



The history of **THE TABLE**

When researching the fascinating history of a piece of furniture as ubiquitous as the table, I was surprised to learn just how recently this central piece of furniture to our modern lives has come to assume such a presence.

Whenever we enter a house we expect to see at the very least a dining table. Often other pieces, such as a desk or work station, perhaps an occasional table or sideboard and the now dominant essential coffee table. This is one of the most difficult pieces of furniture to find in a form that is not too dominant over all else.

Loving tables as I do, it is difficult to imagine a time when they were absent from the domestic scenario: a place to eat, drink and enjoy the company of family and friends; a working surface for making all manner of things from school projects to sewing or simply reading the newspaper or playing games; and of course a place to sit and talk.

I have always been aware that the ownership of furniture until quite recently was restricted to the wealthy. That well-made pieces were the exclusive domain of individuals who would commission artisans to make bespoke furniture especially for them. My research revealed the way in which the table developed over time to become what it is today, from the Greeks and Romans through to the Europeans in the 16th century and to our present day.

The Greeks spent most of their leisure time outdoors, seeing the home as a refuge to retreat to for rest and a place to store things safely. They had little need for a permanent surface to eat from, so when a meal was taken a slab of timber was brought in and perched upon the legs of the diners and taken away at the end of the meal.

Romans created the triclinium or couch. Its purpose being to allow the host and guests to recline on an exquisitely luxurious piece of furniture. They were able to linger longer in conversation (or love making), between the sampling of many courses that were served from small tables brought in by servants and removed once consumed.

Later, the Romans started to see the table as a status symbol to be held in high esteem, but not necessarily to dine at. No article in a Roman's house cost so much as the table. It was made from a single piece of wood, often the last cut from the trunk at its widest diameter and lowest to the ground where all the burring would be present, known | as orbes.

Mounted on an ivory plinth, these tables were known as monopodia and were enormously expensive. Cicero had such a table for which he paid the equivalent of a year's income. However, such tables were too small for dining at and too costly for just anyone, so the Romans made tables from veneered timbers, a common timber forming the deal or base timber covered with costlier citrus. This is a technique that we have seen used well and appallingly ever since.

The marble table, with many embellishments using precious stones and exotic timbers mounted upon pedestals decorated with griffins, dolphins, flowers, vines and tendrils became a prized centre piece. It is not unlike our foyer table as a means of creating an axis in a space. However, if the table was for dining it would be a simple square table with little embellishment.

A round table had greater advantages, seating more people, but was more costly due to the wastage in the construction of the outer pieces. This is a problem I confront in the design and making of round tables even today. Another limitation of round tables for the Romans and us was the scale. Whilst more commodious, they tend to take up a lot of space compared with their rectangular counterparts.

As Roman citizens became wealthier and more exotic timbers were brought from the far reaches of the empire, so their tables reflected this affluence. Surfaces became highly polished, making it necessary for slaves to buff the surface between courses to rid the table of the grubby marks left by the diners who ate with their hands.

When not in use, these precious surfaces were covered with a mappa or linen cloth. As time passed, guests brought their own mappa which was fastened across their breast and used it to wipe their hands. Occasionally, the mappa was used to secrete titbits of dainty foods to be carried away. This was an early doggie bag.

Throughout the ages we note the same connection between tables and prosperity. In the 16th century it was a common practice to eat at a table that was wall mounted or stood against a wall seating upon a long bench pulled up to its side, known as a side table. Over time, this side table developed into the cupboard or sideboard we know. The fourth side of the table was left unfinished as it would not be seen and the other three sides were fully decorated.

The centre table stood independently of any walls, sturdier in its construction and fully



decorated, taking pride of place in the middle of the room. This table became more central in more than just its placement in the home, as it served as a place for eating, gaming or working in everyday life.

The trestle table became another important piece of furniture where space was an issue. Easily dismantled, the trestle table was a more advanced form of the old slab the Greeks rested upon their legs. Importantly this trestle structure led to the further development of the table base, in turn allowing larger surfaces to be supported.

The alternative form of the trestle was the pedestal table, becoming a twin pedestal in some cases. The improvements in 15th century joinery made it possible to create even more secure and permanent outer frames for tables of all styles. So the making of the four-legged table was a big step forward. For tables of greater length, their support was created by upwards 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 being less costly items of furniture. The three-legged joined cricket table is one of my favourites. The more formal tripod table is an enduring space saving classic, as elegant as it is useful.

The Victorian household burgeoning with large families created the demand for a table that could expand and contract. The early trestle table as a demountable was the

precursor to this concept, but now the need was for something permanent and adaptable in situ. The gestation of the design and the mechanics of the extension had a complex term finally giving birth to a myriad of contraptions and devices that were ingenious to some and downright treacherous to others.

One of my greatest sources of joy when designing extension tables is the ease of the mechanism which allows a table to be extended by one person. To maintain the integrity of the design and the timber grain it is important to avoid where possible the pop up centre piece style of extension for which the Victorians were renowned. That creates a choice between the un-extended or the extended table as to which has the continuity of grain. This allows the wonderful character of the timber to remain the hero.

The table as we know it today is a meeting place and in many ways a great leveller – we are all equal at the table, all on one level. Often we are at the table for a purpose: to eat, to work, to play or to talk, so we feel comfortable in knowing what that purpose is.

For me the table is the 'engine room' of the home from which we can celebrate, make plans, share joys and move forward from the comfort of a still point ●

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