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Curvaceous?
Sexy? **John Lloyd** takes a politically-correct look at some ooh-la-la legs from across the Channel

Country cabriole chic



The 'high society' cabriole leg from France filtered through to fashion-conscious country folk across the Channel in a simpler yet still elegant form



Having made your template from thin ply or cardboard, transfer it to the leg blank

The word *cabriole*, apparently, is a French dancing term for bounding or leaping. If you are Italian you would know the derivation is from the word *capriola*, which means 'goat's leap'. But quite what a curvaceous leg with a pronounced knee on a piece of furniture, and occasionally, a claw-like foot clutching a ball, has got to do with prancing about in a leotard, or bounding across the Italian countryside, completely escapes me!

Despite my inability to make the link between a frisky goat and a piece of furniture, this curvy sort of leg, when fitted to a table or chair, is called a 'cabriole'. The name, with its Continental influence, is actually quite appropriate for what is undeniably a rather sexy form of leg.

Having discovered that the name comes from the Continent, perhaps it is no surprise that this type of leg originally came to England from across the Channel, and obviously arrived complete with name. All of this is even less surprising if you remember that just about every other influence on the design of what is now antique English furniture came from the Continent. For some reason we British didn't have an original idea in our heads as far as furniture was concerned. We were obviously saving our creative energies for the industrial revolution!

The cabriole leg came into common use in this country in about 1700, and was used extensively on walnut furniture – think of Queen Anne chairs with their curvaceous legs and elaborately carved knees and feet. But the cabriole leg was also used on country furniture in a much simpler form, again on chairs, and also on oak dressers and other items for the fashion-conscious country folk.

Moving from the big city to the country myself some years ago has obviously had its effect on me because I now much prefer the cabriole leg in its simpler 'country' form. The curves are much

less pronounced and the ankle much less delicate and prone to damage. Also, the inside faces of the legs are often left almost straight, with the concave curve behind the knee often being left flat, with the shape being almost straight off the saw.

I realise that this is a rather selfish indulgence on my part, but I am going to look at creating this simplified country leg. In fact the principle is exactly the same for the more ornate, refined, versions. The carved embellishment obviously requires some carving skills, but the basic shaping is executed using exactly the same principles and techniques, whether rustic oak or sophisticated walnut.

Inspiration

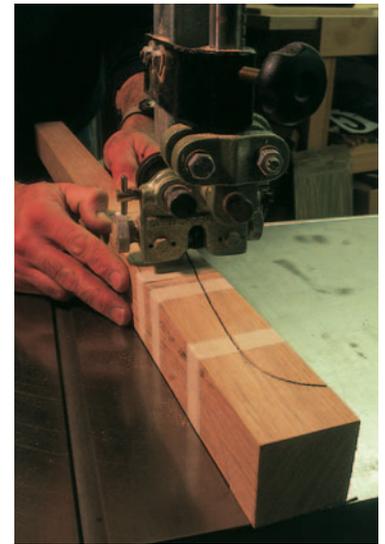
The starting point for any cabriole is to create a full-size template. Copying an existing leg is relatively simple and just requires a bit of care and a steady hand to transfer the existing shape to a piece of card or thin ply. If you are working from scratch it's a bit more of a challenge to get the curves to look right. I often search for inspiration from books, but it seems to be a rule that photos of cabriole legs are never taken directly side on, which means that arriving at the right shape is rather tricky.

For both methods though, the starting point is a basic rectangular 'blank' from which the leg is to be cut. This will usually be something over 50mm (2in), but rather depends on how voluptuous the final shape is going to be. So, the template starts off in its rectangular 'blank' form and the curves are then drawn within the confines of the rectangle, and finally the template is cut to shape.

The legs will start off the same size and shape as the original rectangular template 'blank', with a square cross section, not forgetting that the leg will extend above the knee of the cabriole so that



Cut right on the line; it will save work later



Tape back the offcuts and cut the other face



joints can be added later.

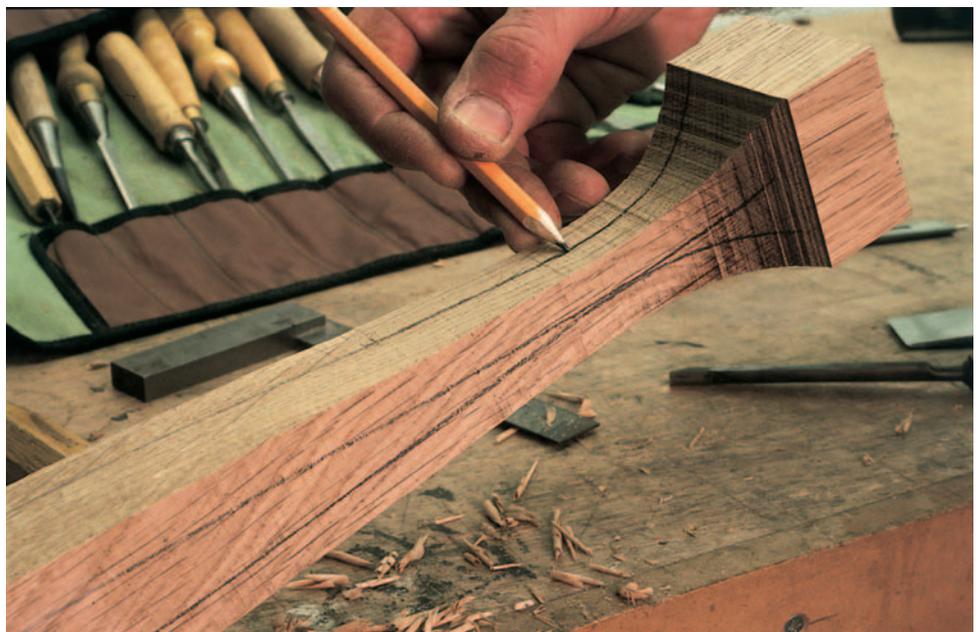
The template is then placed on the wooden 'blank' and the shape is transferred in pencil to two adjacent faces in such a way that the knees are pointing away from each other. The vital piece of equipment for the basic shaping of the leg is a bandsaw. I'm sure it's perfectly possible to do so without one, but you'd be a better man – or woman – than me if you were to do this bit by hand. I might be a purist at times but not where cabrioles and bandsaws are concerned!

A nice sharp blade is a good idea. I usually find that a 12.5mm, 4tpi blade will get round most curves, sometimes with a little encouragement, while also retaining directional stability for the straighter bits, although very tight curves may need something a little narrower. To avoid any unnecessary effort on my part, I cut right on the line. A little bit of extra time spent carefully bandsawing will save a huge amount of time later on in the final hand shaping.

“For some reason we British didn't have an original idea in our heads as far as furniture was concerned”

Cutout: The basic bandsawn shape

Right: Using a finger as a gauge, mark in the guidelines on all four faces





Once all your lines are in place, start shaping



The tighter curves can be shaped with a carving or flat chisel

“Basic shaping is executed using exactly the same principles and techniques, whether rustic oak or sophisticated walnut”



All the rough shaping for the rest is done with a spokeshave

Having cut to the lines on one face, don't be tempted to throw the offcuts in the wood-burner just yet as they have to be taped back into place so that the cuts can be made on the adjacent face. Having made all the cuts on the two faces the offcuts can be consigned to heating duties and the basic cabriole shape admired.

Shaping

The rest of the shaping is carried out mainly with a spoke-shave. My personal preference is for wooden spoke-shaves as in my experience they are a bit friendlier than metal ones, but metal should work just as well! On my first attempt at a cabriole I got to this point and just ploughed straight into shaping, assuming that the correct shape would just materialise as if by magic or some sort of divine guidance. I did end up with something that looked like a cabriole, but creating four legs that bore more than just a passing resemblance to each other, I decided, needed the introduction of a little more control into the shaping exercise.

To this end I add a series of pencil lines to guide my cutting. The starting place for this is the point at the 'ankle' of the leg, where it is at its most slender. Here, and at this point only, the cross section of the leg will be a circle, so the mid point of the square face here is going to be a point on the circumference of the circle, and is therefore sacred. Using a pencil, and a finger to act as a fence to run along the arrises of the leg, this 'sacred point' is extended for the whole length of the leg, twice on each face, and on all four faces.

Additional lines are then run using the same method, but this time approximately halfway between the sacred lines and the arris. These additional lines are the guidelines for the initial shaping with spokeshave and chisel. The idea is that the arrises are removed to create a flat face

that runs the length of the leg, on all four arrises, with the edges of the 'flat' following the pencil lines, which in turn follow the shape of the leg.

The majority of this can be done with the spokeshave, bearing in mind grain direction to avoid tearout. The tighter curves are achieved with carving chisels and/or the bevel of a large flat chisel. Having created these four flat faces, a further pencil line is added along their length, in the middle of the flats, and this line becomes another sacred line, which shouldn't be removed.

Refinement

At this point the final shape of the cabriole should be emerging, albeit still with a few lumpy bits, and the next stage is to remove these while retaining all the sacred lines – if you can remember which ones they are! The ideal tool for this is, once again, the spokeshave, and having achieved all the basic shaping it's time to do a bit of freehand refinement, aided and abetted by the judicious use of your most useful curve checkers, the fingertips. Running fingers over curves is one of the easiest and most effective ways of finding lumps and bumps. When the final shape is almost there I usually switch from spokeshave to cabinet scraper, which is an excellent tool for taking off controlled shavings without having to pay very much attention to grain direction.



Right: A cabinet scraper is used for final shaping



Feet and ears

The only bit of the leg that is likely to require some additional shaping at this point is the foot. The footprint of most cabrioles is usually vaguely circular, although on this particular one it comes to a bit of a point. A circle can be drawn on the end of the leg with a pair of compasses which can then be used as a guide for a bit of chiselling. The area around the foot will generally just need a bit of fiddling about with where the curves sweeping down from the main part of the leg hit the vertical part of the foot. This bit I do by eye until it looks right and the various faces flow into each other nicely.

Final shaping is done with a piece of serious abrasive. Something like 80 or 120 grit with a cloth backing, like belt sander belts, works well as the cloth will follow the curves satisfactorily. Using a piece of flexi-ply as a sanding pad can be a useful aid to get rid of any remaining bumps and bandsaw marks.

The cabriole leg usually also needs ears – not that ears are something usually associated with legs, but these ears extend the curve at the top of the leg where it meets the adjoining frame or rails. They are roughly shaped before gluing into place when the leg has been glued into its frame. The

Above left: The basic foot shape

Above right: Coarse cloth-backed adhesive will finish the job

Right and middle right: My finished version and the country 18th century original

Far right: A more flamboyant version



final shaping is done in situ to ensure that the leg curves flow into the ears.

I realise that cabrioles these days will generally fall into the 'repro' category of furniture making, but they are elegant and I have seen some very nice modern takes on the cabriole. Perhaps between us we could create a modernist cabriole revival, although we may have to wait for some inspiration from abroad! ■