

HENRY UPTON ALCOCK AND BILLIARD TABLES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by John Hawkins

The year 1838 saw the first licensed billiard table at the Angel Inn, Port Phillip. In 1839, William Smith, keeper of the Lamb Inn, the biggest of the original hotels, and John Bullivant, at the Waterloo Hotel in Little Collins Street, both had billiard tables installed for purposes of entertainment and gambling and by 1847 a hundred pounds per side and 500 up was not an unknown wager.⁽¹⁾



Figure 1. Henry Upton Alcock
Australasian Sketcher, 3rd July 1880

Henry Upton Alcock (1823 - 1912) arrived in Melbourne on the 15th of April 1853, aged thirty, on the *Africa* from London. The *Cyclopaedia of Victoria* published in Melbourne in 1905, with his photograph and therefore presumably supplied with information by Alcock himself, notes 'He was born in Dublin in 1823, and educated at a private institution in his native city. On leaving school he was engaged in

the cabinet making business for seven years.' It may therefore be assumed that Alcock had served a full seven year apprenticeship to the cabinet making trade and subsequently worked for some years as a fully fledged craftsman, prior to his departure for Australia.

David Johnston had conducted the business of billiard tables and bagatelle manufacturer using his steam saw mills from at least 1857 at 130-132 Russell Street, Melbourne.⁽²⁾ Henry Alcock must have become sufficiently well established as a cabinet maker to open in Brunswick Street, Melbourne [later Fitzroy] by 1855. He purchased an interest in 1859 in Johnston's, for the firm is listed as 'Johnston, Alcock & Co., billiard and bagatelle makers, 132A Russell Street'.⁽³⁾ Alcock gained complete control of the business in 1860, listed as 'Alcock & Co., billiard table makers, saw and moulding mills' of 132 & 127 Russell Street and 95 Little Bourke Street East. The firm's Little Bourke Street address was on the Russell Street corner, the properties therefore presumably in close proximity to each other. It is my opinion that Alcock's business between 1855 and 1859 was that of supplier of dressed Australian timbers to the few cabinet makers then operating workshops in Melbourne, the directories listing only six in 1856. His transition to billiard table manufacture commenced with the outright purchase of David Johnston's business around 1860. A curious advertisement appeared in the *Two Fold Bay and Maneroo Telegraph* of August 31st 1860, showing that the acquisition was not without problems: 'Alcock & Co selling off - relinquishing billiard business'. This may well indicate a bogus 'closing down' sale to raise cash to pay for his acquisition, even the need to generate sales in remote places, like the bustling port of Eden, half-way stop on the sea cargo route between Melbourne and Sydney. Alcock



Figure 2. The 1880 Melbourne 'Exhibition Suite', no 1520, comprising the billiard table 'mostly richly carved' with silver pocket mounts, extra carving to all mouldings and a unique carved apron.