

# Antiquity and strength

## George Thwaites and the University of Melbourne Council's Gothic revival furniture

Robert La Nauze

One of the most significant and finest examples of Australian colonial secular Gothic revival furniture is the mid-19th century suite made for the University of Melbourne Council. The furniture was designed by Joseph Reed, the university's architect, and made between 1864 and 1866 by George Thwaites & Son. For nearly a century this suite witnessed the council's deliberations and participated in the university's ceremonial occasions.

In the post-gold rush decade, Melburnians, bustling with energy, gave expression to their newly found wealth by applying the Gothic style to ecclesiastical and secular buildings. Between October 1866 and February 1867, a quarter of a million visitors passed through the hall and rotunda of the Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition, which was designed by Joseph Reed and decorated by Edward La Trobe Bateman under the guidance of the exhibition's president, Sir Redmond Barry. Apart from produce and wares from the colonies, the exhibition featured a 'Mediaeval Court'—a Gothic revival church interior emulating Augustus W.N. Pugin's famous medieval court in the 1851 International Exhibition in London. During the Melbourne Exhibition, William Wardell's St Patrick's Cathedral (perhaps the



**Previous page:** Joseph Reed (designer), George Thwaites & Son (maker), Ceremonial thrones with matching footstools, c. 1864–66; carved oak, non-original artificial leather upholstery, throne heights: 220 cm and 210 cm. Commissioned 1864–66, University of Melbourne.

**Below:** Joseph Reed (designer), George Thwaites & Son (maker), One of a set of 19 chairs, c. 1864–66; carved oak, non-original artificial leather upholstery; height: 140 cm. Commissioned 1864–66, University of Melbourne.



prime example of the Gothic revival style in Australia) was taking shape, while two years earlier the Gothic revival National Museum, also designed by Joseph Reed, had opened in the university grounds. Harriet Edquist has commented on this architectural fashion:

While the enthusiasm for medievalism might appear incongruous in colonial Melbourne it was deeply embedded in 19th-century design thinking. For Pugin, Ruskin and other reformers medieval architecture and design represented an historical period where the unity of religion, society and art had not yet been dislocated by the pressures of modernity, industrialisation and great urban agglomerations like London. They aimed to reproduce in their work characteristics they considered intrinsic to the medieval period, including honesty, integrity and a love of handcraft and it was these values that made the voyage to Melbourne with architects and designers infused with the spirit of reform.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to shaping the direction of Victoria's early public

Joseph Reed (designer), George Thwaites & Son (maker), Meeting table, c. 1864–66; carved oak, non-original leather inlay writing surfaces; 75 × 544 × 148 cm. Now in the Rowden White Library. Commissioned 1864–66, University of Melbourne.

culture, Barry, the hard-working and politically astute chancellor, lobbied the government for funds to fulfil his grand vision for the university. In 1864, the University Council was able to allocate space in the Quadrangle for a library and a designated Council Meeting Room. Prior to this, the 20 councillors had met elsewhere: notably at the Law Courts and occasionally in Barry's home.<sup>2</sup>

In October, the council's Building Committee met to discuss five tenders for making furniture for the Council Room. George Thwaites & Son tendered £100 'for tables' and £170 'for chairs' and, although Thwaites' quote was among the most expensive, it was accepted.<sup>3</sup>

George Thwaites, a London cabinet-maker, had arrived in Melbourne with his family in 1842. In the 1850s, Thwaites established a reputation for quality domestic and institutional furniture, a standing that was consolidated when the firm won the contract to fit out Governor Hotham's residence, Toorak. In 1861, Barry commissioned Thwaites and the woodcarver Daniel Livingstone to make a Gothic-style case for gold specimens for the Melbourne Exhibition. Barry took the case, together with a portable wardrobe made by Thwaites, to the 1862 London International Exhibition;

it was during this trip that Barry visited Pugin's medieval court.

Reed's designs were for an impressive carved suite in oak, consisting of 19 chairs,<sup>4</sup> two thrones (now known as 'the chancellor's thrones'), two footstools, a large table to seat the 20 councillors and a small companion table for the secretary to the council. The design, in Gothic revival style, was probably made on Barry's request and in general was inspired by Pugin's furniture. At the time of the commission, Edward La Trobe Bateman was working in

Reed's office and he may also have had a hand in the design. Bateman had worked with Owen Jones on the Great Exhibition of 1851, where Jones was responsible for the exhibition's interior decoration and layout. Bateman had also contributed to Jones' influential book *The grammar of ornament*, a copy of which was owned by Reed, who had visited London in 1862 and most likely saw the medieval court. While the current generation might find the carved thrones and chairs ostentatious, to Reed, Bateman, Barry and Thwaites





Far left: Joseph Reed (designer), George Thwaites & Son (maker), One of a set of 19 chairs, c. 1864–66; detail of oak leaf and acorn motif, quatrefoil and finials.

Left: Joseph Reed (designer), George Thwaites & Son (maker), Ceremonial throne, c. 1864–66; top of taller throne, showing detail of oak leaf and acorn motif, and quatrefoil with shield.

they were in keeping with the general principles espoused by Jones and Pugin.

The Act of Incorporation gave the University Council the power to make or change statutes or regulations, to control numbers, appointments, stipends and dismissal of staff and, indeed, ‘all other matters whatsoever regarding the said University’. It is likely that Barry wanted furniture befitting the council’s status, even though in 1865 the university enrolled only 56 students. The council was made up of ‘pastoralists, merchants, civil servants, newspaper owners, lawyers, clergymen and medical practitioners—practical and powerful men accustomed to command’.<sup>5</sup> The richly carved Gothic revival chairs and tables displayed the gravitas expected by these august men, many of whom were also in the process of acquiring such outward signs of success. The large table enabled the councillors to sit united while deliberating on the future of the university, while the smaller table and the 19th chair were used by the secretary/note-taker.

Yet these handsome thrones, chairs and tables convey more. The solidity of oak furniture and their ancient design echo two of Barry’s recurring themes: they hark back to

the mother country and her great universities, while also alluding to the permanence and future greatness of the fledgling institution. Indeed, the oak leaf and acorn motif, expressed in many different forms on the thrones and chairs, symbolises antiquity and strength.

It is possible for us to postulate how the furniture was deployed in the original Council Chamber from a photograph sent to alumni as a supplement to an 1897 edition of the university magazine, *Alma Mater*. In the photograph (shown opposite), nine chairs are set along each side of the large table and at the ends are the two thrones. The higher throne is mounted on a dais to further enhance its importance and somewhat distance its occupant from those around the table. This arrangement preserved the social hierarchical niceties of the times, which were assiduously observed by the conservative Barry. The thrones may well have been deployed in this manner when Viscount Canterbury attended as the university’s visitor in 1871 and sat in the Council Chamber to hear a dispute that had arisen between the University Council and the University Senate.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1860s, although much furniture was locally made in Melbourne, significant quantities

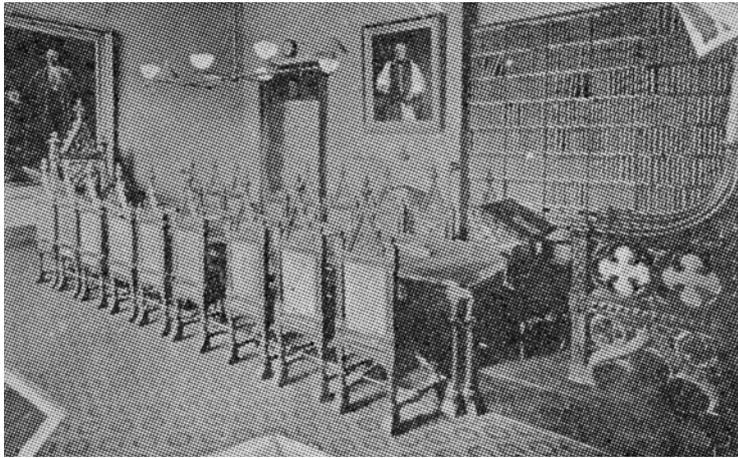
were shipped out from Britain and assembled after arrival, in much the same manner as mass-produced furniture sold today as ‘flat packs’.

As no native Australian timbers are incorporated into the hidden sections of the university tables, it is not possible to state with complete certainty that they were made in Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> However, the evidence strongly supports the local manufacture of the suite by George Thwaites & Son. The University Building Committee minute of 24 October 1864 states:

That the tender of Thwaites & Son be accepted on his signing an agreement to make the chairs and tables specified according to the drawings already made by Mr Reed and that the work be done to his satisfaction within two months and that Thwaites and Son fit up with scarlet morocco leather—if none in the Colony Morocco of the required colour to be sent for and a temporary covering to be attached of a material and colour to be selected by Mr Reed.<sup>8</sup>

No such uncertainty exists for the thrones and footstools.

Throughout this period, the university kept exact financial and



The two thrones, chairs and table in the Council Chamber, which from 1863 until about 1925 was situated at the eastern end of the first floor of the northern wing of the Quadrangle. Image titled 'Council Chamber: "The warders of the growing hour"', extracted from photo-montage titled 'Haunts of the Dons', in *Astraea Redux*: commemoration supplement to *Alma Mater*, vol. 11, no. 1, April 1897; copy glass-plate negative, 10.5 × 8.0 cm (detail). UMA/I/7387, ref. 1985.0025, Colin Sach Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

administrative records, including the invoices submitted by George Thwaites & Son and certification records from the supervising architects, Reed & Barnes. The total payment for the furniture was £295, a sum that represented a significant purchase. Records show that between 1864 and 1873, apart from small payments for incidental furniture and tables, the only other major expenditure on furniture was £96.12.0 for library shelving. The high cost of the council suite may be compared with the purchase from James McEwan in November 1870 of 24 cedar tables at 15 shillings each, that is, a total of £18, and one Gothic side table (6 feet by 1 foot) made to order at a total cost of £3.5.0.<sup>9</sup> Like Thwaites, McEwan was a maker of quality furniture: he and Thwaites would be chosen in 1875 to furnish the new Government House on the Domain.

Thwaites received part payment for the work, to the value of £75, on 13 January 1865 and a further £95 on 22 March. Thus, when the Building Committee, comprising the chancellor and vice-chancellor, met on 27 March, a significant portion of the contract had been completed. At this meeting, the Building Committee agreed to an additional 'sum not exceeding £15 to be given

to Mr Thwaites beyond the sum agreed to in the original contract in order that the carving may be done by Livingstone'.<sup>10</sup>

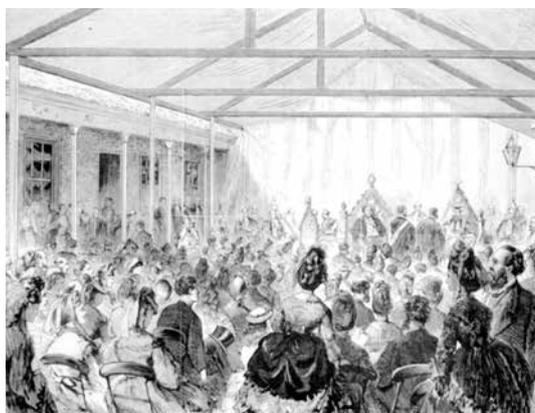
One wonders why a subcontract for the services of Daniel Livingstone was required at this late stage, though it is probable that he was engaged to undertake the more difficult and ornate carving on the chancellor's thrones. As the original contract had specified a two-month delivery, it is even plausible that the thrones were an afterthought—two of the proposed chairs being replaced by the thrones—requiring the services of a master carver. This would explain in part the subsequent delay in completing the contract. A further payment of £50 was made on 13 October for 'making chairs and supplying carpet etc for the Council chamber of the university' and £75 paid on 2 February 1866 for 'making furniture for the Council chamber'. Furthermore, before completion of the contract, George Thwaites died on 5 August 1865, shortly before his 74th birthday. Acknowledgement of the payments after his death was made by George Thwaites Jnr, whose signature appears on the university vouchers as 'Administrator of the estate of the late George Thwaites'. George Thwaites' estate was not finalised until 1871, at which time his

second son, Thomas Henry, became sole owner of the firm.<sup>11</sup>

It is not clear whether Barry had in mind from the outset the possibility of using the council thrones and chairs for ceremonial purposes, but the time was propitious for their public use. Barry had been deeply impressed by the University of Sydney's Gothic revival Great Hall, which he praised in his address to workers at the completion of the Melbourne Exhibition Hall in 1866:

[The Sydney University Hall] is of great beauty, exhibiting in its construction and ornament the exercise of combined learning, taste, and skill, equal to that applied to any hall produced within my knowledge in modern times. It stands a constant incentive to the people of Victoria to complete their University in a manner consonant with the interests and dignity of the sacred cause of education.<sup>12</sup>

When the Intercolonial Exhibition closed at the end of February 1867, many visitors had seen the Mediaeval Court, which included a similar carved throne with quatrefoil, triangular pediment and finial, or they would have seen an illustration



Thomas S. Cousins (artist); Samuel Calvert (wood engraver); *The Melbourne University—conferring degrees*, wood engraving published in *The Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 20 May 1873, p. 72. SLV IAN20/05/73/72, State Library of Victoria. This ceremony took place in the courtyard of the old Medical School (since demolished). The thrones, chairs, bedells' wands and temporary awnings were made by George Thwaites & Son.

of the court in the press.<sup>13</sup> In 1867, the year after the delivery of the suite to the university, the thrones made their appearance at the university's annual commencement ceremony—an altogether grander affair this year than on prior occasions:

The interesting ceremony of the conferring of degrees in connection with the Melbourne University took place on 27th ult. There was a very numerous assemblage, chiefly representatives of the professional and mercantile classes, and the spectacle was enlivened by the presence of a considerable number of gaily-attired ladies representing the beauty and fashion of Melbourne and the suburbs ... the professors, lecturers, examiners and members of the council also taking their places surrounding the dais. The chair set apart for his Excellency was slightly raised above the seats occupied by the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor, placed on the right and left.<sup>14</sup>

The chair 'slightly raised above the seats occupied by the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor' is the larger of the two thrones. This was designed

so that although the seats of both chairs are at the same level, the arms and back of the larger chair are raised some 5 centimetres and 10 centimetres respectively.

Until Wilson Hall became available, the ceremony was usually held in the courtyard of the Medical School (built in 1863 to a Palladian villa design by Reed & Barnes, and since demolished), which for the occasion was covered with canvas, boarded, carpeted and furnished with chairs. The university vouchers show that George Thwaites & Son was contracted on a number of occasions to prepare the courtyard for the ceremony. This work included the construction of the canvas awning and a dais and transport of the thrones and chairs from the Council Chamber. Thwaites also supplied 'wands' made from wood gilded in white gold—the ceremonial staves signifying the authority given to the university by the monarch.

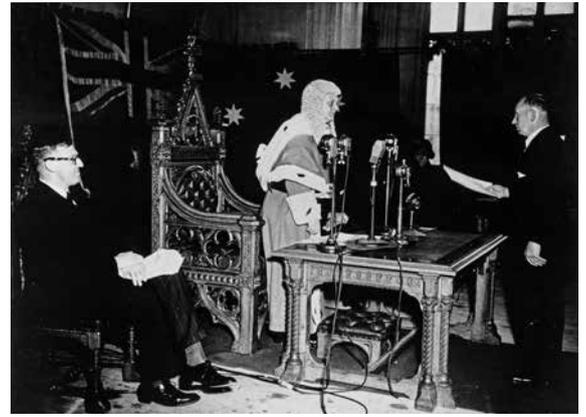
In addition to those graduating, exhibition and scholarship students were presented to the chancellor and vice-chancellor. In each year between 1871 and 1874, Thomas Henry Thwaites' academically gifted son, William, was among those presented. In 1873, 'His Excellency the Governor Sir George Bowen, accompanied by Lady Bowen and

Miss Bowen' attended the ceremony. *The Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* carried a wood engraving by Samuel Calvert (above): the governor sits in the larger of the thrones and the vice-chancellor, Dr Anthony Brownless, in the other throne. (Barry was not present on this occasion.) At least six of the council chairs are occupied around the dais by members of council or the professors. At this ceremony William Thwaites received his Diploma of Civil Engineering; one assumes that his parents were present.

For 70 years the thrones, chairs and smaller table were used in Wilson Hall on formal occasions. In 1949 the furniture was conspicuous at a naturalisation ceremony before another Mr Justice Barry. The ceremony, the first held in Victoria under the new *Nationality and Citizenship Act*, was filmed and broadcast. Before receiving their naturalisation certificates, the men renounced their former citizenship and took the oath of allegiance to the King and Australia. Arthur Calwell, federal minister for immigration, and Sir Harold Gengoult Smith, acting lord mayor of Melbourne, took part in the ceremony (illustrated opposite, above).<sup>15</sup>

On some formal occasions a third ceremonial throne was required,

**Right:** Mr Justice John Vincent Barry, with the Hon. Arthur Calwell, presiding over the first naturalisation ceremony held at Wilson Hall, 1949. Ref. nla.pic-an22986697-v, Sir John Vincent Barry Photograph Collection, National Library of Australia.



**Below:** Conferring degree on the Duke of York (later King George V) in Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, 12 May 1901, photographic print, 20.0 x 15.0 cm. UMA/I/1005, University of Melbourne Photographs Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. See also inside back cover.



which was brought in from outside the university as the council suite had only two. Today in the foyer of Wilson Hall there is a third throne, a replica of the smaller throne, carved in a wood other than oak. This throne was made in the 1980s on the instruction of the vice-principal, Ray Marginson:

[The loss of Wilson Hall in 1952] by the fire was increased in its effect by the fact that the portraits that hung in the Hall had just returned from conservation and had been stoutly rewired, making their removal impossible. The chairs were however rescued and the smaller ones are now in the Council Chamber and the two original thrones, conspicuous in the early photographs and engravings of conferring ceremonies, are now in the Wilson Hall foyer. They are joined there with a third replica throne to which attaches a story. I had the replica made by a Melbourne carver with the objective of replacing the Grant Featherstone [*sic*] pair on the platform, which by the 1960s were not in good order. We also had a replica footstool made. These footstools in early times

were used for graduands to kneel for the chancellor to place the hood around the student's neck. The chairs themselves are of substantial height. I mentioned my intention to Sir Douglas Wright [the chancellor], who in characteristic fashion exploded, 'Can you see me sitting there with my little legs dangling in the air?' This certainly squashed the proposal and therefore the thrones and footstools inhabit the foyer of the hall.<sup>16</sup>

Three thrones were present in Wilson Hall in 1901 when the university honoured the Duke of York, who was visiting Melbourne for the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia. In the photograph of the occasion (see p. 9 and inside back cover), the duke can be seen sitting on the higher throne, to his left is the other throne and further to its left is a slightly smaller throne of unknown origin, brought in for the occasion. Also brought in, on the duke's right, is a fourth throne, similar to one that today can be found in the Queens Hall of the Victorian Parliament.

It is highly likely that William Thwaites, by then a university councillor and well known as engineer-in-chief of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works,

would have been present at the 1901 ceremony. One wonders whether Thwaites, on this or one of the many other occasions when he attended meetings in the Council Chamber and sat on the chairs that his grandfather and father had made, paused to consider their beauty, their evocation of the lineage of learning and their passive witness to the deliberations of the councillors. Perhaps he paused to remember his grandfather who 'was smitten with the spirit of adventure and determined to try his fortune in the newly settled District of Port Phillip away out to the south under the Southern Cross'.<sup>17</sup>

Dr Robert La Nauze is author of the book *Engineer to Marvellous Melbourne: The life and times of William Thwaites* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011). He is presently writing a book on George Thwaites, his sons and their furniture.

- 1 Harriet Edquist, *Building a new world: A history of the State Library of Victoria 1853–1913* (electronic book), Melbourne: State Library of Victoria, 2013, p. 82. [www.slv.vic.gov.au/explore/our-publications/building-a-new-world](http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/explore/our-publications/building-a-new-world), accessed 17 June 2014.
- 2 Richard J.W. Selleck, 'Chancellor Barry', *La Trobe Journal*, no. 73, autumn 2004 (Redmond Barry number), p. 46.
- 3 University of Melbourne Building Committee minutes, meeting 191, 24 October 1864, item 3. Ref. 1963.0045, University of Melbourne Archives. Tenders were also received from Nichols & Sinclair (£99.10.0), James Nation (£113.0.0), Holroyd &

Ravenscroft (£171.10.0) and McKennie & McEwan (£98.9.0).

- 4 Nineteen chairs is an unusual number to order and it may well be that the original order was for 20 or 24 chairs.
- 5 Richard J.W. Selleck, *The Shop: The University of Melbourne 1850–1939*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, p. 21.
- 6 *Argus*, 17 August 1871, p. 7.
- 7 J.B. Hawkins, personal communication, August 2014.
- 8 University of Melbourne Building Committee minutes, meeting 191, 24 October 1864, item 3.
- 9 *Vouchers 1858–1880*. Ref. 1982.0003, University of Melbourne, Accounts Branch, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 10 University of Melbourne Building Committee Minutes, meeting 194, 27 March 1865, item 3. Ref. 1963.0045, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 11 George Thwaites & Son continued in business until late 1889.
- 12 Redmond Barry, *Halls of Europe: Address to the workmen employed in building the Great Hall of the Melbourne Public Library and Museum, in Melbourne, Victoria ... September 8, 1866*, Melbourne: Wilson & Mackinnon, 1866, p. 36.
- 13 *Australian News for Home Readers*, 20 December 1866, p. 8.
- 14 'The Melbourne University', *Argus*, 20 May 1867, p. 3.
- 15 'First ceremony here as new citizens take oath', *Argus*, 27 April 1949, p. 6.
- 16 Ray Marginson interviewed by Robyn Sloggett, 'Impecunious magpies, or how to adorn a university with little ready cash', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 7, December 2010, p. 32. Grant Featherston designed modern thrones for the new Wilson Hall.
- 17 William Thwaites, 'Tribute to Thomas Henry Thwaites on his 80th Birthday', 1906. Manuscript 11884, Royal Historical Society of Victoria.