

EXTENDING IDEALS

Extension tables are generally magnificent and valuable items and are well worth restoring. They have ingenious winding mechanisms and runner systems and this allows the owner to choose the number of leaves to add to the top of the table. In this way, the extension table can accommodate varying numbers of dinner guests.

If extension tables are not maintained, the process of opening and closing them soon becomes an excuse for household wrestling, pushing, and shoving. Then, as the joints begin to fail, these tables become wobbly, and unsightly ridges appear on the tabletops. Traditional, authentic restoration will maintain the value of the table and make its usage more pleasurable.

The restoration process begins with a full examination of the table. The runners, which allow the table to open and close, lie just below the tops. Once the table is fully open, the leaves are laid on the runners. It is at this stage that it is possible to get an idea of how many leaves were originally made to go with the table. Sometimes we discover that leaves are missing. If desired, these can be replaced. Also, if there is sufficient space, further leaves and runners can be made to add to those originally supplied by the furniture maker.

Sometimes the manufacture of additional leaves (over and above those supplied originally by the maker) will require a corresponding alteration to the runner system. It may even require provision of a longer winder or a telescopic winder. The winder is the long encased metal corkscrew fitting, which makes the manual extension and contraction of the table much easier. The detachable handle for the winder is easily removed and is best kept in a nearby sideboard.

Mirrored boards are used for new leaves and ensure an exact match in board character. This is where one board is split in half and opened out butterfly style. It is best to have a situation where timber can be individually hand selected at the timber mill or yard but unfortunately, very few timber agents allow this.

People are sometimes quite surprised at the change in the colour and shine of the

table over time although it often doesn't become apparent until the table is extended to take additional leaves. If the leaves are stored away in a dark cupboard, they will appear darker than the rest of the tabletop. The leaves will have retained their original colour and shine, while the table will have gradually faded. This problem can be overcome by repolishing. Another surprise for owners of extension tables is the accumulated grime, which builds up underneath the tabletop and along the runner system. This is cleaned during the restoration and rarely has any lasting impact beyond the accompanying unnecessary embarrassment.

Not all furniture restorers have the facilities to restore extension tables. The delivery vehicle, the workshop and the machinery must all be extra large. The table sander, in particular, is of considerable size. This type of sander is recommended to ensure an even finish over both ends of the tabletop and all the leaves.

For best results, these tables are restored from the foundations up. It is usual to start with the legs, move on to the base followed by the runner system and top and leaves and then finally the rims. While at the workshop, the table is checked over to see that the cut of the timber (quarter or back) and grain (character) matches throughout. Naturally, all new sections need to match the original piece.

Leg joints are checked for strength and the runner system assessed for straightness and free movement. Warped and worn runner systems are restored or reproduced before applying a lubricating wax. Table winders may also require straightening, cleaning up and lubrication, to ensure free motion. Final placement of each section must be very accurate, for it has immediate impact on how well the rims, leaves and tops meet together.

The tops, when wound up, should readily come flush together if the locating pins and the tops are correctly restored. Standard leaves are usually 18 inches (45.72 cm) to 24 inches (55.88 cm) wide, however some restored leaves can be very narrow, and are best made bigger or replaced. Sometimes it is necessary to correct previous restoration work because uniformity and authenticity



TOP: Victorian English Oak Extension Table, fully repaired and ready for traditional French polishing to match the colour and shine of the original polish of the base

ABOVE: This extension table extends to 18 feet (5.49 metres) in length and takes six leaves on its paired telescopic winder and runner system

adds to the value of the piece. It is not appropriate to have different types of joinery or locators on the one table. Originally they would have all been the same and that is how they should be restored.

The rims are also checked to ensure they come together flush. High quality extension tables usually have rims on each leaf. If they are missing, new ones are made. For long lasting 'invisible' joints in tabletops, the right equipment must be used including long shooting hand planes and the correct clamping equipment. Some restorers may say they can't make new leaves or replace leaves or tops. This often means they don't happen to have the individual spindle cutter or router cutter needed to match the original moulding of the table edge. However, hand tools such as edge, shoulder, block and rebate planes, along with carving gouges, can be used to ensure new sections exactly match existing ones.

The original finish and value of the table will dictate the most sensible approach to French polishing. A table with polish in good order should be restored in such a way as to minimise the damage to the polish. Later, the polish can be touched up. Some tired finishes may only need to be cut back and built up again, while others in poor state may benefit the most from a full strip and

repolish. Generally speaking, a good quality extension table should only be French polished using a shellac. For economy and a harder wearing surface, some people prefer to use a high quality lacquer finish.

Most people like their antiques looking like antiques, and not something shiny and brand new. For this reason, it is good to discuss your preference for patina and final appearance with the restorer. To help give a piece a well maintained but aged appearance, a furniture waxing and antiquing process can be carried out. This is also good maintenance for the table.

Though it is quite possible to make new extension tables, there are still good quality ones available through antique dealerships. It is better to purchase one of these and have it fully restored, rather than investing in having a new table made. However, sometimes it can prove very difficult to find one that matches the existing chairs or décor. In such situations a traditionally made custom or antique reproduction extension table might be the very answer ■

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