

Maritime Caned Chairs

In 2007 I was with a group of civil engineers in Scotland to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Telford, first President of the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1818. First were lectures on his career at the Royal Society of Edinburgh, then visits to many sites associated with him. While in Dundee we visited the site of Craig Pier and the adjacent harbour designed by Telford for the Tay Ferry, which site became operational in 1821. This is now the home of the historic Dundee-built *RRS Discovery*, of Scott, Wilson and Shackleton fame, and is now a major tourist attraction, the surrounding area being named Discovery Point. During Scott's period she was originally known as *SY Discovery* (Sail Yacht) and only became *RRS Discovery* (Royal Research Ship) when refitted in 1925.

We had a guided tour of the ship and, while the whole ship is very fascinating and well worth a visit, the chairs in the wardroom particularly attracted my attention. Some chairs had leather seats while others had caned seats, but our group had not noticed this - civil engineers do not

normally have an interest in furniture. When this was queried with the guide, he explained that the seats were reversible for comfort - leather for use in the winter and cane in the summer. To be honest I really did not believe this, although at the time felt it could have some relevance.

Louisa Attaheri, curatorial assistant of the museum, advises that it is believed these chairs were installed as *RRS Discovery* prepared to set off on the Oceanographic Expedition of 1925-1927. Very unusually they swivel on a frame connecting the three substantial legs, each of which is bolted to the deck through brass plates and fixings, together with another bolt at the intersection of the three-legged stretcher. There is no information on the maker of the chairs. It would appear that unbolted chairs were present during Scott's expedition, so experience in rough seas presumably suggested that chairs were bolted to the deck. With the current design of chair, one can imagine the effect on diners in rough seas as the chairs swivel to and fro!

The wardroom on the *RRS Discovery*



Recently I re-caned a three-piece suite for a client and in conversation recounted this story. To my great surprise, he indicated that he also had two similar chairs with reversible seats, bought in Liverpool; they had come from a passenger ship. These duly arrived in my workshop for restoration and exhibit similar details to those on the *Discovery*, being designed like them to be bolted to the deck through the stretcher. A local specialist upholsterer renewed the leather side of each seat and I re-caned the other side. They are machine carved, being made around 1900, and are individually numbered with brass plates on the chair back, but again no information exists on their maker. The proportions of these chairs are unusually small, presumably intended to hold the diner tightly in rough seas.

On the same theme of maritime chairs, but not designed for bolting to the deck, there are many folding caned chair designs which were used on passenger ships and which occasionally come in for re-caning. I am now

convinced that the two faces of the seats were indeed intended for use in cold and hot climates - but not convinced that the user would notice the difference! However, I would be very interested to hear if any other chair caners have come across similar caned chairs for use in maritime situations and if anybody can offer more information on the chairs illustrated in this article.

I am grateful to Dundee Heritage Trust, Discovery Point for permission to use the photos of the chairs in the *Discovery*, to Louisa Attaheri for taking the photos on site, and to my client for permission to use a photo of his chairs.

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For information on *RRS Discovery* go to www.rrsdiscovery.com

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The RRS *Discovery* in the harbour designed by Telford for the Tay Ferry, now a major tourist attraction



One of the chairs in the wardroom with a cane seat



One of the chairs in the wardroom with a leather seat



The chairs swivel on a frame connecting the three substantial legs, each of which is bolted to the deck through brass plates and fixings

