

THE BROUGHTON TRAVELLING WRITING DESK

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Published in 1888, Garryowen's *Chronicles of Early Melbourne* is a wonderful compendium of life in that city by the journalist Edmund Finn in the period between 1835 and 1852. He notes that the Victorian Industrial Society's first exhibition held at St Patrick's Hall, Bourke Street on January 29 and 30, 1851 was a result of its formation the previous year at the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute.

At this exhibition, the travelling writing desk illustrated on these pages was shown and drew the following comments from Garryowen:

The gem of the exhibition was ... a marvel of ingenious handicraft by Mr William Broughton, a Collingwood mechanic. This was a writing desk composed of the following 18 colonial woods: He oak, tartarra, honeysuckle, sassafras, Murray pine, Huon pine, forest oak, blackwood, box, teak, musk, tulip-wood, silk-wood, red gum, dog-wood, Cypress pine, cherry-tree and myall. It was purchased by Mr Henry Moor as a Melbourne curio, and sent to England.¹

Broughton was awarded a large silver medal for the exhibition.²

1. *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne* 1835-52, p. 437 and *Melbourne Morning Herald* 30 Jan 1851, p. 2. 'The most unique article in the place ... purchased by Mr Moor M.L.C. for exportation to England ...'
2. *The Argus* 1 Feb 1851.

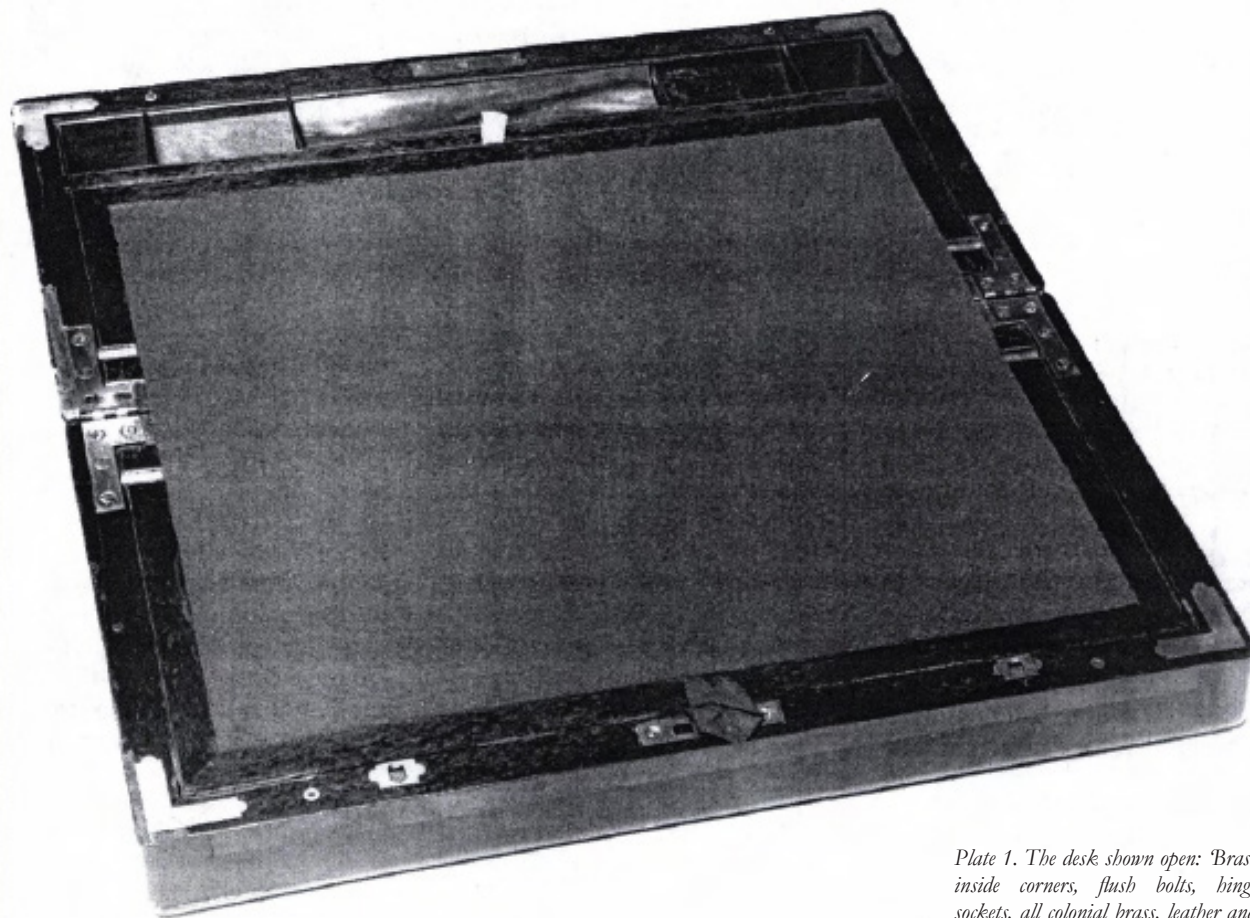


Plate 1. The desk shown open: 'Brass inside corners, flush bolts, hinge sockets, all colonial brass, leather and springs.'

The survival of this labelled and documented piece of furniture with its contemporary hand-written list of colloquially named timbers is a major discovery for the furniture historian. It brooks no argument as to contemporary timber descriptions, their sources and the practicality of their use. As an example of pre-goldrush Melbourne cabinet-making, it is a key survivor.

H.W. Broughton has so far proved to be something of an enigma. He arrived in Melbourne on January 9, 1846 from Launceston, Tasmania on the *Swan*³ the same vessel that 10 weeks earlier had brought the watchmaker David Hamilton Fleming from Launceston to later work with Charles Brentani. This Launceston/Tasmanian connection may well prove important to both furniture and silver historians. Broughton's skill and knowledge of timbers, as evidenced by this example, may be the key to the complicated parquetry cabinet work produced in Tasmania prior to 1850, finally resulting in the important Tasmanian exhibits forwarded to the London Exhibition of 1851. Broughton is listed in the Directories at Victoria Parade, Collingwood in 1851, at 116 Russell Street in 1861-62 and 118 Lonsdale Street in 1870-72, the large gaps between addresses tend to point to an employee rather than an employer.

His source of woods may well have been Crooks Furniture Warehouse who advertised:

Fancy woods. The public are invited to an inspection of some of the finest specimens of Van Diemen's Land, Port Phillip and Moreton Bay woods, at Crooks Furniture Warehouse, where Picture Frames and every other description of Cabinet work, from the above woods are made. Gentlemen requiring samples, for the purpose of sending to England, &c., can be supplied.⁴

It should be noted that Samuel Crook advertised: "The availability of Australian Furniture of every description and hand-made to order of the best cedar, Blackwood, Huon pine, Cypress, etc., etc."⁵ Maybe the cabinet maker behind this sudden interest was none other than Broughton.

Henry Moor, the purchaser of the writing desk, was a Melbourne lawyer who had arrived there in 1842. He was Melbourne's second Lord Mayor and was considering a return to England at the time of purchase, the result of his disappointment over a libel suit in March 1851 against the proprietors of the *Argus* who had called him a 'double faced and unprincipled schemer'. He won the verdict but was only awarded a farthing in damages. He finally left in January 1852, presumably taking the desk with him.

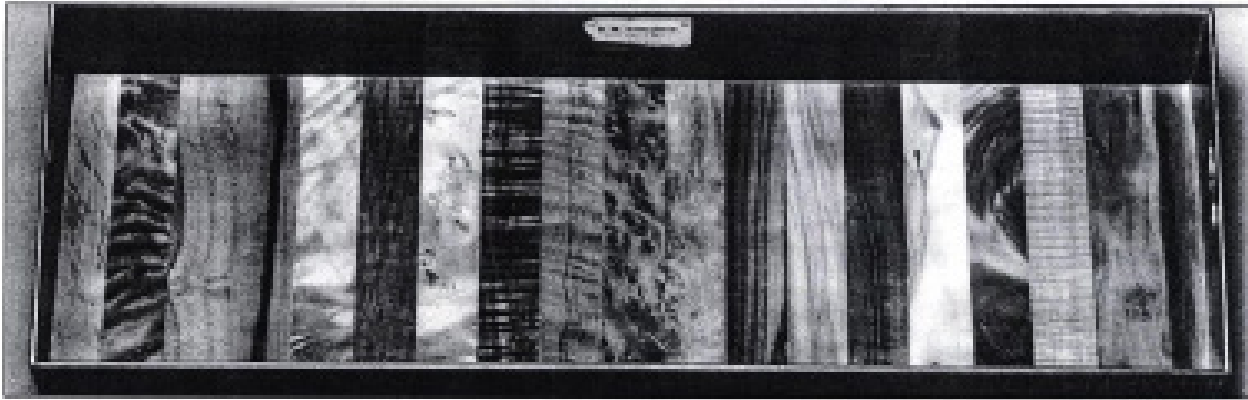
I purchased the writing desk at Olympia in 1993 and so its return marks a gap of 142 years out of Australia. I would suggest that the wooden travelling case for the Sugden silver box of 1848/9, also made from native timbers of a similar geometric format and now in the Australian National Gallery is also a product of Broughton's workshop.⁶ I would also suggest that as with the Packer Cabinet, sold by J.B. Hawkins Antiques to Old Government House, Parramatta, 20 years ago, the H.W. Broughton exhibition travelling writing desk will be the key to pre-1850 Melbourne and Tasmanian furniture. Pre-gold rush Victoria had a population of approximately 12,500 married couples of which about 6,000 lived in Melbourne and the chances of the 'Gem of the Exhibition' being made, much less surviving to be correctly identified, must be considered extremely small.

3. P.R.O.V. V.P.R.S. 22 Unit 29
Passenger Arrivals 1846-47
to Port Phillip.

4. Port Phillip Directory 1847
Advertisements.

5. Kerr's Melbourne Almanac
and Directory, 1842.

6. Nineteenth Century
Australian Silver by J.B.
Hawkins Vol. II plate 465.



A tray containing 20 different woods

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Maple	Walrus	Kingwood	Amber	Black Walnut	Black Oak	Am. H.	Blackwood	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black

Names of wood in the tray

1 Maple	Belgian	Victoria
2 Walnut	—	—
3 Kingwood	—	—
4 Kingwood	—	—
5 Kingwood	—	—
6 Kingwood	—	—
7 Kingwood	—	—
8 Kingwood	—	—
9 Kingwood	—	—
10 Kingwood	—	—
11 Kingwood	—	—
12 Kingwood	—	—
13 Kingwood	—	—
14 Kingwood	—	—
15 Kingwood	—	—
16 Kingwood	—	—
17 Kingwood	—	—
18 Kingwood	—	—
19 Kingwood	—	—
20 Kingwood	—	—

Pl. 1 contains 1 piece of wood

- 1st class only
- 2nd class only
- 3rd class only

but the heavy woods of wood can be found in 1st class

H. W. Broughton,
Fancy Cabinet Maker,
STOURBOURNE.

Label from the above tray.

Plate 3. The removable tray to the inside of the desk is made up of 20 various woods whose origins when known are given, a total of 27 woods being used in its construction.

Henry Broughton died at Sandhurst in the colony of Victoria on February 16, 1881.⁷ His death certificate states him to be a cabinet maker aged 75 years, name of parents unknown, born in London, England, was married in England and buried in the White Hills Cemetery: 'nothing else known'. Broughton died a pauper and at the Coronial Enquiry into his death⁸ his next door neighbour in Echuca, Mary Ann Neeson stated that:

He was a cabinet maker by trade but for some time unable to do much work. He was a native of London and a very old colonist ... lived alone ... been receiving relief from the Ladies Benevolent Society ... confined to bed ... determined to send the deceased to the Sandhurst Hospital. A ticket was obtained from The Rev. Mr Garlick ... left by train ... in charge of the guard ... his cab fare was provided ... he appeared strong enough for the journey.

Archibald Colquhoun, the hospital doctor stated: 'death was accelerated by removal, deceased was not in a fit state to leave his bed in Echuca'. A sad end for a man whom time may prove to be Australia's equivalent to New Zealand's Anton Seuffert.

7. Death Certificate Schedule B, no. 13465, District of Sandhurst, 1881.
8. Coroner's Inquest 18 Feb 1881, P.R.O.V. V.P.R.S. 24 Unit 418.