

# The humble cottage chair



American steam pressed rocking chair

Restoration of chairs, particularly cottage and kitchen chairs of the late 19th and early 20th century can be a contentious issue. The humble chair is usually well liked because it is quaint or charming, and perhaps it is associated with family or other fond memories. However when it comes to the restoration decision, the chair may be seen to hold a relatively low dollar value.

Generally speaking, people are happy to pay for table restoration, but prefer to keep chair restoration investments down. Chairs are relatively small, and rarely grand or a point of focus. Many restorers load their table restoration prices to subsidise the chairs. The facts are that chairs have many more joints (styles of Windsor and Douglas chairs can have 30-45 joints!); they are more prone to risk of overload and misuse; and they hold far greater and more devastating consequences should the joints fail.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century it was commonplace to find these simple and practical wooden chairs in cottages, hotels, halls, and offices. During the early decades of the 20th century, the popularity of cottage chairs waned. These same chairs were then considered to be old, unfashionable and an embarrassment to the next generation. However, in the era of the Depression and World War II

that followed, people could ill afford to replace them. It was only in the fifties and sixties that the old cottage chairs were replaced with bright new chromium and vinyl status symbols.

In Australia, since the seventies antique cottage chairs have gained in both popularity and value, and they are increasingly viable to restore. Most of this revitalised interest follows the positive coverage by home decorator magazines and television shows which applaud their charm and design features.

Many a collector and dealer looks back with resigned disappointment thinking of all the 'tired old faithfuls' which found their way to the tip, or were burnt, or relegated to the shed. These old chairs used to clutter the second-hand shops, and could be bought for just a few shillings each.

Old cottage chairs now fetch a goodly sum, and are good value when compared against less sturdy reproductions. Chairs which were individually handcrafted by skilled craftsmen are now being mass produced in highly mechanised and even computerised factories. Unfortunately, most of the reproduction chairs of today are a misrepresentation and distortion of the original design. All too often, the newly produced chairs are from poorer quality timber, and the soundness and longevity of joints has been compromised.

The cottage chairs we see in our workshop include various styles of Windsor chairs (both English and American), Douglas chairs, American wheelbacks, revolving office chairs, cane seated Regency Chairs, and both plain and highly ornate bentwood chairs and of course our all-Australian kangaroo and emu chairs. We also get various rocking chairs including Austrian bentwoods, Boston rockers, high backed, steam pressed rocking chairs and platform rockers.

Windsor chairs have migrated from England to almost every corner of the English speaking world. They have been produced continually since the seventeenth century. One myth regarding the origin of the Windsor chair recalls how King George III, while on a hunting trip, sought shelter in a humble cottage

and was offered a seat upon a simple stick chair. The King was so impressed by the comfort of the chair that he ordered one made for his own use. Though this story is entertaining, it is now known that Windsor chairs were mentioned in inventories prior to his ascension to the throne in 1760.

English Windsor chairs were often brought to Australia as family possessions, and survive to the present day as treasured heirlooms. Mass importations of the American style of Windsor chairs flooded Australia during the Gold Rush years. This precluded the necessity of Australians developing their own style, and only limited numbers of Australian style Windsor chairs were ever made.

Windsor chairs can be of various types, having bow backs or comb backs or a combination of these. Early Windsor chairs were much lighter, and surprisingly are much stronger than their appearance suggests. They represent the peak of their evolution and future mass reproductions have never improved on this basic form.

Wherever the backs were not circular enough to be self-supporting, a V brace was introduced for additional support. Other variations include the use of either splats or spindles or mixtures of the two, and steam bentwood in the armrests and the stretcher. The wheelback chair derives its name from the wide centre back splat with a wheel carved on it.

English Windsors were usually varnished or 'in the white' whereas American Windsors were usually painted. 'In the white' usually meant a plain scrubbed no-stain finish.

Captain's chairs have an armrest height bow that caps a half circle of turned spindles. In the late 19th century these heavier versions were very popular and widely used in public houses, meeting halls, coffee houses, pleasure gardens, offices and homes.

The Vienna or bentwood chair has achieved widespread popularity all over the world. Its distinctive and hard wearing method of construction became the all-purpose seating for homes, hotels, offices, stores, halls and most of all, for cafes and restaurants. These chairs were mass produced in the late 1850s and by the 1860s bentwood chairs were a noticeable element in English and colonial furnishing.

Film and television have led us to associate these chairs with 1930s dance halls, Roaring Twenties speakeasies, Edwardian pleasure gardens and back into the 19th century. In fact they go back to a Viennese designer, Michael Thonet (1796-1871) who showed his designs to



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the world at the 1851 London Great Exhibition. Even against the flamboyant and intricate entries of other competitors, these no-nonsense designs caught the eye of both the public and the judges and won him wide acclaim. Thonet's furniture exhibited at the Crystal Palace was of a different nature to the common bentwood chairs which are readily available today. There were certain details which tied the design to contemporary 19th century forms, such as the cabriole legs, waisted backs and shaped rather than perfectly round seats.

Bentwood furniture has diversified into a variety of types and designs ranging from complete suites including side chairs, carver chairs and couches, to hallstands, tables, high chairs and the Bentwood rocker. One of the practical qualities of Bentwood chairs has always been the ease of transportation due to its lightness and simple construction. In Australia, they were imported in pieces, and assembled in local workshops. Chairs which can handle such rough handling and survive are rare.

Bentwood chairs are traditionally cane seated. Ply seats were cheaper and could be decorated with drill holes or pressed patterns. Spindle backs and woven cane backs provided variety in design too.

The future of cottage chairs is assured. They are coming of age, they are increasingly rare, and they are charming and decorative pieces of highly functional furniture. Now, if only they could talk! What stories these early cottage chairs could tell! ■

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Close up of inlay made from at least 5 different timber veneers

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Child's rocking chair featuring rush seat and inlay on the top rail



Reproduction late 19th century cedar revolving desk chair featuring leather and brass castors imported from England