45</sup> and W Toms published designs for chairs that 'included curved backs, often of balloon shape, with carved ornament and buttoned upholstery'.<sup>46</sup>

However, the full set of mid-Victorian features seen in the Pollock suite first appear in mid-19th century design books such as that published by W Blackie and Son, *The Cabinetmakers Assistant* (1853) which arose out of London's Great Exhibition of 1851.<sup>47</sup>

Introducing the Antique Collector's Club (UK) *Pictorial Dictionary of British 19<sup>th</sup> Century Furniture Design*, Edward Joy comments on the significant effects of the Great Exhibition on furniture design. Its furniture exhibits were prestige, custom-made items representing the best design and workmanship available at the time; they were not representative of the furniture in common use in 1851 but were in fact 'futuristic' new work. Joy comments 'Exhibitors inevitably fell into the temptation of over-elaborating their pieces and these were bound to be imitated'.<sup>48</sup>

The designs from the Exhibition were promulgated by several publishers including Blackie and Son in 1853 and William Smee from 1850–1878. Smee was a subscriber to Blackie and Son's publication but had published earlier and went on to produce his own large catalogues of 374 pages of line engraved drawings, reproduced until 1878.<sup>49</sup> Those designs were spread very widely, reproduced often, and formed the basis for many cabinetmakers' work long after the Great Exhibition. Such English designs, first seen in the 1850s and especially inspired by that great event became the inspiration for some English-tradition furniture by makers around the world for at least 25 years afterwards.<sup>50</sup> That is why, despite dating to about 1872, Rorke's Pollock drawing room suite designs can be seen to relate closely to those mid-19th century designs.

Fig. 6.



### 9.

Design for an easy chair, Blackie and Son's *The Victorian Cabinet-Maker's Assistant*, 1853, fig. 6 on plate XXVII.

For our purposes and providing an easy reference to mid-19th century designs, Dover Publications Inc. in 1970 republished the 1853 publication *Blackie and Son's The Victorian Cabinetmaker's Assistant*.<sup>51</sup> We have chosen to reference that work for most of the items in the suite, although other publishers such as William Smee and Sons also copied and produced relevant designs as noted below.<sup>52</sup>

Edward Joy puts Blackie and Son's publication into context<sup>53</sup>

The immediate effect of the great Exhibition was to confirm the historical approach of the previous decades with renewed search for novelty inculcated by the Exhibition. These effects can be seen in Blackie's *Cabinet-Maker's Assistant*, 1853. ... It has 101 plates dealing with furniture of every kind ...

The book had over 400 trade subscribers from all parts of the country.



## 10.

Terence Rorke,  
c 1872, *chaise  
longue* or couch.  
H 94.5, W 186,  
D 90 cm,

Blackie and Son were the publishers, but not the designers of the furniture. Joy continues on the same page:

The authorship is anonymous but evidence points to P. Thomson whose signature appears on the plates and who later, c. 1860, published under his own name *The Cabinetmakers Sketchbook* with the note 'Author of *The Cabinetmaker's Assistant*'.

John Gloag, writing in the introduction to the Dover 1970 re-publication,<sup>54</sup> writes

... the third division [of the book] gives the *Assistant* the status of a copy book, and as such it would be found, well-thumbed and in constant use, on the benches of small independent cabinet-makers and chair makers, and in the larger workshops of such manufacturing centres ...

Although Gloag was most likely referring to its wide distribution in the UK, it is likely that Rorke, emigrating to Australia in the 1860s, would have had a copy of Blackie or another similar publication (most likely a reprint of the original or the 1860 version by P Thomson) and would have brought such

an essential book with him. It would have also been useful as a catalogue for customers to choose what style they preferred. Copies may also have been available for sale in Australia.<sup>55</sup>

### Design comparisons for individual pieces of the suite

Let us first consider the six drawing room chairs. Blackie and Son included six different, though similar, single drawing room chairs, all are variations on what we term balloon-backed chairs, all are variations on what we term balloon-backed chairs. We illustrate six chairs in Blackie and Son's plate LXV (plate 5) and three Rorke drawing room chairs (plate 6). The design influences for the simple curved balloon-shaped back of the chair and the carved, elaborate mid-rail are obvious, especially with the upper leftmost illustration. The Rorke chairs have an exaggerated curve to the cabriole leg, a characteristic of the elaboration seen in later 19<sup>th</sup>-century furniture.

Next, let us consider Rorke's gentleman's easy chair (plate 7), colloquially called a grandfather chair today, and its companion easy chair without arms (plate 8) yet to be cleaned and reupholstered.

Searching through the available references reveals a design for a similar

chair on plate XXVII of Blackie and Son's publication, for 'Easy Chairs' (plate 9). The chair depicted in the design shows many similarities to Rorke's chair. Although not an exact match, the influences are clear, such as the multi-petal stylised flower in the centre at the top and adjacent stylised foliar decoration. Rorke's chair has borrowed the more balloon-shaped back from the design of the drawing room chairs and has open-sided arms, whereas figure 10 has closed in arms. Such variations were common, as illustrated by very similar designs in *The Pictorial Dictionary*.<sup>56</sup>

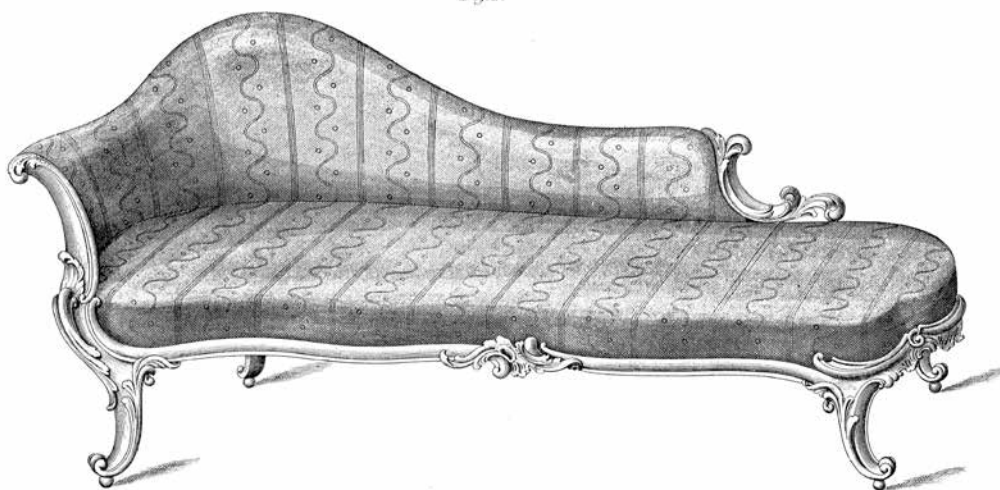
The next item to consider is the *chaise longue* or single-ended couch (plate 10). Searching through the available references shows a design for 'Drawing room sofas' on plate LXI of Blackie and Son's publication (plate 11).

While there are differences between the chaise longue and the design drawing, the influence is clear. Rorke and his carver have exaggerated the lines and created their own detailing and embellishment of the basic design. As noted elsewhere, such embellishment and exaggeration of features was in line with the practices in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as started with and encouraged by the Great Exhibition and its successors.

## 11.

Design for a chaise longue, Blackie and Son's *The Victorian Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* 1853 fig. 3 on plate LXI.

Fig. 3.



Another chair, the 'state chair' (plate 12), has some stylistic differences from the rest of the suite. 'State chair' was a term we were originally not familiar with, not in common use today in the domestic context. However, historical reference for such a term can be found in Blackie and Son's publication plate LXIX titled 'Antique State Chairs.' Adjacent plates LXVIII and LXX, titled 'High-Backed Chairs' and 'Antique High-Backed Chairs' respectively, show possible design antecedents for this chair, though no exact match. Figure 4 of Blackie and Son's plate LXVIII, shown here (plate 13), and figure 3 of Blackie and Son's plate LXX (not shown) give the closest design indications in that publication.

Whereas the state chair in this suite has convex sides to the back, the design in Blackie and Son's publication has concave sides. It would be entirely understandable for Rorke to have altered the concave sides to convex sides to match the rounded shapes of the other chairs in the suite.

On the other hand, the design could be a hybrid between designs from different authors, as other design books in the middle of the 19th century had included designs with the rounded, convex sides of the Pollock suite state chair. A design for a high-backed chair with a rounded back occurs in William Smee and Sons, 1850.<sup>57</sup> It is possible that Rorke owned or had seen both publications and took his inspiration from both.

As was common at this time, before the Arts and Crafts movement with its emphasis on being true to life, the carved

plant motifs are very stylised. They can be seen to resemble closely the English designs promulgated after the Great Exhibition, as distributed by publishers such as Blackie and Son.<sup>58</sup>

### Yellowwood

Yellowwood (*Flindersia xanthoxyla*) is also known as Yellowwood Ash and Long Jack. Growing to 45 m high with a maximum cylindrical trunk diameter of 90 cm, its natural distribution is from the Richmond River in northern NSW to Gympie in southeast Queensland.<sup>59</sup> Yellowwood trees were never plentiful as they occurred singly and in limited sites.<sup>60</sup> Yellowwood is no longer commercially available although the species itself is not regarded as being at risk of extinction. It is in the same genus (with 15 species in Australia) as the much more common Queensland maple from far north Queensland and is closely related to one other species of *Flindersia* in far north Queensland.

The medium-weight timber is fine-grained, old-gold colour with little figure in most boards. It is reasonably hard and strong and has a distinctive odour when cut. *Flindersia xanthoxyla* has been grown as a street tree in Brisbane and the Australasian Virtual Herbarium records several specimens.<sup>61</sup>

### RHSQ acquisition

In April 1969, when the Pollock suite was acquired, the RHSQ was based at Newstead House, Brisbane's oldest surviving residence, in the inner northern suburb of Newstead. At the

time the society was planning a major renovation of the building so that it could become a historic house museum. The enthusiastic honorary secretary, Louise Harris, proposed furnishing some rooms in 'period' style, hence she was thrilled to secure the Pollock suite for the future drawing room.<sup>62</sup>

After major work was undertaken in 1969–70 by the State Works Department, the house reopened to the public in February 1971. With Mrs Harris' sudden death soon afterwards, the museum project lost impetus;<sup>63</sup> however, her vision to recreate a gracious 'period' home led to its subsequent presentation as a 19th-century residence.

The Pollock suite was displayed at Newstead House until 1981 when the RHSQ moved to the convict-built Commissariat Store in William St, Brisbane City. Thereafter, some of the pieces were pressed into use. To facilitate this, they were inappropriately re-finished, sometimes in multiple layers, making the timber look dull and lifeless. Some were reupholstered, using inappropriate fabric, though the original structural elements of the foundation upholstery were unaltered.

Constant use of the balloon-back chairs, being of particularly fragile design, caused damage. Incorrect lifting from the top of the arched backs or from the elaborately carved mid rails resulted in numerous breaks, though most of the broken components had been retained. Some chairs had been poorly repaired using ill-fitting dowels



## 12.

Reupholstered *state chair*. H 128.5,  
W 53.5, D 63 cm.

and Queensland maple instead of yellowwood. This gave them an uneven appearance, which was somewhat disguised (possibly on purpose) by a murky finish.

The loo table had been placed near a window and exposed to damaging light and heat from the sun. The boards in the top of the table had warped, shrunk and the original dowelled joints had come apart, revealing gaps between the boards of up to several millimetres, then badly repaired with inappropriate timber dowels. Other pieces of the suite were consigned to storage, deteriorating out of sight.

## The conservation and reupholstering project

In 2021 Dr Judith McKay, in her Significance Assessment of the RHSQ museum collection, drew attention to the significance and plight of the Pollock suite. Dr Denver Beanland, the RHSQ President, gave his enthusiastic support to a rescue project which was organised and overseen by Dr David Bedford. The project was made possible by the financial support of the Queensland Gambling Community Benefit Fund, donation of the fabric and upholstery of the state chair as well as freight and time by Art Sofa Upholstery, and donation of extra workmanship, time and freighting by Frank van Brunschot Fine Furniture, Brisbane. With their combined support all but two pieces of the suite have now been conserved and reupholstered. This represents the first attempt in Queensland to conserve and reupholster a suite of colonial furniture using traditional materials and techniques, based on historical research.

## Conservation work in 2023

Australiana Society member fine furniture specialist Frank van Brunschot was recruited to do the restoration work. Initially, in line with Australia ICOMOS's Burra Charter 2013<sup>64</sup> – which sets best practice conservation standards – we hoped that common solvents would dissolve the inappropriate later finishes, revealing the original finish. However, that did not prove possible, as the original finish had been removed previously and been replaced by a series or mixture of 20<sup>th</sup> century finishes.

Paint stripper was essential to remove those polyurethane and lacquer finishes. The original surfaces were left intact as far as possible to retain the patina. Removing the opaque finishes revealed the extent of previous poor repairs to the balloon backs that didn't match the shaped profiles of the unbroken chair.

David Bedford put out a request for yellowwood to a woodworking forum. Eugene Dimitriadis, a member of the International Wood Collectors Society (IWCS), responded that he had some boards of the timber. When Eugene was made aware of the purpose of

the timber, he generously donated the boards, including express postage. These provided the initial material needed for the repairs to begin.

Unfortunately, because of the many previous breakages, poor condition, and inappropriate finishes, the preferred ideal minimalist conservation approach could not be taken with the repairs. However, in line with the principles of the Burra Charter, we ensured that only hand tools, traditional collagen glue and shellac were used in the work. All the work done is fully reversible if that should ever be needed.

The seat furniture was first assessed for loose components and joints. The *chaise longue* and state chair were found to be structurally solid with no significant inappropriate repairs. However, the balloon back chairs required a lot of work. Every side chair and every component was individually numbered as it was disassembled to ensure correct reassembly. When joints were found to be solid, they were left untouched unless they had been previously repaired with a piece of a different, inappropriate timber. Every loose join and inappropriate repair was completely disassembled. Fortunately, most of the previous repairs had used traditional collagen glue, so they were relatively easy to take apart.

Once that was done the joints were cleaned and any necessary replacement parts were shaped from yellowwood before being reassembled using collagen glue. The reassembly of the side chairs was difficult work as previous repairs had left the chairs differing in the height of the backs, twisted and not level.

Once the seat furniture was repaired, reassembled, and refinished with French polish (shellac applied in the traditional manner using a French polishing pad or rubber) it was taken to the upholsterer.

The loo table repair began with the disassembly of the loose boards of the top. The edges were cleaned using a hand smoothing/jointing plane so that the least possible amount of timber was removed. Some later-fitted inappropriate timber dowels were replaced with yellowwood dowels in the original dowel holes. Despite careful minimal treatment, the boards had shrunk so much that the reassembled and re-glued top was too small in proportion to the

apron under the table. It is possible that incompletely dried timber had originally been used in the manufacture of the table. The extent of the shrinkage meant that the apron had to be adjusted or reduced in size to fit correctly, which was done so as to be virtually invisible. Such changes are undesirable in furniture conservation but to ensure the structure is sound and as the suite will be on public display it was unavoidable. Once reassembled the table was French polished. The beauty of the subtle figure in the top, which had been disguised by the opaque later finish, was revealed (plates 14–15).

### A conservation approach to reupholstering the suite

In the best case, traces of the original fabric would have remained on the furniture itself and that would have guided the reupholstering. Unfortunately, earlier re-upholsterers had removed all traces of original fabric, though they had left important underlying structural upholstery shaping and indications of deep buttoning.

Finding an appropriate fabric became a challenge. Although furniture designs are well illustrated in design books, the fabrics are not specified and less well represented in the examples that we have seen. Most illustrations indicate that the fabrics were plain though some in Blackie and elsewhere do show distinctive patterns and stripes running front to back or up and down on chairs.<sup>65</sup> Colours are not shown nor indicated in monochrome line drawings.

Susan Lasdun's 1981 book *Victorians at home* includes some colour illustrations of important Victorian era households and

upholstery in England (including those of Queen Victoria herself) but the book is mostly monochrome and, while providing some indications, did not provide much guidance.<sup>66</sup> To our knowledge, there are no references specifying suitable fabrics for particular items of furniture in particular time periods, though we would be pleased to hear of any.

Faced with that situation we decided to trawl Queensland newspapers in Trove for enlightenment, starting with 1865. Fortunately, answers were found quickly. The earliest mention of a Yellowwood drawing room suite was in 1870; T F Wilson was leaving the colony for England, and his furnishings to be auctioned included a 'Drawing-room Suite in Yellowwood and Green Damask, comprising 6 Chairs, Couch, and Easy Chair ... Centre Oval Table, elegantly carved'.<sup>67</sup> The same ad was repeated 4 days later, when the suite's upholstery fabric was changed to 'Green Rep'.<sup>68</sup>

In January 1873, another auction offered 'A Handsome Suite of Drawing-room Furniture, in Yellow Wood, covered with Green Rep'.<sup>69</sup> In December, the suite came with a table as the Pollocks' suite did: 'Handsome Suite of Furniture in yellow-wood, covered in green rep, consisting of 6 Chairs, 2 Easy Chairs and

Fig 4



#### 13.

High-backed chair, fig. 4 on plate LXVIII Blackie and Son's *The Victorian Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* 1853.

#### 14.

*Loo table*, restored. H 78 (with castors), L 132, W 103.5.



Couch, Oval Table to match.<sup>70</sup> None that we found listed a state chair.

Other auction advertisements in the early 1870s offered several more ‘Handsome Suites of Drawing Room Furniture in Yellow Wood’, usually comprising 6 Chairs, 2 Easy Chairs, and Couch; some included an oval table or two. Covering included ‘green rep’, ‘richly Embossed Damask’,<sup>71</sup> ‘Striped Green and Gold Damask, Holland Saving Cover for ditto’,<sup>72</sup> and a double suite (12 chairs) covered with ‘Morocco Leather’.<sup>73</sup>

Given this range of popular choices in the early 1870s, and the propensity for green, we decided that as green rep was popular at the time and that green would sit well with the yellowwood timber, we would see if this fabric was available today.

What did rep look like? Rep or repp is a ribbed fabric.<sup>74</sup> The internet revealed a

Scottish historic restoration project that used a specially woven reproduction of a heritage green rep fabric with a moiré figure.<sup>75</sup> Grants available to the RHSQ were inadequate to consider having a fabric specially woven, so we set out to find a contemporary equivalent.

We first approached the Brisbane outlet for South Pacific Fabrics. The helpful manager there did not know of any examples in the ranges that they stock but contacted their head office, which had in stock a green rep that met the requirements – an Italian fabric made by the Dedar company in Milan ([www.dedar.com](http://www.dedar.com)). Both this fabric and the only other possible similar fabric that we could find, another Italian fabric by Schumacher in their *Rive Gauche* collection also has a moiré figure. It is unknown if the fabric on the suites advertised in the 1870s showed moiré as it is not mentioned.

## Finale

After a planned official opening in August 2023, the Pollock suite will be proudly displayed in its entirety at the RHSQ headquarters, the Commissariat Store in William Street, along with an appeal for funds to conserve and reupholster the final two easy chairs. The entire suite is now catalogued on the RHSQ eHive database at [https://ehive.com/objects?accountId=200594&query=pollock&facet=account\\_name\\_facet%3ARoyal+Historical+Society+of+Queensland](https://ehive.com/objects?accountId=200594&query=pollock&facet=account_name_facet%3ARoyal+Historical+Society+of+Queensland).

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### 15.

*Loo table*, top tilted to show figure. H 155 cm with top tilted up (without castors).

### 16.

John Carey (c 1828–1902), *davenport* with carving by Matthew Fern (1831–1898), Brisbane, 1873. Queensland Women’s Historical Society, Brisbane, photograph Judith McKay.



**Dr David Bedford** has been collecting Australiana for over 40 years and chairs the Queensland branch of the Australiana Society.

David is a botanist (BSc (Hons), PhD) who worked at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney from 1980 before becoming director of the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens in Hobart 1993–99. His special interests are Australian timbers and furniture. Email: [australiana.queensland@gmail.com](mailto:australiana.queensland@gmail.com).



**Dr Judith McKay** has spent a lifetime in museums, first at the Australian War Memorial and more recently at the Queensland

Museum. Judith's Significance Assessment of the RHSQ museum collection, undertaken in 2021 under the National Library's Community Heritage Grants program, is accessible on the RHSQ website at <https://commissariatstore.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RHSQ-Museum-Collection-Significance-Assessment.pdf>.

## NOTES

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- Marilyn England, 'Finding the provenance of two oil paintings from Gympie', *Queensland History Journal*, vol 21, no 7, Nov 2011 pp 423–37.
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- In 1868, Alex Pollock lived in Woodbine Cottage, Lady Mary Terrace (just above the mineshafes), Caledonian Hill, Gympie. Robert Pollock lived at Vine Cottage, Caledonian Hill when a son was born on 8 Dec 1872 (*Gympie Times* 11 Dec 1872 p 3); by 1875 had moved to Calton Hill when a daughter was born, *Gympie Times* 24 Mar 1875 p 3, and in Mountain View Villa, Calton Hill in 1876 *Gympie Times* 11 Nov 1876 p 2. Later they were at Horseshoe Bend.
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