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.

was considered the finest judge of timber in the Colony [4] and the advertisement, however, may have been the result of a visit to Eden to purchase timber.

Melbourne in 1860 was a very rich city, and able to support four billiard table manufacturers. Alcock's main competitor, Julius Paser, established in 1854 as a billiard table manufacturer at 196 Little Bourke Street East, was a prize medal winner at the Melbourne Exhibition of 1866/7.[5] Alcock was confident enough of his product to exhibit a billiard table at the 1862 Exhibition in London and gain a medal.

In 1863 Henry Alcock was presented by his Russell Street employees with a massive silver cup manufactured by the Melbourne silversmith William Edwards.[6] 'Embossed round the bowl with an animated representation of a game of billiards, while the base was likewise embossed with emus, kangaroos and a variety of indigenous plants'. Alcock, in replying to the address mentioned that he and his men had had a 'long pull' together, many of them having been with the firm for upwards of ten years.

Figure 3. Silver two-handles cup, by William Edwards, presented to Henry Alcock, by his staff in 1863. Height 29.3 cm Private Collection. *Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria*

In the Argus of the 25th April 1865 there occurs a long article, titled 'The Manufacturer of Billiard Tables in Victoria', stating that Alcock was manufacturing three tables per week at a cost of £100 each, which was only slightly more than the imported article. By 1865 he had manufactured over one thousand tables. However this was only one branch of a large establishment employing over seventy men, of which one half were employed in the production of billiard tables. His yard contained logs of cedar from New South Wales, myall from the banks of the Murray, myrtle and huon pine from Tasmania, kauri pine from New Zealand, mountain pine from Dandenong and Mount Disappointment, also walnut 'super excellent for veneering' from North America and last but not least ash from England. Commentators have always implied that only colonial timbers at this date had been used in the manufacture of Australian Furniture. The fact that Alcock was using European timbers and placing 'heavy reliance on machine saws to break down the timbers to all manner of eccentric shapes' , further indicates a possible source of cabinet timbers for the Melbourne trade. The article further notes the use of a patent screw adjusting toe to facilitate a perfect level - the earliest mention of Alcock's invention.

Clever with publicity for his product, Alcock in 1866 invited John Roberts, the world champion billiard player, to play on his tables. Roberts states [7] '"I have never played on a better table in my life . . . " He gave away the cue which he had used for over twelve years, to take home Alcock cues to accompany an Alcock table for use in his London rooms.' Alcock was advertising for sale, in the Argus in November 1866, cedar, myrtle, blackwood, huon and kauri pine, well seasoned and of all dimensions - further confirming the supply of such timbers to the Melbourne trade. Alcock billiard tables in most of these timbers have survived. *Figure 4* illustrates a mid eighteen sixties' numbered billiard table in musk, probably the rarest of all Australian cabinet woods.

The veneer saw, which Alcock introduced to his factory in 1867[8], was still producing veneers for the cabinet trade in Melbourne when illustrated and described in 1880 [9]: 'The only one of its kind ever brought to our part of the world . . . it has played an important part in developing, for general manufacturing purposes, the fine qualities of many Australian timbers. Their tortoiseshell-like grain, durability and susceptibility to high polish, could scarcely be availed by the trade until the revolutions of this immense disc saw (diameter 12 foot, weight, 3 tons) began to cut veneers for not only billiard tables but for cabinet making generally . . . the cost of the saw as it stands was over £1,800 and 25,000 feet of redgum was used for the foundation on which it was fixed . . . The firm supplies the furniture trade of Melbourne with seasoned wood'. The Russell Street sawmill was almost certainly a major source in the latter half of the 19th century of the finest cabinet veneer and timbers used in the colony of Victoria.

Figure 4. Alcock and Co. billiard table in musk, huon pine and blackwood, pre 1870. [10]

Figure 5. A standard Duke of Edinburgh table, an example of which was ordered by the Chirnside brothers for Werribee Park, Victoria, and is still in the Billiard Room.

Figure 6. The veneer saw. *Australasian Sketcher*, 3rd July 1880

defined, and of surface so finely mottled, that it looks like tortoiseshell. A cue rack to suit is also being prepared; and among the cues is one for presentation to His Royal Highness, the handle is inlaid with the best colonial woods, myall, eucalyptus, myrtle, blackwood, musk, etc, including tulipwood, which as an ornamental wood is almost unknown. The legs of the Billiard Table are a curiosity in their way, being 'canted', not by hand in the ordinary fashion, but by a machine invented and patented by the firm, which cuts flutes into the turned legs at the rate of one per minute, fifteen seconds per flute'.[11] At Alcock's the Duke turned with his own hands a 'pool pin' which he took away as a momento of his visit.

Alcock's supplied to the Government of Victoria a table for the use of the Duke of Edinburgh during his Royal Visit in 1867 and the Duke allowed the firm to associate his name with that particular model. 'It is not likely that a finer piece of furniture was ever manufactured in Victoria than the Billiard Table just made, to the order of the Government of Victoria, for the Duke of Edinburgh, at Toorak, by Alcock & Co., of Russell Street. To Mr Alcock is due the credit of being the first fairly to show that colonial blackwood is one of the finest woods in the world; so much so that, in order to get the wood fit for use, he has to produce for himself the trees, simply cut into lengths, instead of being roughly - shaped and the best portions adzed off, as was usual before he entered the market. He has, however, never developed the qualities of this beautiful wood better than in the structure of this New Billiard Table, which in other respects is of the best make and of colonial material. It is so rich in colour, in pattern so well

The 'Duke of Edinburgh' table remained Alcock's finest product until the creation of 'The Exhibition Table' for the 1878 Paris and 1879 Sydney Exhibitions. At the Paris Exhibition a correspondent noted.[12] 'I had the satisfaction of admiring the tasteful way you got up the billiard table which you there exhibited . . . I am persuaded that if the jury know what they are about, it is the best one of the exhibition. The next one to it in beauty and perfection by Mr J. C. Bruggen of St Petersburg . . . the third next best is exhibited by Mr C. Toutlett of Brussels. There is one sent from New York, not worthy of comment . . . ' This table or a similar Exhibition Prize Table was exhibited in Sydney in 1879. [13]

Figure 7. The 1878 Paris and the 1879 Sydney 'Exhibition Prize' Table, which was later to become the standard model at the top of Alcock's range, based on the 'Duke of Edinburgh', but with the addition of carved fluted tapered legs and rope twist carvings to the high points od the fielded panels. In the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition the tulipwood table would have been of this model, with a matching cellarette surmounted by a combined marker but without the surmount of the electric marker system.

Figure 8. The blackwood 'Exhibition' cellarette, carved to match the table, surmounted by a combined marker and crested with Alfred Upton Alcock's patent electric marker operated from the table. In the top of the pediment of this marker is an electric bell, recording each advance of the hands and drawing attention to the fact that the score has been increased, thereby preventing cheating.

Figure 9. Detail of the carving to the cellarette section of the 1880 Exhibition cabinet. Note the choice and figure of timber, and the quality of the carving (carver as yet unknown).

Alcock & Co had expanded their property by 1879 to encompass 132-138 Russell Street [14] with his private residence by 1880 at Upton Hall in Dandenong Road, [15] the timber yards being at Lonsdale Street East and 95 Little Bourke Street. According to the *Australasian Sketcher* [16] of 1880 Alcock benefited from 'supplying the numerous reasonably furnished hotels on every side of the primitive sly grog shops . . . Mr Alcock always aimed, first, to at least equal the best billiard tables in the world, and secondly to find his materials within the colony . . .'

Alcock excelled for the Melbourne Exhibition of 1880, producing the billiard table, marking cabinet (*figs 2 and 8*), and accompanying cue stand, which was described in the *Argus Exhibition Supplement* as [17] 'In the west nave of the front building Messrs. Alcock & Co exhibit a number of very superior tables. The ordinary sized and very elegant specimens stand at the transept. One of these is in beautifully grained Gippsland blackwood. It is most richly carved, and the pocket mountings are of silver. On the feet patent adjusting toes are fitted. The other table here is in tulip wood, which gives it a particularly handsome appearance. It is not so elaborately carved as the first mentioned, but in other respects it is very similar. A patent spring marker is placed in the end. In the intervening space stand cabinets with cellarettes, one in blackwood and the other in tulip, matching the respective tables. Surmounting these are combined markers. The former has in addition an electric marker, which is worked by means of buttons in the table. It has also a reversible panel, with mirror on one side and white marking slate on the other, and is altogether most complete in its arrangements and elaborate in its ornamental carvings.'

The tulipwood table mentioned was undoubtedly an example of his 'Exhibition Prize Table', similar to that exhibited in Paris in 1878 and Sydney in 1879, whereas the blackwood table with its 'richly carved' mouldings is in fact his masterpiece. The quality figure and choice of blackwood show Alcock to have indeed been the finest judge of timber in the colony. With its electric marking system, silver plated pocket mounts and superb carved decoration it is very much 'The Exhibition Suite'. I doubt if anything finer in Australian cabinet work was made in the 19th century.

Alfred Upton Alcock, Henry's son, invented the electric marking system, as used in the 1880 blackwood Melbourne Exhibition Suite, whilst at Geelong Grammar, aged 15 years. He applied for the patent in December 1883. In later years his inventive mind enabled him to conduct other scientific electrical experiments of an original nature.[18]

The firm by 1880 [19] 'now represents a capital of over £60,000 . . . workshops in which constant employment is given to from 120 to 140 men whose wages in total varied from 200 - 240 pounds per week . . . premises, including a store yard for timber, covered 2 acres. The manufactory of the firm is one of the sights of Melbourne, so many and so striking are the processes carried on within it.'

Victoria was soon to feel the effects of a depression and by

the mid 1890's banks were failing and many land boomers had gone bust. A billiard table was the most expensive and high-status piece of household furniture a gentleman could buy, and in addition it required the construction of a suitably sumptuous billiard room. With the boom times gone, never again would there be money available for the private purchase of tables such as those exhibited in the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition.

On Federation in 1901 Alcock produced a catalogue to illustrate their range of billiard tables, which even without cabinets or revolving cue stands, were costly:

Exhibition Prize Table	
Blackwood With adjusting toes	265 pounds
The Duke of Edinburgh	
Blackwood With adjusting toes	215pounds
The Hopetoun	
Blackwood	175 pounds
The Salisbury	
Australian Oak	155 pounds
The Commonwealth	
Blackwood	130 pounds
The Victoria	
Australian Oak	125 pounds

Henry Upton Alcock may be considered to have been a careful businessman, taking steps to ensure that on his death the business and property passed to his children free of duties and tax. He owned a single one pound share in Alcock & Co, and left a total estate of 404 pounds 8 shillings 2 pence.[20] It has so far proved impossible to trace the numbered inventory for the manufacture of Alcock billiard tables which presumably listed when and to whom they were supplied. Its whereabouts would greatly assist in dating various examples.

Figure 10. Detail of the centre section of 'The 1880 Exhibition Billiard Table', showing extra carving, apron and unique leg of this model.

The '1880 MELBOURNE EXHIBITION SUITE' is on view on ACORN ANTIQUES STAND at the Fair.

Notes

1. *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*, Vol II, page 744.
2. Sands and Kenny. *Melbourne Directories* ,1857, 1858, 1859.
3. Sands and Kenny. *Melbourne Directory*, 1859.
4. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Entry for Alfred Upton Alcock.
5. Sands and McDougall. *Melbourne Directory*, 1868, p. 46 (advertisement).
6. *Argus*, 2nd February 1863, p. 5.
7. *Argus*, 25th April 1865, p. 6.*Geelong Advertiser*, 3rd April 1865 reports: 'The Champion Billiard player Roberts left for Great Britain by the mail steamer *Northern* bearing with him many presents of Colonial workmanship. . . two emu egg goblets, beautifully mounted in silver and some billiard cues and elaborately carved fittings of colonial wood given by Mr Ray of the now celebrated firm of Alcock & Co . . .
The champion was so much prepossessed in favour of our Colonial tables that he has even thought proper to have one manufactured to take home with him.' His son was presented with a gold cup in 1878, surmounted by a model billiard table by Fischer of Geelong and formerly in the writer's collection, see J. B. Hawkins. *Australian Silver*, Vol 2, Colour plate 42, p. 325.
8. *Argus*, 25 July 1867, p. 5.
9. *Australasian Sketcher*, 3rd July 1880, p.154.
10. This design, in my opinion, pre-dates the introduction of the 'Duke of Edinburgh' table. It is nearly there but without the fielded panel to the body. Numbered C958, this table was probablt made in 1866. Alcocks & Co had made approximately one thousand billiard tables before 1865, and they may well have dropped the C from number 1000 on.
11. *Argus*, 2 Oct. 1867, p. 5.
12. *Age*, 13th August 1878, p.2.
13. Illustrated, *Argus Exhibition Supplement*, 11th October 1880, p. 24.
14. Sands and McDougall. *Melbourne Directory* ,1879.
15. Sands and McDougall. *Melbourne Directory* ,1880.
16. *Australasian Sketcher*, 3 July 1880, p. 154.
17. *Argus Exhibition Supplement*, 11th October 1880, p. 22.
18. ADB., ibid. [Alfred Upton Alcock] 'will be chiefly remembered for the invention of a Hovercraft demonstrated in Perth in 1912 and patented in 1914, an idea later taken up by the Westland Aircraft Company, maker of the modern version. Alfred also converted Melbourne's cable trams to electric traction.'
19. *Australasian Sketcher*, 3 July 1880, p. 154. For comparison, the Argus, 13th May 1878, Supplement page 2, gives a dissection of the labour market, giving the wages in many trades, viz: housemaids, 30 to 36 pounds per annum; cooks, 35 to 60 pounds per annum; watchmakers, 2 pounds 10 shillings to 4 pounds per week; jewellers, 2 pounds 15 shillings to 3 pounds 15 shillings per week; cabinetmakers, 2 pounds 10 shillings to 3 pounds per week.
20. Public Records Office (Victoria). *V. P. R. S.*, 28, p.3, Unit 330. 127/297. Henry U. Alcock.

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Australian Silver 1800-1900: an Exhibition Catalogue, 1973.
Thomas Cole and Victorian Clockmaking: published to commemorate the author's Collection, exhibited at Algernon Asprey, London, 1975.
The Al Tajir Collection of Silver and Gold: describing the most important Collection of English and European Silver formed this century, under the auspices of the author. Privately printed, limited edition of 200 copies, 1983.
Australian Silver 1800-1900, 2 volumes, published by the Antique Collectors' Club.