

THE AUSTRALIAN FOUR-POSTER BED 1810-1852

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Though a European idea, this unique piece of furniture found its way into the bedrooms of some of Australia's more important colonial citizens.

The four-poster bed in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries was synonymous with wealth and position. In the 17th and 18th centuries the most expensive piece of furniture in a nobleman's house was the principal bed and its hangings. Many such beds cost thousands of dollars in contemporary money.

This tradition continued through into the 19th century and a judgement of a person's wealth and position could be made on the size of his bed. Australian



Plate 1. The full-length Blackett bed, 1815. Has very finely turned and hand finished front poles, tapered square back posts not shown. Turned feet, tester and headboard replaced. Cover plates missing for bolts. The spirals of the poles are turned in opposite directions, a sign of quality. As the feet have been cut off, a double mattress has been employed to build up the height. Turner: probably Edward Cox. Dimensions: 134cm wide, 193cm long. Timber: Rosewood [Dysoxylon fraserianum].



four-poster beds with testers made prior to 1850 must therefore in this context be considered rare. The first reference to a four-poster bed is to be found in the Bigge transcripts and is contained in the inventory of the contents of government houses in New South Wales as compiled for Commissioner Bigge, dated March 21, 1821. The inventory, compiled by Macquarie's aide-de-camp, Henry Colden Antill, was forwarded to Bigge after his departure and contains the following cover letter:

Sir, At the request of Mrs Macquarie, I have the honor to forward the enclosed Lists of Furniture belonging to Government in the Government Houses at Sydney and Parramatta, which have been taken with as much care and correctness as possible. The Cottage at Windsor Mrs Macquarie considers sufficiently furnished, and as every thing in it belongs to Government with the exception of some new printed Furniture, she has not thought it necessary to trouble you with a List of the articles there, but it will be desirable for the New Governor to bring out two peices (sic) of dimity, or some printed furniture with fringe, for window curtains to make the Cottage more comfortable. I hope this will find you safe arrived in England in Health and without accident.

Plate 2. Full length W'balan bed, 1819-20. This bed has its original feet. The spiral poles, completely turned on a lathe, should be compared with the legs of the table illustrated in First Fleet to Federation, plate 41, page 36, and the pillars to the Oatley clock, Faby, page 95, plate 72. It may be suggested that they are all by the same hand. Rear poles turned, original headboard, never fitted with a footboard. Turner: Probably Edward Cox. Dimensions: 129cm wide, 195cm long, 228cm to top of tent. Timber: Rosewood poles and cross beams, cedar slats.

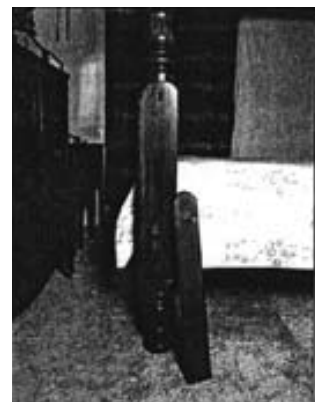


In Government House, Sydney, we find: 'Governor's bedroom – 1 bedsted (sic) rosewood, carved, etc., no bedding or furniture.' This bed would be similar to the rosewood bed shown. This is of the period 1810-20, rosewood in this case being the Australian native timber *Dysoxylon fraserianum*. The use of the spiral flute in its decoration is peculiarly Scottish in origin, a feature common to the two surviving pre-1820 beds. Only one other bedroom is noted in this building, namely 'small bedroom upstairs' which contained '1 small dressing table, 4 window seats, 12 chairs, 1 grate fender and set of fire irons'. No bed of any form is listed.

Government House at Parramatta contained seven listed bedrooms and notes only furniture belonging to the Government. 'The new bedroom' is not shown as containing a bed and one must assume that the bed belonged to Macquarie. The same applies to the number one bedroom, the number two bedroom



Plate 3. Full length bed, 1835. Has original tester, headboard and feet, all four columns turned. Simpler in execution, but the turned section is supported on a vase-shaped turned baluster. Turner: Possibly workshop of Edward Cox. Dimensions: 144cm wide, 212cm long, 231cm high. Timber: Cedar throughout.



contained '1 matrass (sic), 1 bolster and 3 blankets'. The number three bedroom – '2 matrasses, 2 bolsters and 2 blankets', the number four bedroom contained '1 tent Bed Stead (bluegum), 1 matrass and a blanket'. The number five bedroom contained '1 matrass (wool), a bolster and a blanket'. The number six bedroom contained '1 tent bedstead, 2 wool matrasses, 7 blankets and 1 wool matrass'. It may be suggested that the bed known to have belonged to Sergeant Whalan, Macquarie's faithful orderly sergeant, is the bed mentioned in the inventory. This bed, on loan to The National Trust from the Whalan family, is reputed to have been given by Macquarie on his departure to Sgt Whalan. Whalan is known to have lived in the house with his family, as the ground floor plan of the house in the Public Record Office in London shows Whalan's bedroom clearly. The extra bedding, namely 'two wool matrasses, 7 blankets and 1 wool matrass' could be that required for his wife and family.

Plate 4. Full length bed, 1835. Rolling pin scroll to headboard. Unusual wooden Gothic bolt covers, original tester. Never fitted with a footboard. Apparently unique turned and fluted pillars on acanthus carved baluster support. Turner: Unknown. Dimensions: 157cm wide, 218cm long, 254cm high. Timber: Cedar throughout.



The servants' bedroom contained 'two small wool matrasses, 2 common stump bedsteads'. These stump bedsteads would be four small circular posts terminating at mattress height and joined by pieces of heavy timber, with the mattress resting on a slatted base.

In the loft Antill notes '1 large size 4 post bedstead, 7'7" high, 5'4" wide, 6' in length, no bedding or furniture belonging to it'. This bed was probably made for the first married governor, Governor King. On his departure, the bed may have been consigned to the loft by Bligh as he, being unmarried, would have had no use for it.

It should be borne in mind that Macquarie was very much the military man and probably slept in a campaign bed supplied by one of the leading London campaign furniture manufacturers such as Morgan and Saunders or Butlers of Catherine Street, The Strand. The Antill inventory was only of Government furniture and the Macquaries' personal furniture is not mentioned.

A feature of all four-poster beds of the period 1810 to 1850 is the turning of the posts. Woodturning was a specialised trade generally being carried out on a treadle-operated pole lathe. The trunk to be turned would be fixed at both ends to the extremities of the lathe. A pole or tree would be bent under tension by rope, with the rope encircling the trunk or a wheel on the lathe, thence to the treadle. When the treadle is depressed, the rope turns the trunk increasing the tension in the overhanging pole. When the treadle is released, the pole springs back, reversing the trunk on the lathe, and the cutting chisel has to be removed. The turning chisel would be held on a rest, cutting on only the



Plate 5. (left) Full length bed, 1830. The tester has been replaced, with finials upside down. Headboard original with simplified rolling pin scroll. Never fitted with a footboard. Victorian castors are not original. Turner: Possibly Edward Cox. Dimensions: 142cm wide, 220cm long, 231cm high. Timber: Cedar throughout.



Plate 6. (below) Miniature bed, 1850, possibly a manufacturer's sample. Turner: Possibly Edward Cox. Dimensions: 50cm wide, 50cm long, 45cm high. Timber: Cedar throughout.

downward thrust of the threadle. These simple bush pole lathes could be utilised anywhere. In a city workshop, a man would be employed to turn a large heavy fly on a properly set up lathe, probably by Maudsley or Holtzapfel.

Prior to 1820 Sydney appears to have had only one turner, William Gray. He advertised in the *Sydney Gazette*, January 1, 1809, as a turner at 13 Back Row, that:

He performs every species of useful and ornamental work comprehended in his professional branch, at very moderate prices, with neatness and expedition. Carpenters and cabinetmakers, bench screws of all descriptions, and screws for all kinds of presses, etc. furnished at short notice.

This advertisement fails to indicate a distinction between a woodturner and a turner of metals. Turned wooden bed posts require the professional skills of a woodturner and by careful investigation another name, that of Edward Cox, may be produced from the records. Cox arrived on the *Earl of Cornwallis* in 1801, aged 29. He next appears, presumable having done a stint in the convict lumberyard, as a chairmaker in the 1822 muster. A chairmaker requires to be a turner of some skill as the turned legs of each chair have to match. In the 1828 census he was described as a turner with a business in Princess Street.

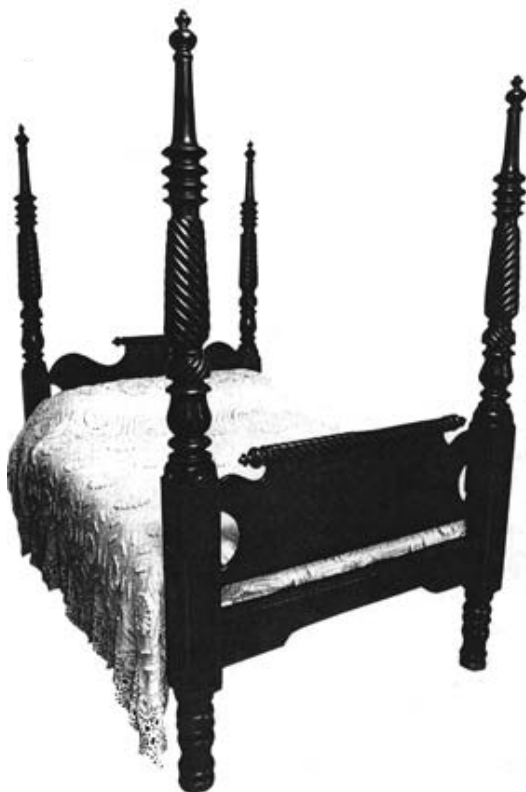
It would appear that pre-1820 Sydney bed posts were turned from Australian rosewood, as shown by evidence given to Commissioner Bigge by Patrick Reilly: 'The valuable rosewood which was then found nowhere else in the colony but in the brushes on the banks of the Hunters River was prized for veneers and fine furniture, particularly bed posts.' These spiral posts, Scottish in flavour, are very difficult to turn as can be seen from the detail of the Blackett bed which is so finely turned that the spiral had to be finished by hand. The Whalan bed has been turned complete, the spiral being large. The rosewood balusters from the staircase of Old Government House, Parramatta, were completed in 1816 and I suggest that these balusters were turned by Cox.

The colonial cedar four-poster bed pictured again has the peculiar twisted spiral column. The dictates of fashion of the 1820-35 period decreed that posts should be heavier and fatter. I suggest that this bed, which has lost its tester, is also from the same workshop.

By 1820 new names have entered the field. Thomas Morrison, born in the colony and brother of James, apprentice to the early cabinetmaker, Laurence Butler, was a specialised woodturner in Elizabeth Street by the 1832 census, having previously been in Pitt Street as noted in the 1828 census.

Bernard Glover, aged 40 in 1828, who arrived on the *Agamemnon* in 1820, was a specialised woodturner in Pitt Street. Other woodturners operating between 1830 and 1850 were John Kelly, at 403 George Street; George Lee, 106 Goulburn Street; Henry Nickless, 93 York Street; Alfred Steel, noted as a turner, capinetmaker and billiard table fitter. Legs of billiard tables and bed poles require similar skills.

Plate 8. Full length bed, 1825. Headboard and footboard original with rolling pin scroll, tester missing, finials are replacements. The plates for the bolt hole covers have been drilled out with a circular auger bit. All slats original. Turner: Possibly Edward Cox. Dimensions: 144cm wide, 200cm long, 218cm high. Timber: Cedar throughout.



The two largest Sydney cabinetmaking businesses of the 1820s employed specialist turners. Edward Hunt, in the 1828 census, had a household of 10 servants, seven apprentices, two upholsterers, one cabinetmaker and a turner, namely James Const, aged 25 in 1828. In addition, Bell employed one upholsterer and five cabinetmakers.

In conclusion, large four-poster beds must be considered rare, bearing in mind the social environment of the period. Not one is known to survive with its original hangings. Early beds with their spiral turnings have a very Scottish flavour. The testers have rarely survived complete and when they have are often incorrectly fitted.

Unless a bed carries the label or sign of its maker we can only guess who may have made it. However, this is not an impossible task, since there were very few woodturners in a colony of fewer than 50,000 people.

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Plate 9. (left) For comparison, bedposts from the leading Victorian pattern books (from left) Nicholson 1828, London 1833, a complete bed with tester, King 1839 (lower sketch) Smee 1850.

Plate 10. (below) Rosewood balusters from Old Government House staircase, 1816. Probably designed by Li Watts, and made by Edward Cox.

