

Laying Desk Leathers

Find out how to replace leather inserts with furniture maker Chris Tribe

If you are restoring a desk you may need to remove and relay the leather panels. The work is best done after any other refinishing so you don't risk damaging the new leather, though you may need to prepare the substrates before laying of the new leathers. For small panels (up to 42x25in) you can use a skiver or sheep's leather, but for larger panels hide will be required as skivers are limited in size. Hide is thicker than skiver. I usually order leathers from Essex Galleries who have recently relocated to Kent.

You will need to measure the panels to be restored carefully, once the leather has been removed, and send your supplier a portion of the original as an example of the original tooling. The leathers are usually produced with an inner gold tooling, and an outer blind tooling indicates the edge of the leather, plus a strip of waste around the outside. After tooling the leathers are lacquered to seal them. Some restorers lacquer the leather themselves with French polish, but I've never had to do that.

Preparation

To remove the leather, first moisten the surface with water and leave for a few minutes. If it is seriously degraded, perhaps even broken up and rotten, you can ease it off by running a wide chisel between the leather and substrate. When the leather is more robust it is often possible to remove it by rolling it off wound around a dowel.

It is important to ensure that the surface on which the new leather is to be laid is flat and undamaged and that any glue or leather residue is removed. I use an old, but sharp, chisel to remove any vestiges of leather or glue. Then I inspect the area along the edges to ensure there's no debris that might show up as a lump.

Then offer up the new leather to check



the leather surface will be flush with the surround. If the new leathers are thicker than the previous ones the surface may need a little chamfering to allow for the increased thickness. So that you don't damage the edge, perhaps even pulling it up when chamfering, use a scalpel and rule to score the grain up against the edge, then pare a 15mm-wide margin until the leather fits flush.

Laying the leathers

When the surfaces are flat the leathers can be laid. Generally the leathers arrive larger than the panel they are to be laid on, so

Restored New leathers look fantastic on an antique desk. To position the leather accurately it's a good idea to show where the corners are with masking tape. This helps you line up the corner of the blind tooling

one cannot see whether they are located correctly. To overcome you need to stick down markers around the panels to help with positioning. Stick masking tape onto the surround, extending beyond the edges of the panel.

Using a pen, extend the line of the blind tooling to the edge of the leather. By locating the tooling line on the masking tape the leather should be correctly



Preparation Dampen the old leather then remove it with a wide-bladed chisel (above). If you need to do any chamfering to the panel, first score the edge (right)



Chris Tribe

Chris Tribe produces commissioned furniture (like the dressing table in cherry, maple and elm (right)), mainly for clients around Yorkshire. He has a workshop and gallery in Blubberhouses, where he will soon be establishing a collective furniture making business called Designer Makers. Chris also runs courses and more details can be found at his website (christribe.co.uk).



Jewellery This 300mm wide jewellery box is made from solid padauk and madrona veneer



Coffee The legs on Chris's maple Origami coffee table are made from individual components, cut on a tablesaw and splined together

Repairing cracks

TIP



Small cracks in the wood can be filled with two-pack filler (I use Ronseal High Performance Wood Filler) and then sanded back, but anything wider than about 1mm will need a more significant repair with a fillet, ideally made from the same timber as the panel. You may need to vary the thickness of the fillet to fit the crack. I do this by clamping a too-long piece of wood to the bench, and plane it with a block plane. It's a good idea to taper it slightly for a wedge fit. Don't taper it too much or there won't be a good glue bond, and you could even split the wood knocking it home if it is too much like a wedge. A couple of shavings is enough for a taper.

The fillet should be flexible enough to be bent to follow the line of a crack if it isn't straight. Once you're happy with the fit, glue the fillet in place using PVA and tapped home. Pare away any excess fillet. If the panel on either side of the crack is uneven you may need to level it with two-pack filler and sand back to give a flat surface.



Cracks Tapping home a fillet into a crack in the substrate of the panel



TIP

Cutting Marking the edge of the blind tooling at the corner of the leather (top). Rolling out air pockets (above right) and cutting the leather (right) with a protective sheet of acrylic protecting the wood. To see what you're doing gently pull the waste away from the line (above)

which runs neatly along the edge of the panel to press the leather down.

If the blind tooling does not align with the edge at some point that part of the leather should be lifted and relaid. You can usually stretch or compress it a little without distorting the grain or tooling.

Cutting to size

Cutting the leather to size is the critical part of the operation, and the bit where beads of perspiration may appear on the forehead! Before the glue sets, fit a new blade in your scalpel, and start cutting from a corner. I place a thin piece of 1mm acrylic under the waste leather to protect the surrounding surface when you are cutting across the waste at the start of the cut in the corner.

Locate the blade against the panel edge, slightly angled outwards. Run the blade against the edge, with the angled cut ensuring that the raw edge of the leather faces slightly downwards so is not seen. As

the cut is made you need to hold the waste away from the cut to see what you are doing, but don't pull or the leather might be distorted. Hold the scalpel at a lowish angle to avoid rucking up the leather ahead of the cut. You can achieve a neat fit by working carefully from the corners, feeling the blade run along the line of the edge below the leather. Tidy up to ensure that the leather is well down along all the edges and the job is done.

Details Leather from Essex Galleries (antiquedesktopleathers.com), 01843 584945. Chris Tribe has been running furniture making courses for 20 years in small groups at his fully-equipped workshop in North Yorkshire. Most of the courses are two-day weekend sessions, with some longer five-day tuition. They include sharpening, jointing, drawer making and finishing. Find out more at Chris's website christribe.co.uk or call 01943 880417.



Impress Use the piggy stick to push the leather into the edge



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