

# Introduction



## *Vintage Breadboards*

*by*

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In a nutshell, this book is the result of a series of serendipitous accidents. By chance my mother, Rosslyn, an antiques dealer and restorer, found a pretty "*Our Daily Bread*" breadboard in the East End in the early 1980s. Club Row and Brick Lane were still bombed out slum dwellings, with buddleia eating away at the brickwork and colourful characters scratching a living in the semi-habitable houses. Mum tried haggling the owner down from £5, but the lady did not relent, so mum left it on the understanding that if it was there the next week, she could have it for £3. She kicked herself all week. When she went zipping back to see if it was still there, she was jubilant to find it, and snapped it up. She scrubbed it down and sold it, thus began the 'breadboard phase', which lasted till 2015.

Again, unintentionally, she found herself unable to part with one "stunner" after another, until stalagmites started accreting, and knives covered chairs and benches in neat rows. This was the landscape of my childhood, combined with teetering mountains of antique chairs awaiting restoration, for she was a caner and rusher of seats during the week. She was the only one in central London who could do the fiendish chair backs with wooden panels suspended in cane woven spirally. Thus she lived, with her 'two hats', namely antiques and restoration.

But what to do with the hoard? In the late 1990s, I suggested she write a book about them, and Rosslyn, after some misgivings about driving prices up, threw herself into researching her collection. She had enormous fun travelling to libraries, museums and archives, and visiting curators who gave her privileged access to their treasure troves.

The information was amassing alongside the collection when, by sorry happenstance, she became so incapacitated with Alzheimer's that I had not only to shut her business down, but take over her whole life, inch by painful inch, with mum fighting me all the way. It was her immense love for me as a child that sustained me through this turbulent period and guided my decision to move back into her home to care for her myself. This required major adaptations, refurbishment and the uprooting of my family.

Again, what to do with the hoard of breadboards? The Alzheimer's Society advice to keep her connected with her past was a crucial factor in spurring me on to turn our front room into a gallery, hung with her breadboards and knives. Displayed in creative ways which were both attractive and safe, she could keep in touch with her old passion in what became her therapy room, where she sat for hours polishing, shuffling

and hiding her most cherished pieces.

After Rosslyn passed away, and all the ghastly paperwork was completed, the hoard again awaited my decision: box it all up and auction it off, or throw it open to the public? I decided to keep the collection, and they have become my personal response to her life and death, a form of grief therapy which celebrates her 40 years of collecting and her love for me.

### **Guidelines for assessing a board**

Is it warped, scorched, chipped, cracked or worn beyond recognition? Although many find such imperfections endearing, enhancing the 'character' and giving an insight into the story behind the board, you should be paying only half the going rate. The going rate is anything between £10 for a small worn board from the 1970s with square lettering, to hundreds for rare specimens, depending on all the factors stated below.

### **How big is it?**

The average Victorian breadboard was 12 inches plus, so size can help in the dating of the item. By the early 1900s, bread-platters were evolving into 'bread plates', 8-10 inches across, which could slot into a plate rack. There are always exceptions however. Diameters reached 16 inches, and depended on how deep the customer's pocket was, as the bigger boards came from the older trees which were rarer.

### **What is the grain like?**

A quality breadboard should be sourced from the choice cuts of the tree, that is to say, the central planks running along the trunk, either side of the centre. The year rings should appear as parallel. They can be attractive with curve and wave formations. Any knots would suggest the wood is from the outer portion of the tree, which makes the board prone to bowing. They are the spot where branches joined on, and they weaken the object, falling out of their socket eventually and leaving a hole.

### **What is the carving like?**

The Victorian nobility preferred elegant, understated carving in the Gothic-style. High-end carvers perfected the naturalistic portrayal of crops, garden flowers, fruit, and woodland flora, often individualised

with mottos and crests. By the 1860s, breadboards became more commercial as carvers avoided time consuming techniques such as under-carving, undulations and smooth backgrounds. Patterns standardised and tended towards symmetrical repeats covering half, a third or a quarter of the border. Wheat became notional, traced in briefly in the 1 shilling items.

### **What is the lettering like?**

The Gothic Revival, starting with the new Houses of Parliament in 1844, inspired lettering in the 'Old English' style, reflecting this nostalgia for a pre-industrial world. But towards the 1880s, square lettering is in evidence. From the Edwardian period, Bauhaus influenced taste and breadboards followed, with clean straight lines, plain patterns and low-relief.

### **Is the motto rare?**

There are common mottos such as 'Bread' and 'Our Daily Bread', or variations on the Christian theme of the Credo. Others are homely wisdoms 'Eat of My Bread' or have a moralising tone 'Waste Not Want Not'. It seems breadboards were given like we give greetings cards, at weddings, birthdays, as holiday souvenirs and even professional milestones. Since breadboards were often homemade by ordinary people for personal celebrations, the sky's the limit in terms of what you can find on a breadboard.

### **Is the motto in a foreign language?**

French or German mottos do not mean it is automatically a French or German board, as we know boards were carved in England in both languages for visitors to the Great Exhibition of 1851: or vice versa, such as the Swiss boards carved for English tourists. It is also possible they were carved by French/German carvers on the instruction of an Anglophile client who wished the style to be inspired by the English look, but with their mother tongue. The French and Germans tend to prefer dishes and baskets to present their bread.

### **Is there a stamp or signature on the back?**

Carvers rarely signed their work as they were not considered artists. Some boards of the 1950s may have the stamp of Bramhall of Sheffield, a very prolific maker, whereas others sometimes have the stamp of the

retailer who wished to protect his sources. Signatures were more subtle, such as a mouse in the Richard Thompson workshop. The carving community could identify each other by the way motifs were depicted, so each workshop would have its signature look. But even within the Mouseman workshop, no two carvers would approach their mouse exactly the same, so it acted as a signature.

### **Which wood is it?**

99% of boards are sycamore. Certain boards are of oak, especially those made as pilgrimage souvenirs from cathedral towns such as Winchester and Canterbury. We also can find beech, fruit woods and Swiss walnut, but they are exceptional.