

THE ELEPHANT TABLE – TWO LETTERS

12th January 2005 – Your Elephant Table

I wonder if you have had lots of answers to your question in the Autumn 2004 R F S Newsletter. My wife and I instantly recognised the piece in the picture, because I gave her one of these soon after we married in the sixties, together with the letter-press that normally sits on top of it, and which she used as a bookbinding press. The reason I am so certain in my identification of your table is that the dimensions you give exactly match a similar table, now in my daughter's possession, which still has the original letter-press on it. The 'recess with its two semi-circular extensions' will be the outline of the letter-press itself, the extensions marking the bases of the two arms which supported the top half of the press. My daughter's press table had drawers underneath, and most of the ones I have seen had drawers rather than a cupboard. Hers also shows signs of having had its legs fixed to the floor by brackets, which I imagine was a safety measure, as the press itself is very heavy, at least 56 pounds I should think, and this would make the whole thing rather top-heavy. If you have an email address I can send you some images for comparison.

I was familiar with such tables as a young solicitor practising in Chelmsford, because most of the old established firms in the town, indeed in the county, had one tucked away somewhere in their offices, and my firm was no exception. Our table (which is still in my possession) was quite a respectable piece of furniture, made of mahogany, having three drawers and with folding flaps on each side, only one of which survives, with a rather elegant wooden support which folded outwards from the body of the table, to which it was hinged with a ruled joint. My father said he could remember the letterpress standing on the top when he joined the practice in 1937. At that time it was an important piece of office equipment kept in the general office, where it was in daily use making facsimile wet copies of every letter that was sent out. He told me that before the war the Rules of the Supreme Court permitted only the use of copies made in this fashion as evidence of the original document; carbon copies were not acceptable. I can remember seeing the faded, wetted look of files of correspondence which had been subjected to this process, though I never saw it carried out. It must have been a time-consuming process, but then most copying tasks were; there was a distinct class of typists called copy-typists, whose typing was accurate and reliable and the best were equal in status to typists who could also do shorthand.

I hope this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,
Nick Abbott



Fig. 15
Press on
table stand

'I have always maintained that the membership of the RFS contains the 'Great & the Good' of the furniture world. Great in their range and depth of knowledge, and good in the readiness to share that knowledge. This has certainly been borne out in the response to the 'Elephant Table' query.

Almost from the moment the 2004 Autumn Newsletter hit members' doormats, responses started to come in. A wealth of evidence from fellow members of the RFS shows its original purpose was as a Press Table. Its sturdy structure is to take the heavy cast-iron screw-down press used as an early type of document copier and/or as a book press used during book-binding. A photocopy of the Army & Navy 1907 catalogue, sent by Laurance Black in Edinburgh, shows the press with the 'footprint' that fits the insert in the top of the table exactly. It also gives a price for a table, admittedly with drawers not a cupboard - 27/0 shillings!

Thank you to John Gall (Beamish Museum), Grierson Gower (of Bath), Lady Wemyss (Midlothian), Laurance Black (Edinburgh), Gabriel Olive (Salisbury), Brian Duffy (London) and John Hicks (Burford), all of whom possess one (or more !), or have seen many of them.

*Yours sincerely
Michael Haines*

PS It has been drawn to my attention that CSK recently included such a press (fig. 15) in their auction catalogue (with an illustration) lot 478 for their sale on the 24th November 2004. The cast iron press included the manufacturer's markings, S. Mordan & Co, London (second quarter of the 19th century)