



## **ENGLISH WOODS**

### **FOUR GREAT PERIODS OF ENGLISH FURNITURE**

(Note that provincial woods (local timbers) include applewood, rosewood, beech, cherry, cedar, elm were also used)

## **OAK**

### Periods

- Elizabethan
- Jacobean
- Commonwealth
- Restoration (walnut was increasingly being utilized; oak became restricted to country furniture and to carcasses of fine and veneered furniture)

### Construction

- Most oak used during these periods was either plain sawn (cut parallel with the diameter of the trunk) or not quarter cut

### Tidbits

- Bog oak (wood preserved in bogs of peat; nearly black in color) was used as an inlay with holly, sycamore, poplar, beech, ash, yew, and fruit woods for much of the main oak period.
- Elm was often used for tabletops
- Ash and beech were often used for chairs
- Yew was often used for turned chairs
- Oak fell out of favor during the last half of the 17<sup>th</sup> C, but was used in provincial furniture
- Victorians admired oak for its sturdy qualities and it was used in Gothic Revival and Arts and Crafts furniture

## **WALNUT**

### Types of Walnut

- English walnut
  - supposedly introduced by the Romans when Britain was an Imperial province
  - comparatively scarce today, but its exquisite figure makes it greatly prized
  - regarded as particularly precious
  - its use in Britain before the latter part of the seventeenth century is rare
- Italian walnut
  - inferior in beauty of figure to the English variety
  - easy to work with
- American black walnut
  - finely marked timber
  - easy to work with
  - less susceptible to worm attack
- Satin walnut
  - used for cheaper varieties of furniture
  - hard to work with (inclined to warp, twist, split)

Periods ● 1626 - Francis Bacon refers to walnut as a wood well suited to tables, cupboards, and desks

- Restoration period (c. 1660 - 1730) walnut was the popular hardwood for fine furniture
  - mostly wood imported from France

- some native walnut trees grown in the south of England ("Juglans regia")
- severe winter of 1709 caused importers to look to Virginia where a darker "black" walnut wood was to be found ("Juglans nigra")
- walnut was usually used as a veneer on case furniture
- walnut was a solid wood for chairs and table legs
- fancy veneers (oyster, burr)
- walnut was susceptible to work attack
- walnut was not as sturdy as oak
- few antique pieces have survived the ages
- Walnut use declined after 1730 and by around 1750 it was replaced by mahogany
- Victorian (*circa* 1850)
  - walnut was used as a solid for chairs and as a veneer on case furniture and table tops
  - walnut worked better for marquetry decoration than mahogany or rosewood

## **MAHOGANY**

### Periods

- Georgian
  - After around 1730 walnut declined except in some cabinets, chests, bureaux, clock cases
  - By 1750 mahogany was the dominant hardwood
    - first mainly for chairs and tables
    - later in the 18th C for veneering on case furniture
  - By 1770 more exotic woods (satinwood and rosewood) became popular
- Currently
  - Remains popular through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> C
    - easy to work with
    - can be polished to a beautiful luster

### Suppliers

- Earliest supplier - West Indian Islands of Puerto Rico and San Domingo ("Spanish mahogany")
  - dark, closely grained, somewhat formless
- Later supplier - Cuba
  - redder, more marked grain pattern.
- Latest supplier - Honduras (called "Baywood")
  - lighter color
  - inferior quality to the Cuban mahogany
- Present suppliers
  - India (introduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C)
  - Central America
  - French West Africa and the Gold Coast
    - durable wood, but is liable to twist

## **SATINWOOD**

### Period

- Late Georgian / Neoclassical
  - Revival of marquetry work preferred a lighter, more exotic wood

- After 1760 - exotic West Indian satinwood were imported
  - yellow appearance
  - fine and plain grained
  - richly figured
- After 1780 - East Indies satinwood was imported
  - cloudy, grainless look when polished.
- Both used as veneer and inlay and occasionally as a solid  
(Satinwood furniture of this period had a light golden yellowish patina which has now mellowed to a rich honey)
- 1800 - 1820 satinwood was gradually replaced by rosewood

Note

- Both birch and chestnut resemble satinwood to a great extent and these woods were often used as substitutes for satinwood in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C.