

SMALL & SIGNIFICANT

How could a piece so beautiful and small ever have been a trouble to anyone? How indeed! If one starts thinking about the World War I era and three generations living under one roof in Mosman, Sydney, it becomes easy to see how necessities and space took precedence over this luxury piece.

Retired owner Mrs Gillies of Clayfield, Brisbane, recalls her first clear memory of the davenport. In 1923, she attended boarding school. However, when school was in recess, she was one of many in their large extended family home.

They had just moved house, she recalls. Previously, they had all lived in a very large home in Bradley's Head Road, Mosman. Not long after Mrs Gillies' grandmother died, they all moved to this slightly smaller home in Mosman's Redan Street. Though she was only ten years old, she remembers distinctly the argument about the worthiness or otherwise of this beautiful davenport.

Some of the various comments made by her aunts, as they worried over it, were:

'What are we going to do with that fool of a thing?'

'It can't be used for anything!'

'Just thank-you cards and invitations.'

'Well, we don't really need it at all!'

'But we should keep it!'

Mrs Gillies, at ten years of age, didn't understand how anyone could make such comments about such a beautiful thing. Already she had fallen in love with the little davenport.

Finally her aunts decided that it could be installed in the main bedroom, and there it stayed for quite some years. When the aunts moved to their own house in Moruben Road, Mosman, the davenport, ironically went with them.

In the end the davenport was passed down to Mrs Gillies in the 1950s and she brought it to Brisbane with her. It was constantly used and had its own special place in her main bedroom. She has kept it close to hand ever since.

Though Mrs Gillies couldn't be certain how the piece came into her grandfather's possession, she describes how various ancestors emigrated from Scotland. The first to emigrate was a missionary, appointed by the Church of England to a position in Port Jackson in 1824. Though he never made it, his wife and three children survived the ordeal. Others emigrated between 1824 and 1855, the time when the davenport was made. Of course, the davenport may simply have been purchased second hand, or passed on to family members by people they knew. No one will ever know!

Mrs Gillies had various items of her furniture restored by our firm over the years. Not long ago she asked us to restore her delightful davenport. To the best of her knowledge and ours, it was the first restoration the piece ever received, which speaks highly of the manner in which it was valued and maintained over the last 150 years.

In restoring the piece, we decided to conserve, rather than replace, the original leather insert, to maximise the value of the piece. The



ABOVE LEFT: Davenport with rising top mechanism which allows access to additional pigeon hole compartments

ABOVE RIGHT: Rising top, piano front davenport with carved front legs and fretted gallery, Victorian Burr walnut, c. 1855



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integrity of the leather was fine. It simply had discoloured over the years. To make this less obvious it was restrained and resealed.

A small section of fretwork was missing. Although Mrs Gillies had diligently kept the piece for many a year in a mysterious place we can all relate to, called 'somewhere safe' it could not be found at the opportune time, so a replication was made.

The pop-up mechanism in the back of the davenport was not working as it should and the side, which caught the hot sun through the bedroom window, was quite faded. The drawers were each rerun and paraffin waxed for smooth running.

The hand French polishing process involved working with the original polish, and building it up again to match the colour and shine of the rest of the piece. Finally, the davenport was ready for duty once again.

Mrs Gillies moved from her own home into a smaller unit for her retirement. Space is always very limited in retirement accommodation. The davenport has well and truly found a niche now. It has gone from limited, though regular light duties in a house environment, to full on work detail in the retirement accommodation. Positively all of Mrs Gillies business, social and personal affairs are handled from this wonderful little davenport.

'These drawers go the full width of the davenport. The left-hand side drawers are only false fronts,' she explains. 'They contain a remarkable amount of stuff. Most people say they have never seen anything like this davenport before. I just love it! It brings my whole life into focus.'

When asked to explain, she replies, 'Well, I remember my whole family life, right back to

when I was ten years old. I remember my three aunts arguing about where it would go in the new house. This davenport helps me restore my past' ■

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