



TABLES *a long history*

There is no more commonplace or ubiquitous a piece of furniture in any home than the table. Surprisingly, given that we are all so familiar with the table as to be inclined to disregard it, the table's history is a fascinating tale that germinates millennia past. During my research I was a little disconcerted to find that the centrality of the table to everyday life really only resolves into that focus in the modern era. In contemporary times, whenever we enter a house it is our expectation that – at the very least – we will find a dining table, and often other pieces such as a desk, work station, perhaps a sideboard or the now essential 'coffee' table. But modern expectations are only that, expectations.

STATUS IN ROMAN TIMES

I have always been aware that the ownership of furniture, until quite recently, had been restricted to the wealthy. Bespoke furniture was exclusively the domain of individuals who would commission artisans to fashion pieces especially for them. Exclusivity was at work in Roman times, where the table is concerned, tables being held in high esteem as symbolic of status but not necessarily as

utilitarian. Cicero had a table for which he paid the equivalent of a year's income. However, such tables were too small to dine at and obviously the cost was prohibitive. As an alternative, the Romans made tables from 'veneered' timbers – a technique used well and appallingly since!

PRIZED DECORATION & MATERIALS

Ostentation often follows status and exclusivity, and to this end the use of marble for table construction was much prized. Embellished with precious stones and exotic timbers, and mounted on pedestals decorated with griffins, dolphins, flowers, vines and tendrils, marble tables became important centrepieces, not unlike our foyer tables, and a means of creating an axis in a space.

SHAPING THE FUTURE

On the other hand, if the table was for dining, a simple square, with little embellishment would serve. A round table was advantageous in that it could seat more people, but much was wasted in construction – a problem I confront in the design and making of round

tables even now. Another limitation with round tables – for us and the Romans – was scale; though more accommodating they tend to take up a lot of space compared with their rectangular counterparts! Continuing through the centuries, this same connection between tables and prosperity is quite plain.

SIDE EVOLUTION

More 'recently', and as the table began to assert its presence as more a proletarian than a bourgeois artefact, it was common practice, even in the 16th century, to eat at a wall-mounted table or one that stood against a wall with a long bench, for seating, pulled up to its side – this was known as a side table. The side table was modestly decorated on three sides, the fourth finding itself always against a wall. Time's passage saw the side table develop into the 'cupboard' or sideboard we know so well today.

CENTRAL CONCERN

The centre table, by contrast, stood independently of walls. Sturdier in construction, it was fully decorated, taking pride of place in the middle of the room. This kind of table became more central, in more than just its placement, in the home and in daily lives, serving as a place for eating, gaming, or working.

SPACE SAVER OPTIONS

Where space was an issue, the trestle table proved expedient. Easily demounted, the trestle table was a more advanced form of the old slab the Greeks rested upon their legs but, importantly, this structure led to the further development of the table base allowing larger surfaces to be supported.

LEGGED VARIETIES EMERGE

An alternative form of the trestle was the pedestal, becoming a twin pedestal in some cases. Improvements in 15th century joinery made it possible to create even more secure and permanent outer frames for tables of all sorts, an innovation that made the making of the four legged tables possible. This was a big step forward. Tables of greater length required the support of six or more legs.

The middle of the 17th century saw an increase in the number of small occasional tables, few of which survive due to their size and that, being less costly, they were less valued items of furniture. The three-joined-legged cricket table is one of my favourites and of course, the more formal tripod table is an enduring space saving classic, as elegant as it is useful.

EXTENDING THE OPTIONS

Extension tables are another variant that provide functionality beyond immediate appearances. The extension table is a staple of my own French Farmhouse Tables line, and affords one of my greatest sources of achievement in that the design of the extension mechanism allows easy extension by one person. To maintain the integrity of the design and timber grain it is important to avoid, where possible, the 'pop-up' centrepiece style of extension for which the Victorians were renowned. This done, there is then no need to choose between a non-extension or extension table to maintain continuity of the grain. This allows the wonderful character of the timber itself to remain the hero.

The table as we know it today is a meeting place and, in many ways, a great leveller. I think it is the most important piece of furniture in any home – the engine room as such. Here we can celebrate, commiserate, contemplate and cogitate.

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