

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, ON TUESDAY 8 NOVEMBER 2011 AT 8PM.

Present: The President, Caroline Homer, in the chair, and about 65 members and friends.

Minutes: The minutes of the August meeting were read, and approved as a correct record.

Business: The President remarked on the great success of the recent excursion to Westbury, and warmly thanked the organisers. She referred to a forthcoming book launch, a forthcoming talk in the Port Arthur series, and a release by TAHO of digitised photographs from the Jack Thwaites collection. Ian Terry gave notice of an intended excursion to Tasman Bay on 3 March 2012.

Speaker: The President introduced Peter Hughes as a graduate from the Australian National University and curator of decorative arts at TMAG since 1999.

Mr Hughes began by remarking that, by reason of their day-to-day function, items of decorative art told much of the society in which they belonged. They could acquire their own history, beyond original manufacture. He referred to Britain's Great Exhibition of 1851 as crucially important in the latter-day history of industrial design; it led to the establishment of the Victoria and Albert Museum, meant to offer models of high quality work.

The TMAG collection of pertinent items had been separated out since the 1960s. It comprised some 23000 objects. A great many derived from donors' overseas travels. Only 4% were of Australian manufacture, and only a third of this Tasmanian—albeit these comprised a much larger proportion of value and of historical interest. Mr Hughes then turned to discussing, with the aid of illustrations, some notable specific items. They were:

The Scott Table: Research facilitated by digitised newspapers had established that James Whitesides was the maker of the table base, in the mid 1850s, although the specimen stone and micromosaic top, derived from a Rubens painting, was Italian in origin. George Scott, of Mount Morriston, had received short shrift in his family's history, but appears to have had genuine cultural interests.

The Hamilton Sofa: acquired in 2005 but dating from about 1825 this time displayed severe geometrical patterning of Greek Revival style; its timber, including eucalypt, identify it as almost certainly of Tasmanian provenance. That a work of such sophistication could come so early after settlement was remarkable. The maker was unknown.

Two items by William Hamilton, 1845. Hamilton was probably Tasmania's most distinguished 19th-century cabinet-maker. The first item, a centre-table, belonged to TD Chapman, one-time Premier; the second, a work-table, deployed a remarkable variety of timbers.

Library table by James Shaw, 1850: featured intricate parquetry and evidently was part of the Tasmanian display at the 1851 Exhibition exhibit.

Library Bookcase: in Huon pine, this like some other items, was part of the George Burrows collection. Notwithstanding attachment to Huon pine as peculiarly Tasmanian, it might not have been built locally. This item is rare in that it can be traced to a specific pattern book design.

The Risby Clock, 1860: Of Huon pine and blackwood, the case was probably the work of a cabinet-maker, rather than a specialist in this particular field.

What-Not, 1830: a robust, rustic and beautiful piece, in blackwood.

Horse-bone candlesticks, mid 1850s: a memorial to a racehorse, killed in an accident. Newspaper research showed that the accident had been a matter of some controversy.

Prayer-stool by Whitesides and Sons, c. 1870: of Huon pine and blackwood, notable for its intricate decoration.

Table-cover by Catherine Augusta Mitchell, 1860s: a beautifully executed work, presenting floral images in brilliant colours. The creator lived on the east coast.

The President thanked the speaker, and the meeting closed at 9:15pm.

Michael Roe for Secretary

Caroline Homer, President