

‘Durham’ Armchairs and Cupboards

JOHN GALL AND PETER BREARS

At the opening of the twenty-first century, very few pieces of early vernacular furniture either remain in their original locations or retain a soundly documented provenance. Many of those which do have been studied and described in works such as Victor Chinnery’s *Oak Furniture, The British Tradition* (1979), Richard Bebb’s *Welsh Furniture 1250–1950* (2007), Tobias Jellinek’s *Early British Chairs and Seats 1500 to 1700* (2009), and Paul Fitzsimmons’s *Discovering Dennis* (2009).¹ However, thousands of pieces of oak furniture remain unprovenanced and unattributed in museums, private houses, churches and the antiques trade. Some may have been described as being of a particular date or from a particular region on the basis of informed opinion, rather than on extensive surveys and more detailed study. The purpose of this paper is to adopt the latter approach in order to describe and identify the products of a particular workshop which probably operated in the mid- to late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. As with most other groups, there is no archival evidence to confirm its date or geographical location, but since most of the individual pieces which can be provenanced to domestic or institutional properties are from County Durham, it would appear that this is where they were made.

In the 1990s the authors had noticed that a number of chairs, such as that in the parish church of St Andrew, Haughton-le-Skerne, Darlington (Figure 1), had a range of distinctive features, which might indicate their regional provenance. It was therefore decided to make as comprehensive a search as possible through previous and current sale and exhibition catalogues, and to contact relevant dealers in antique oak furniture in order to gather as much information as possible regarding comparative pieces. In addition, a request for such chairs, accompanied by an illustration, was placed in the *Antiques Trade Gazette* of 11 February, 2006. As a result, a group of twenty-four chairs, almost certainly from the same workshop, was identified. It was further noted that panels bearing the same characteristics also appeared on a number of contemporary cupboards, and so, following the same methods, a group of eighteen cupboards and two chests was eventually identified (Figure 2).

Most of the ten pieces of ‘Durham’ furniture that remained within the county into the twentieth century survived in its churches, institutions and farmhouses. As identified by the numbering system which will be described below, they comprise:

Armchairs

1D St Andrew’s Parish Church, Haughton-le-Skerne, Darlington.

2A Used by the warder in the gatehouse of Durham Castle up to 1942.

3C St Mary and St Stephen’s Parish Church, Wolsingham, Weardale.

3F Brancepeth Castle, photographed there c. 1900.

4B and 5A The Shafto family of Whitworth and Beamish in Co. Durham, whose Davison ancestors formerly used Betty Surtees’ house, Newcastle, as their town-house.

¹ Chinnery (1979); Bebb (2007); Jellinek (2009); Fitzsimmons (2009). Jellinek includes an outline of the present authors’ work on ‘Durham’ chairs on pp. 178–81.



1 Armchair, 1D, Parish Church of St Andrew, Haughton-le-Skerne.
Adam Bowett



2 Court cupboard, 2G. *Beamish, the North of England Open Air Museum*. Acc. no. 1975-143

Cupboards

1A Peakfield Farm, Frosterley, Weardale, where it is believed to have been since the 1700s.

2A Moor House, Leamside, Durham City.

2E Durham Castle.

5A Loud Farm, Annfield Plain, from the 1700s.

Chest

1A Addison's saleroom, Barnard Castle.

In addition, chair 1A was from the Alnwick area, 1B from the Morpeth area of Northumberland, 3B from Ripon Cathedral and 1C from the Gargrave area of North Yorkshire. Cupboards 2B and 2F were in the possession of a dealer in Barnard Castle,

and may have been obtained locally, while the remainder appeared in salerooms or other locations in more distant parts of the country. The locations of all the 'Durham' pieces so far discovered are given in Appendix 1.

One of the most unexpected aspects of this group is that, despite detailed research, it comprises almost entirely chairs and cupboards. Not a single settle, stool, or other item of framed oak furniture has yet been found to have the very distinctive design of carved decoration, while only one chest has been traced (Figure 21). Where there were groups of potentially competing craftsmen, as in the contemporary Staffordshire pottery industry, it was usual for each one to concentrate on certain products, thus increasing his individual efficiency and ensuring good sales. If this was the case with the joiners of the north-east, it would imply a completely unexpected volume of production.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 'DURHAM' FURNITURE GROUP

This group is defined by a number of characteristic forms, constructional details and decorative motifs. Of these, the most obvious is that it is restricted to armchairs and cupboards, excluding almost every other item of furniture. The armchairs are readily recognised by a gap a few inches wide which separates the back of the seat board from the rail supporting the back panel, and by a crest-rail shaped as a large semicircle flanked by two smaller ones, with small diamond-shaped projections rising above their junctions. The crest rail usually has a narrow band of guilloche, rounded or other carved decoration across its base, and projects well beyond the back posts. Here it is supported by added console-shaped 'ears' or lugs, their decoration of roundels or carving continuing across the top of each post.

Diamond-shaped motifs on most of the back panels have narrow sunken borders, and enclose four sprays of symmetrical foliage centred on a small diamond surrounded by four recessed rounds. An incised fleur-de-lis sprouts from each corner of the motif, and sometimes from the centre of each of their sides too. There might also be a roundel close to each of the corners. Other back panels are carved with a large fan-shaped feature springing from a central stalk, its curving branches sprouting a pair of large flowers below and small flowers above. Most of the carving of the back panels has been enriched with decoration executed with a punch shaped as a small round flower. The rail beneath the panel usually has two horizontal mouldings cut into its face, a single moulding running across the front seat rail.

The arms are straight at the top, then sweep down to scrolled ends, three parallel lines often being inscribed along their upper surface. A notch cut into their underside has a very practical purpose, for when the arms are grasped here for lifting the chair, it is found to balance at this point. At the level of the seat the back legs are raked backwards to make the chairs additionally stable, and unlikely to tumble backwards. The front legs are turned both above and below the seat, using a combination of both baluster and column shapes. Four stretchers link the legs, these originally being set a few inches above floor level, but in almost every example the legs have been sawn off at stretcher level, to suit the lesser height of later dining tables.

In terms of their general construction, 'Durham' cupboards are all made in two sections, the top part and balusters lifting free of the base for convenience when

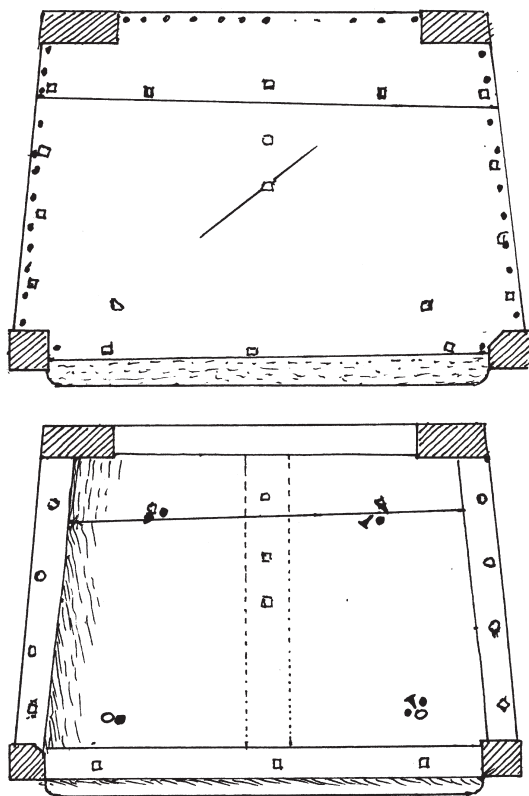


3 Underside of the seat of the Haughton-le-Skerne chair, showing the characteristic, closely spaced parallel kerfs of a Dutch multi-bladed wainscot saw. *Adam Bowett*

removing. Their backs are enclosed by rows of boards usually nailed vertically onto the frame, while their tops have boards running front-to-back, their originally exposed front edges usually being hidden beneath applied mouldings of the late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century date.

The top sections have two doors separated by one or, less commonly, two panels, and occasionally with an additional panel at each end. Both the door and the intervening panels are carved with motifs identical to those found on the backs of 'Durham' chairs, while the muntins may be plain, have a central moulding, or be elaborately carved. The top rail, which projects forward, has a thin board running from its base back to the top of the upper cupboards, this forming a 'secret' shelf accessible only from within. A carved border of interlaced, fleur-de-lis-tipped semicircles runs along most of the top rails, guilloche or interlaced S-scroll designs being relatively uncommon. The blocks mortised onto each end of the top rail are bored to receive the glued-in integral dowel-ends of the balusters, with similar dowel-like projections at their bases engaging in holes bored in the lower section. The balusters themselves are of either egg- or melon-shaped 'cup-and-cover' design usually with a central encircling moulding, or have a truncated conical 'cup' with a shallow conical 'cover' above.

The lower sections of the cupboards may have either a plain or a carved top rail, a few examples having plain, parallel top rails to enclose a pair of drawers with elaborately carved fronts. Both stiles and muntins may be plain, have a central moulding, or be ornately carved. Nearly every door has the same form of construction, with



4 The top (above) and underside (below) of the seat of chair 1E, showing square pegs which secured the seat to the frame, and also the surviving tacks and twine for the upholstery. Note the nail-holes where the leather, or fabric, cover was nailed to the perimeter of the seat. *Peter Brears*

top, middle and bottom rails tenoned into the stiles, the muntins being in two sections to frame four equal-sized panels. Each muntin has an ogee moulding down each side, the stiles and rails having narrow 45° chamfers where they adjoin the panels. Most of the panels are plain, but some may be carved with the same diamond design as on the chair-backs. Although often replaced with butterfly or butt hinges, the original cupboard doors were all hung on iron pins turning in holes bored in the top and bottom rails of the carcase.

One remaining characteristic of 'Durham' furniture is the nature of its oak. Quarter-cut timber with pronounced figuring and a warm brown colour was rarely used. Most of this group is made from slow-grown, straight-grained oak, suggesting imported wainscot rather than native-grown wood. This conjecture is confirmed, in some cases, by the characteristic, closely-spaced kerf marks of a Dutch multi-bladed frame saw evident on hidden surfaces (Figure 3). The oak now appears as a very dark dull brown or even black where polished, areas subject to particular wear sometimes becoming light brown or even yellowish. The darker appearance of sunken sections of the carved decoration is not due to any form of staining or pigment, but is only a contrast to the lighter colour of the more heavily worn upper surfaces. Some items, such as the chair 1E, have the usual dark surfaces down their backs, while all other parts have a lighter reddish surface, similar to that of cupboard 1C. This may be due to the use of a different form of polishing, or, more probably, chemical stripping of these pieces when

'restored'. In many cases the crisp edges to carving and mouldings, and particularly to the turning of the balusters, although original, appear to be recent restorations. The use of imported deal for drawer linings in at least two of the cupboards is also significant.

The use of imported timber is consistent with what is known about the commercial history of the north-east of England. It is surprising that virtually nothing has been written concerning the north-eastern tradition of furniture making, particularly as the Newcastle/Durham area had been one of the wealthiest parts of England. Its prosperity was based on the export of coal, wool, hides and lead, the massive coal trade rapidly expanding to supply fuel to London and many communities along the eastern and southern coasts, as well as to parts of continental Europe. The ever-increasing demand for wood for smelting, shipbuilding, housebuilding and fuel had completely outstripped home-grown supplies by around 1600, and so it now had to be imported in bulk. Timber and timber products had made a profitable return-load into Newcastle for centuries. In 1598, for example, Newcastle received 5,250 boards from Norway and 5,400 from Danzig, the latter being of wainscot, the oak of slow-grown forest trees.² Straight-grained, almost knot-free and uniform in texture, it was ideal for carving and for the furniture trade.

THE JOINERS OF DURHAM AND NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

All the joiners working within the city of Durham had to be freemen of the corporation and follow the regulations which the corporation imposed on its trade guilds. In the early seventeenth century, for example, it instructed the wardens and searchers of the 'Wrights, Joyners and Carpenters' to examine all relevant items which came into the city from the countryside to ensure that they were of sufficient quality. Unfortunately the lists of members of the joiners company only survive for the period 1766–1831.³ A search of probate and other records would yield the names of earlier joiners but still give no indication of the items they were making. At present only Martin Roberts's research into the building craftsmen of Durham has produced such evidence. In the accounts of Bishop Cosin, dated 29 May, 1665, Mark Todd and James Hull/Hall, joiners, were commissioned to supply 'six chairs of wainscoate gross worke for to be placed on insides of the sckreene within Auckland Chappell [at Bishop Auckland] ... made in the fashion of the charres now in the Chappell at Durham Castle.' Hall is known to have been born around 1633, and was living in Framwellgate, Durham, in 1698.⁴ Either of these joiners, or any of their contemporaries, may have been the makers of this group of 'Durham' furniture. It is also feasible that it could have been made in the town of Newcastle upon Tyne, just across the northern perimeter of the county.

In Newcastle, the Company of House Carpenters and Joiners had been incorporated in 1579, the joiners being authorised to make 'drawn tables of frame work, and tables with two posts, buffet stools, presses, chairs and sconces of frame work, framed cheists and all others pinned with wood'. The reference to 'tables with two posts' is of particular interest. Presumably these were folding tables similar in design to the later one which

² Zins (1972).

³ Whiting (1945), p. 7.

⁴ Personal communication from Martin Roberts of English Heritage.

survives in the Treasurer's House in York.⁵ Following a series of disputes and arguments, the Company of Joiners of Newcastle upon Tyne separated from the carpenters and obtained their independence on 28 March 1589. The list of their products included 'draw tables of framed work, all other tables with turned posts, making of all buffet stalls [stools], formes with turned feet and cut sides, and all other forms run with any plaine. Buffets, ammeres [aumbrys], presses, chairs and screens, being of framed wood ... framed cheists, and all other cheists being framed with wood'. In the late sixteenth century there were some thirty-two members of this Company, which regularly met over the Pilgrim's Gate on the northern wall of the town, until its demolition in 1802.⁶

Details of the introduction of furniture into the town's major households has recently been revealed by Gwendolyn Heley's major study of *The Material Culture of the Tradesmen of Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1545-1642*.⁷ The joiners of this period would have had access to the same timbers used by the shipwrights, which included deals, fir deals, planks both 'floor' and 'inch', and boards 'clap', 'Norway', and 'ship'. Their preferred material, however, was wainscot.⁸ Wainscot chairs are first recorded in 1592, the average prices of chairs rising from 6s. 8d. in 1601-1625 to £1 in 1626-1642.⁹ The cushions, some of which were placed on chairs, were of 'Spanish' work, needlewrought, Scots needlework, setwork, or of thrumb, laidwork or leather.¹⁰ Court or livery cupboards, meanwhile, were relatively rare in the sixteenth century, but became more popular in the early seventeenth, their appearance in local inventories increasing over threefold from 1600-25 to 1626-42.¹¹ The inventories also list 'fleers' for cupboards. This word is not recorded in standard dictionaries, except as a verb meaning to mock or jeer. However, Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* of 1611 has 'fleerish' drapery 'flourished' with leaves, meaning, as in Scottish usage into the 1860s, embroidered with floral designs.¹² This explains why the tops of the cupboards are only of flat boards; they were intended to be covered by an embroidered cupboard-cloth. This further implies that they were intended to be decked with ewers and basins or similar pieces of fine tableware, rather than being left quite bare.

Using income from their trading activities, the region's post-medieval merchants and gentry invested heavily in new houses, new fittings and new furniture. As Anthony Wells-Cole has described in his *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England*, the quality of the work produced by the Newcastle joiners and carvers of the early seventeenth century was equal to any of their English contemporaries.¹³ Most of its designs were taken from prints showing the finest productions of various Flemish, Dutch and German artists. These must have arrived here either through direct trade with the Continental ports, or via London. Works of a similar high quality were also being commissioned locally by John Cosin, Bishop of Durham from 1660-1670. In

⁵ Bowett (2002), fig. 4.3.

⁶ Robson (1909).

⁷ Heley (2009).

⁸ Ibid., 179.

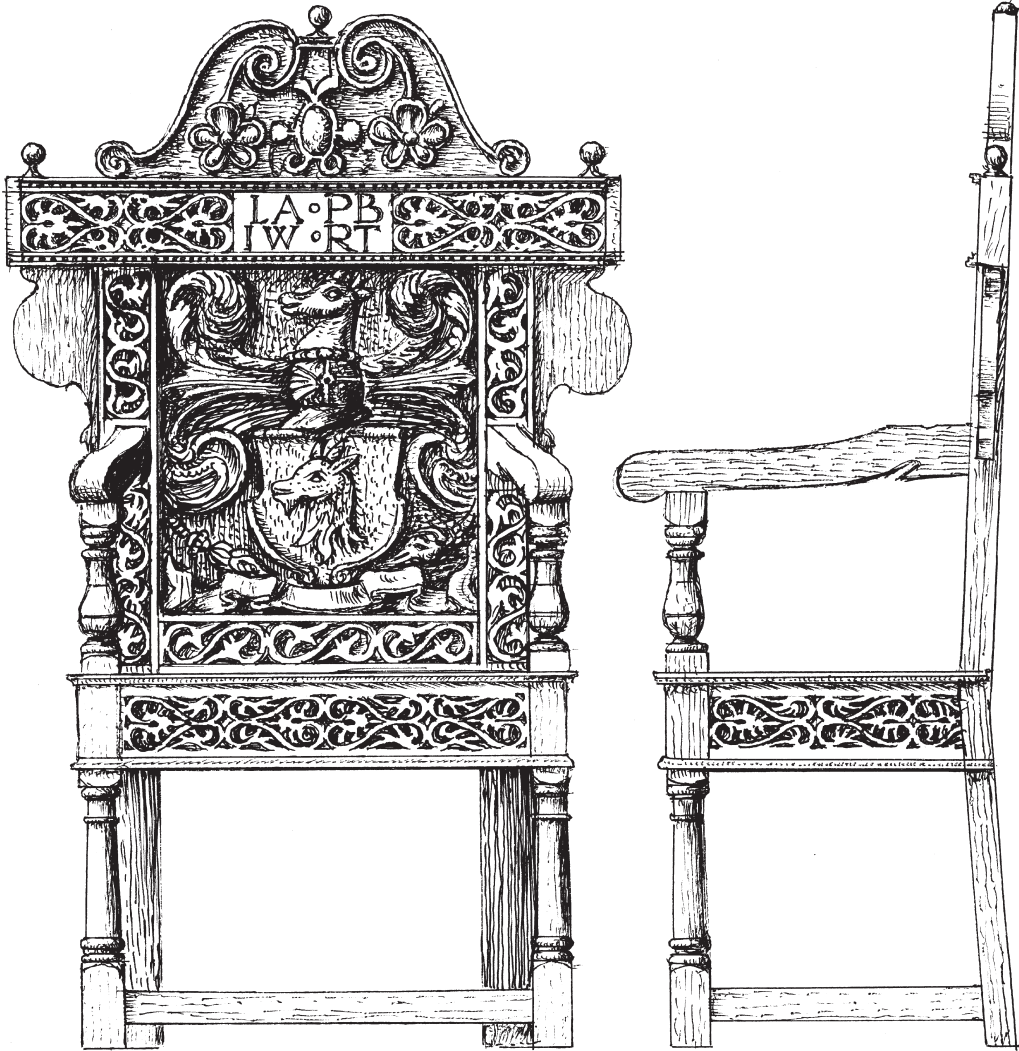
⁹ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰ Ibid., 177.

¹¹ Ibid., 151.

¹² Ibid., 177; Wright, J. (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary* (Oxford 1923) — 'Fleerish'; see also O.E.D. — flourish 'adorn with flowers'.

¹³ Wells-Cole (1997), pp. 185-89, 199-200.



5 Chair made in 1666 for St Mary's Church, Gateshead. This chair demonstrates some of the patterns of carving and turning used by the Newcastle chair-makers of this period. Although comparable to the contemporary 'Durham' chairs, it appears not to form part of that tradition. *Peter Brears*

1638 he employed Robert Barker to refurnish the church at Brancepeth, where he was rector, then engaging various craftsmen to make new fittings for Durham Cathedral, Durham Castle and his palace at Bishop Auckland.¹⁴

The best fully documented item probably made by a member of the Newcastle Joiner's Company is the chair commissioned for St Mary's Church, Gateshead, in 1666 (Figure 5). The churchwardens' accounts for that year have the entry 'Paid for a New

¹⁴ Pevsner (1983), pp. 104, 114–15, 157, 195, 197, 199, 215.

Chaire and Covering a stoole for ye Vestry £1:12:0d'.¹⁵ Made for ceremonial rather than general domestic use, its back panel is carved in relief with a shield bearing a goat's head erased, surmounted by a closed helm in profile topped by an heraldic wreath and goat's head crest, all surrounded by luxuriantly scrolled manteling. The cross-piece above extends beyond the back posts, and has a central panel inscribed with the initials LA PB IW PT. These represent the churchwardens Lancelot Ayer, Peter Bell, John Woolfe and Peter Trumble, who all held office in 1666, confirming the date of the chair.¹⁶ Although its S-scrolled crest, bulging ears, relatively straight, horizontal arms and carved front seat rail are quite different from those of the 'Durham' chairs, it displays a number of useful comparative dating features. These include the combination of front legs with turned columns below the seat rails and balusters above, and both S and double S-scrolled carving on the front seat rail and the timbers surrounding the coat of arms, these being found on a number of the 'Durham' pieces.

Much fitted woodwork survives in situ in the north-east to demonstrate its excellence. However, much of the contemporary furniture made for domestic use was later discarded by members of the increasingly wealthy middle and upper classes. To maintain their status, they regularly bought in new pieces in more fashionable styles and timbers. In 1739, for example, Richard Ellison, merchant, of The Side, Newcastle, paid:

Feb 1. To Do. Mr John Bickerdyke for 2 mahogany Dying Tables	£3-18-0
Feb 27. Do. Mr. Tho. Fenwick for Chairs &c. from London	£33-14-4d
1 May. Payd Mr Fenwicks men for there Trouble in the Furnetor of the House, from London,	2s ¹⁷

As a result of such changes, few vernacular pieces were retained in town or country houses, so that those still extant today must represent only a small proportion of those originally made and used locally.

FURNITURE SURVEY OF 'DURHAM' CHAIRS AND CUPBOARDS

To date it has been the practice to publish furniture in the form of a photograph usually taken from a diagonal angle, along with only one or two of the basic dimensions. Given the dark and reflective surfaces of oak furniture, photographs can make it very difficult to distinguish the differences which separate one almost identical piece from another, or to compare the dimensions of their component parts. It was therefore decided that, wherever possible, each piece should be drawn to a common scale, and the dimensions of its major sections recorded in inches, these being the standard measurements used by the original makers. When doing this, it rapidly became obvious that the frequently-given height of a piece was of virtually no use for comparative purposes, since their feet and sometimes their lower stretchers too had frequently been considerably modified by wear, by being cut down, or being completely restored. To compensate for this, all the heights of the chairs were taken from the lowest recognisable and usually unchanged feature, the top of the bottom stretchers.

¹⁵ *Guide to St Mary's Church, Gateshead* (n.d.)

¹⁶ Boyle (1890), p. 148. The present location of this chair is unknown.

¹⁷ Private collection, *Account book of Richard Ellison*.

As will be seen below, this approach shows, for the first time, how individual makers of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had already adopted their own series of standard measurements for the principal dimensions of their products. They still retained the freedom to modify the proportions of panels, back rails, etc., to meet the needs of particular designs, or perhaps to use up offcuts from other pieces.

The pieces were divided into sub-groups along with others sharing its particular characteristics, and given a common numerical prefix 1, 2, 3 etc., followed by its particular identification as A, B, C, etc.

CHAIRS

GROUP 1 (Figure 6)

The most common form of these chairs shared the following features:

Top Rail/Crest: A central lunette with a fan-shaped plant above two pairs of tulip-shaped flowers and a pair of round flowers with seven, eight or twelve petals with alternately round and pointed tips. Two flanking lunettes have half-round flowers of seven, nine or more petals usually with alternating round or pointed tips. A triangular pinnacle rises between each lunette, each with a four-lobed 'flower', or a six-leaved plant. The lower border usually has twenty-seven to twenty-nine roundels carved to a guilloche design, but may also be plain.

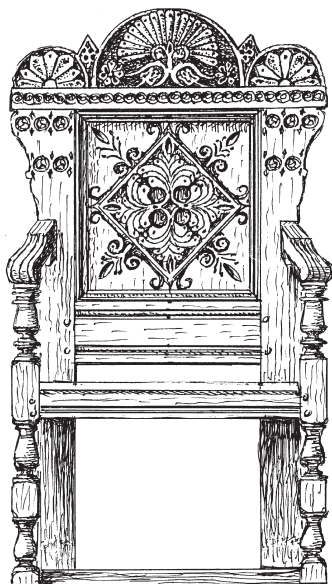
Back Panels: These have a diamond-shaped device with its points almost touching the edges of the panel, a fleur-de-lis motif at each point, and often sprouting from the centre of each side. Sometimes a roundel is cut into the centre of each spandrel. The centre of the diamond is occupied by a small diamond shape surrounded by four circular hollows, beyond which symmetrical lobed 'plants' extend into each corner. Each panel is secured in place by applied mouldings along each edge.

Back Posts: Each is tenoned into the top rail, and has its outer edge extended at the top to form broad ears or lugs, also tenoned and pegged or pinned into the top rail. These are usually decorated with three, four or five roundels, and more unusually with a carved round or square motif too.

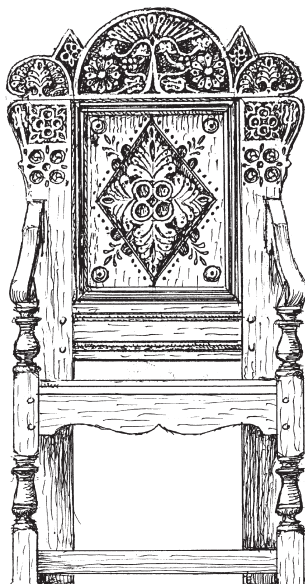
Back Mid-Rail: This usually has two parallel bands of scratch-moulded or planed mouldings, each having a bead set at each side of a recessed flat central strip. The rail is always set a few inches above the seat, leaving a gap and perhaps a means of securing a padded textile squab cushion.

Arms: Usually these have a flat upper surface incised with three parallel lines, which continue around the scrolled terminals. Beneath, each arm has a deep V-cut sawn into it close to the junction with the back posts.

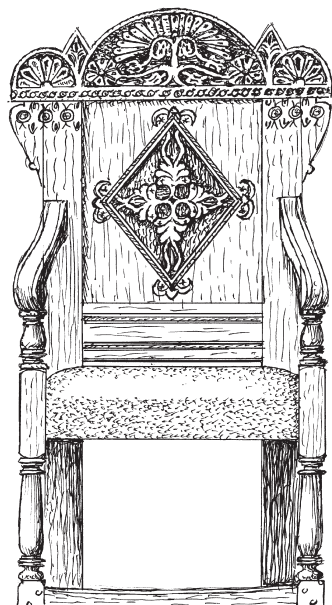
Arm Supports/Legs: The arm supports are usually turned as balusters, while their lower sections, the legs, may be turned as single balusters or as double balusters either separated by a square block, or arranged one upon another, or as columns with parallel sides.



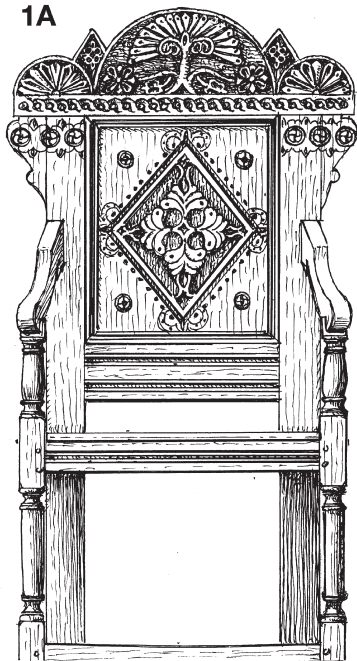
1A



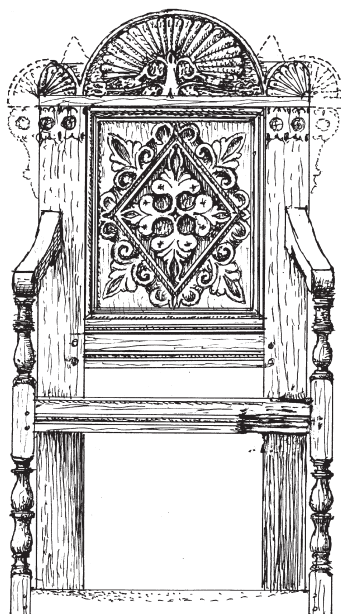
1B



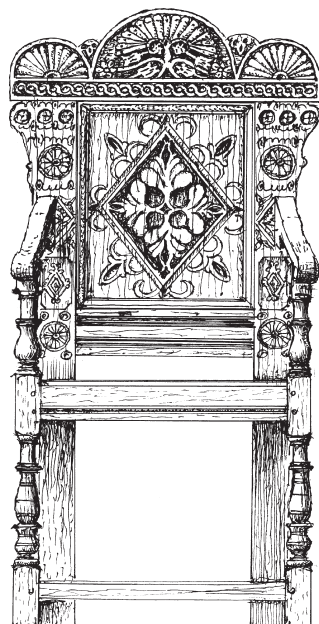
1C



1D

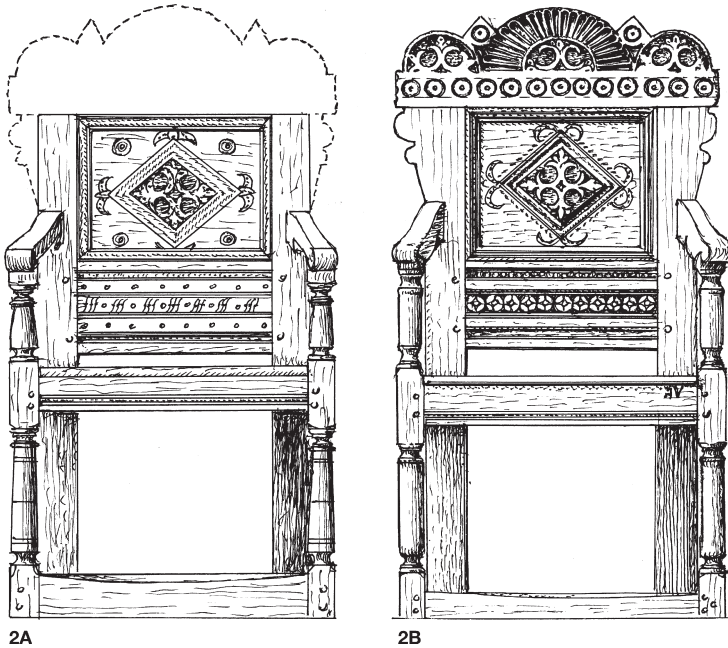


1E



1F

6 Group 1 chairs: 1A, Alnwick area; 1B, Morpeth area; 1C, probably from the Yorkshire Dales; 1D, Haughton-le-Skerne Parish Church; 1E and 1F, distant salerooms. *Peter Brears*



7 Group 2 chairs:
2A, Durham castle;
2B, distant saleroom.
Peter Brears

Front Seat Rails: Plain, except for a single moulding similar to those on the back mid-rail. On some which have been restored, this rail is plain, but given a long ogee profile to its lower edge.

Seats: These have usually been replaced, but at least two originals survive, on chairs 1D and 1E. The seat of 1E is made up of two boards, and has wooden pegs driven through its perimeter to hold both itself and an upholstered covering (now missing) in place (Figure 4). It is not clear whether the upholstery was original or a later adaptation.

Stretchers: Plain, originally at equal heights to link the bottom of each leg.

GROUP 2 (Figure 7)

Having a plainer pattern, these chairs may represent an earlier or first generation of group 1, or have been made in a simpler and therefore less expensive manner, as a somewhat cheaper product.

Top rail/crest: A central lunette with a gadrooned fan motif enclosing a 'plant' of back-to-back C-scrolls, two flanking lunettes with similar 'plants', and a triangular pinnacle between each lunette, each bearing an incised circle with a central hole. A row of identical circles runs across the bottom of the rail.

Back Panels: As group 1, but with fleur-de-lis only at the points of the diamond, and with their longer dimension horizontal rather than vertical.

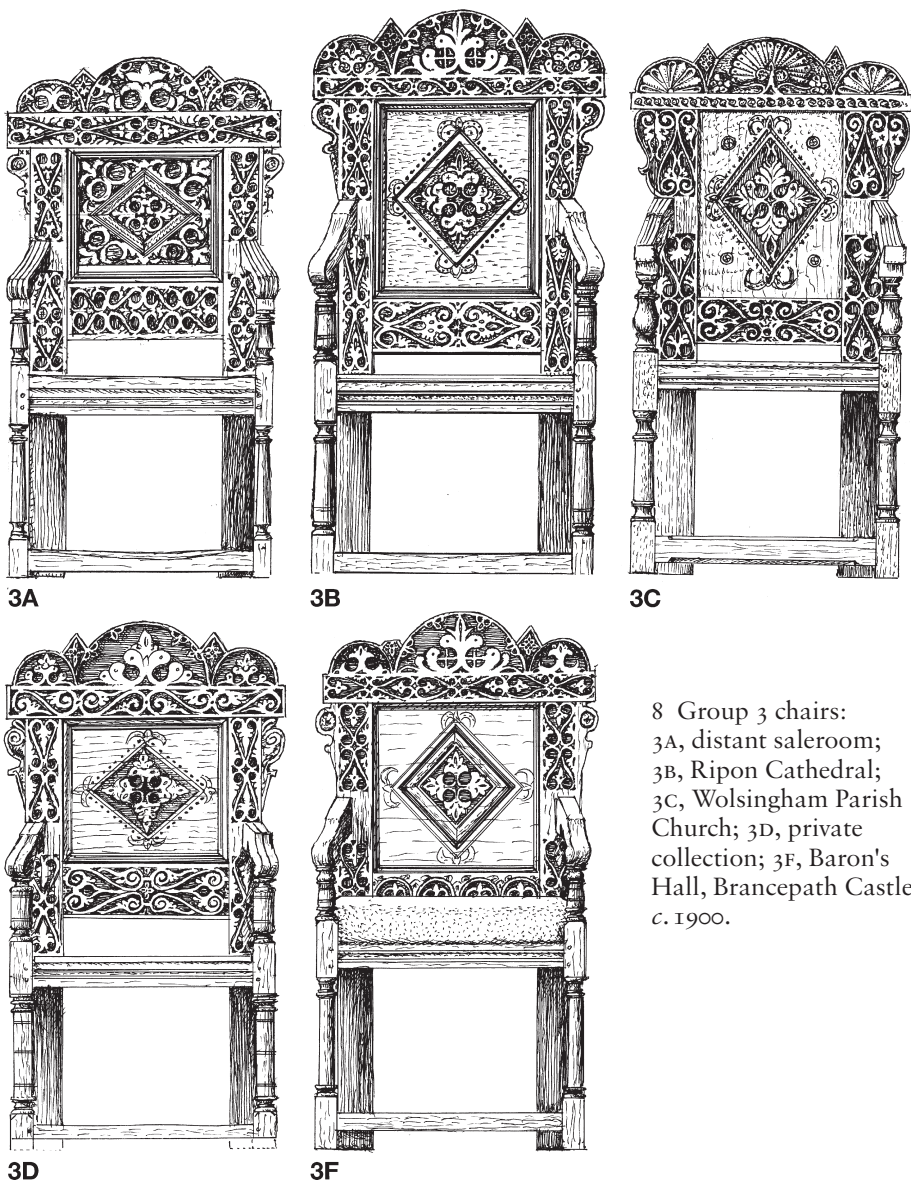
Back Posts: As group 1, but without any form of decoration.

Back Mid-Rail: This is very broad, some 6 or 7 inches wide, scratch-moulded or planed with a narrow moulding like those of group 1, and a much broader central moulding carved with a variety of patterns.

Arms: As group 1, but without the incised parallel lines.

Arm Supports/Legs: Both are columns, either parallel sides or with a slight taper.

Other features: As group 1.



8 Group 3 chairs:
3A, distant saleroom;
3B, Ripon Cathedral;
3C, Wolsingham Parish
Church; 3D, private
collection; 3F, Baron's
Hall, Brancepath Castle,
c. 1900.

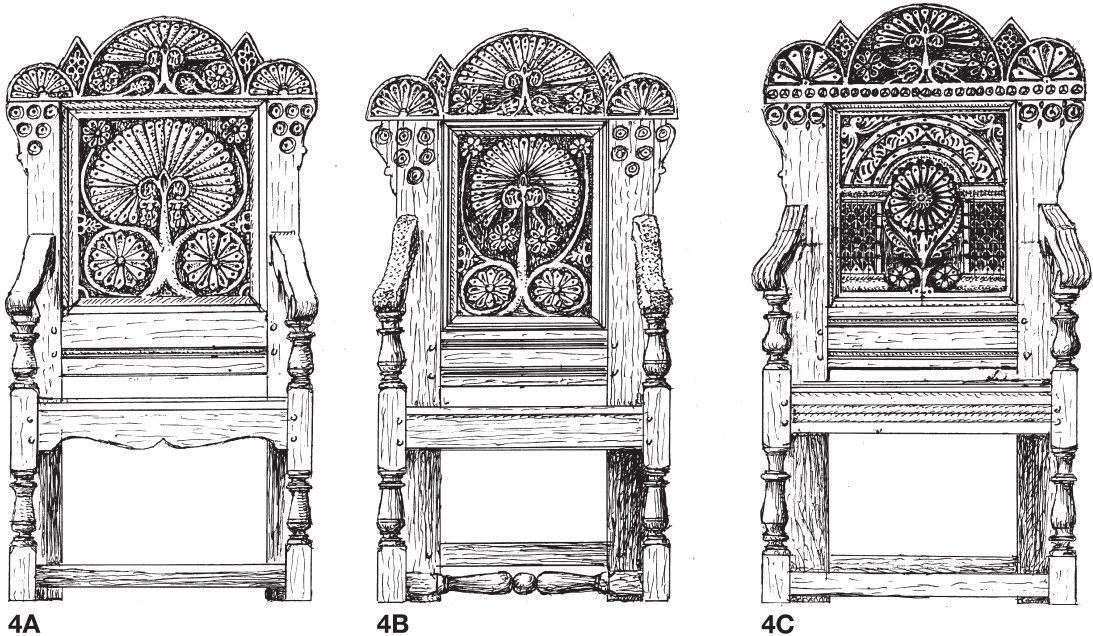
GROUP 3 (Figure 8)

In contrast, these chairs have additional carving, probably to provide a more expensive product for wealthier clients. They have all the characteristics of the group 1 chairs, with the following exceptions;

Top Rail/Crest: The lunettes may be carved with 'plant' motifs, with fleur-de-lis sprouting from their perimeters, all above a strip carved with single S or double S designs.

Back Posts and Back Mid-Rails: All carved with double S designs, which may extend into the ears or lugs.

Arm Supports and Legs: All turned as tapering columns, rather than as balusters.



9 Group 4 chairs: 4A, dealer in Sunderland; 4B, Shafto family; 4C, distant saleroom.

GROUP 4 (Figure 9)

All as group 1, except that their back panels are carved with a large fan shaped flower above a pair of round flowers, with a pair of smaller flowers in the upper corners. Alternatively a stalk bearing a pair of leaves and a round flower rises between two small flowers, all within an arched surround.

Arm Supports and Legs: all turned as balusters rather than as columns.

GROUP 5 (Figure 10)

These are made-up pieces incorporating pieces of 'Durham' chairs. 5A and 5B have top rails/crests closely associated to group 3.

As Table 1 shows, the dimensions of these chairs are remarkably uniform, indicating a degree of standardised production. The presence of the groove seen between the lower back rail and seat at the inside of the left back post is a particularly interesting feature (Figure 11). Its presence there is entirely due to the manufacturing process. Because of the angle caused by the rake of the back, the groove for the back panel would have to be made with a plough plane working against the front face of the back posts. A right handed workman would work the plane from left to right, cutting the groove with repeated shallow passes and gradually working the groove back. On the right post he would start at the position of the mortise for the lower back rail and work back towards the top of the post where the groove would run out. For the left post he would start from the top of the post and work back towards the mortise for the lower back rail. In order to achieve the necessary depth of the groove, the plane needed to begin its cut some way beyond the end of the groove proper, which explains its presence here.

- 10 Group 5 chairs: These chairs include only their top rails from 'Durham' chairs, having been 'restored' on to the frames of unassociated chairs; 5A, Shafto family; 5B, distant saleroom.

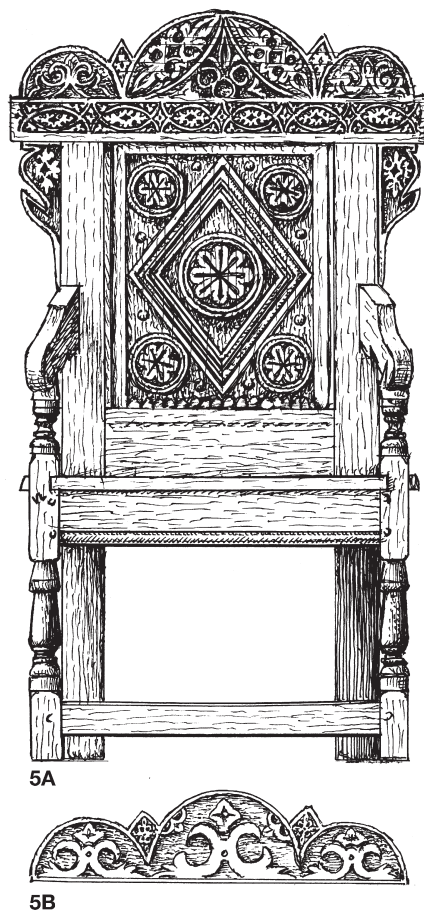


TABLE 1 Dimension of 'Durham' chairs (in inches)

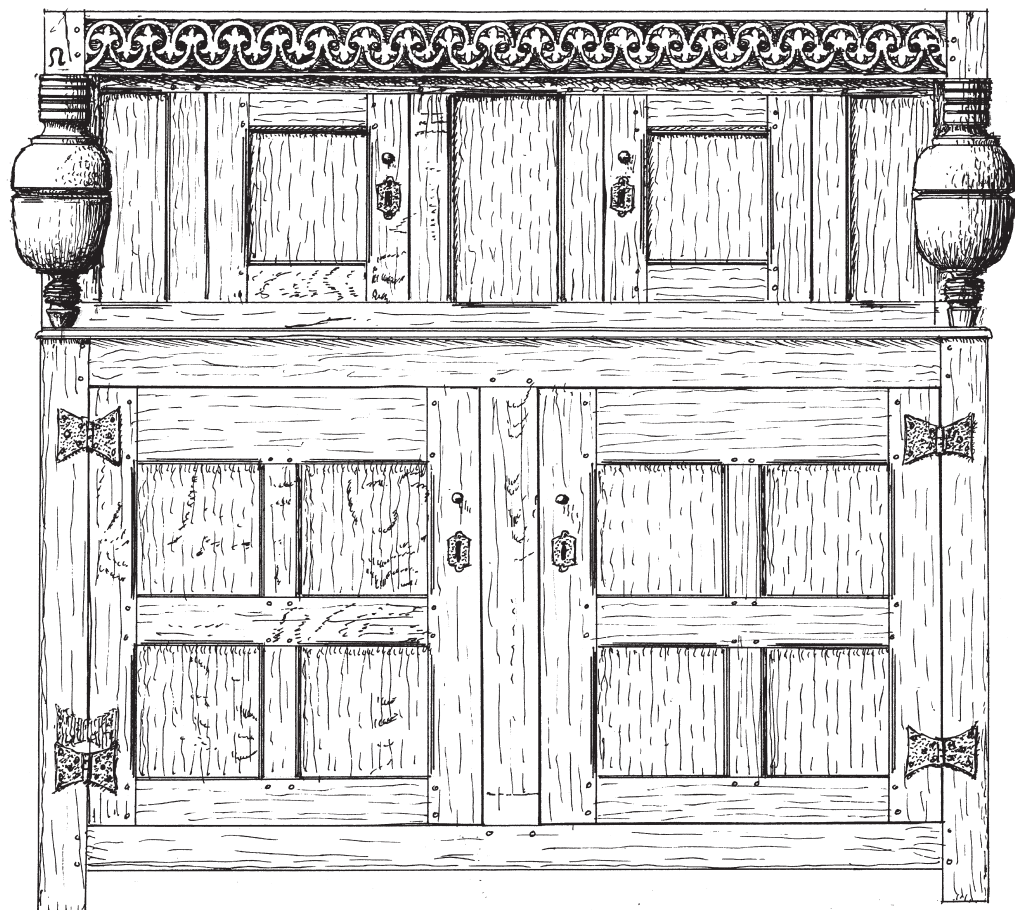
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1A	15	28.5	37	44	24	20.75	24	16	2 × 2	3 × 1.5	S
1B	13.5	28	36	43	23.75	19.5	22.5	16.5	2 × 2	2.75 × 1.5	
1C	15	30	37.5	44	24	20	24.5	19	—	3 × 1.5	S
1D	14.5	30	37.5	45	22.5	19	24.5	?	2 × 2	3 × 1.5	S
1E	13.75	28.5	36	—	24	20	25.5?	16	2 × 2	3.25 × 1.5	S
1F	14.5	29	36	43	22.5	19.75	23.5	16	2 × 2	3 × 1.5	
2A	13.75	25.75	34	—	23	19.75	?	16	2 × 2	2.75 × 1.75	S
2B		30	37.5	44.5	24	20	23.5	16	2 × 2	2.75 × 1.75	S
3A	13.75	26	34.75	41	22.5	19.75	23.5	16	2 × 2	3 × 1.5	S
3B	14.5	20	35.5	43	23	20.5	25	16	2 × 2	3 × 1.5	?
3C	13.75	27.5	36	42.5	25	20	24	16	2 × 2	3.5 × 1.5	?
4A	11.5	23.5	34	41	24	20	24.5	16 ³ / ₄	2 × 2	2.75 × 1.25	

KEY

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Top of bottom stretcher to top of seat rail | 7. Width of crest |
| 2. Top of bottom stretcher to top of arm | 8. Front to back at seat level |
| 3. Top of bottom stretcher to top of back panel | 9. Section of front legs |
| 4. Top of bottom stretcher to top of crest | 10. Section of back front legs |
| 5. Width at front of seat | 11. Groove on right side of left back post – S |
| 6. Width of back rails | |



11 Detail of chair 3D, showing the groove in the left rear post made by the joiner's plough plane. Note how the groove gets shallower as the plane works back. *John Gall*



12 Group 1 cupboard: The plainest cupboard in this series, it is known to have been used by the same family at Peakfield Farm, Frosterley, since the 1700s. *Peter Brears*

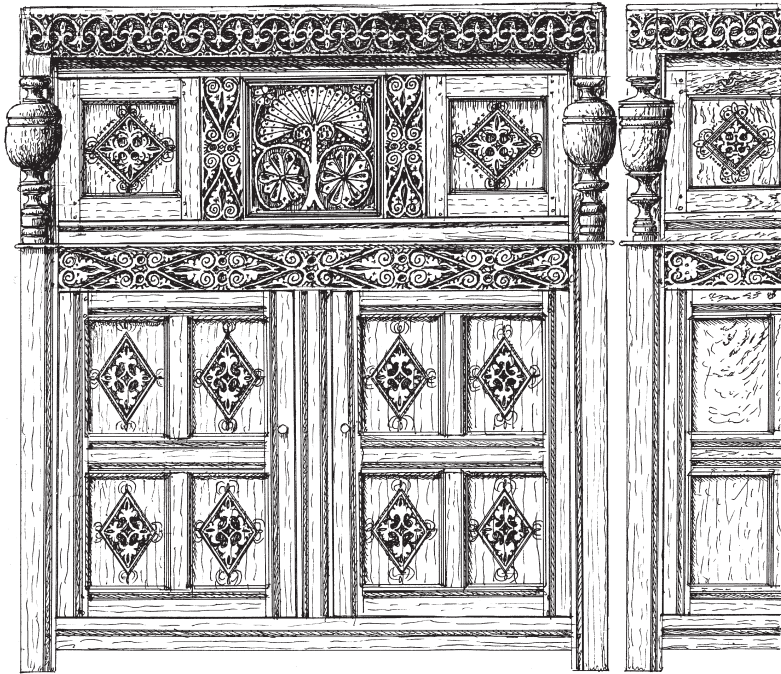
CUPBOARDS

GROUP 1 (Figure 12)

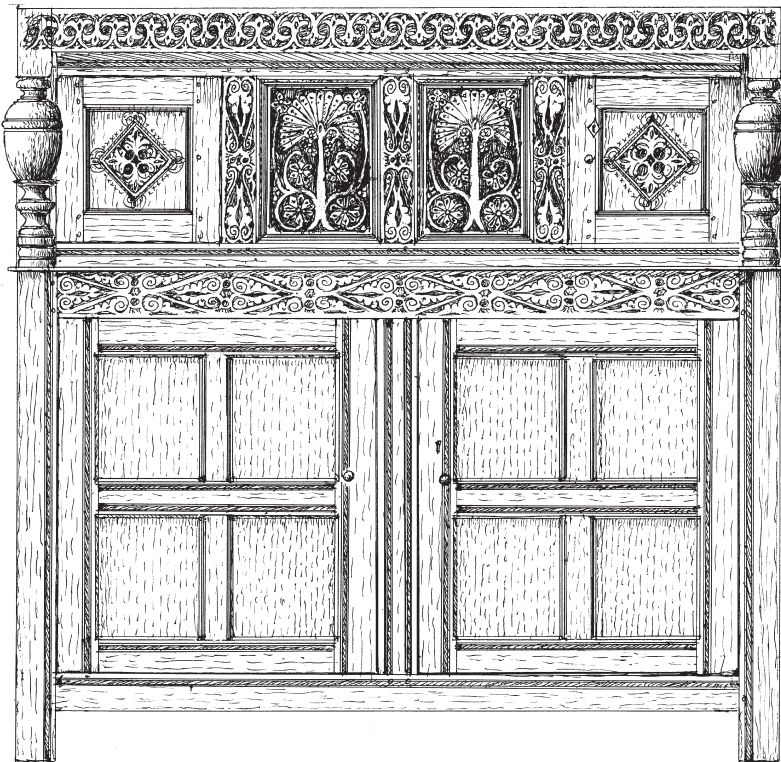
To date only one example of this group has been located. Its unusual lack of decoration may indicate either that it is an early example, or that it was a cheaper model designed for a less fashionable location.

GROUP 2 (Figures 13 and 14)

This group has the identical constructional details to those of group 1. The difference is in the additional carved decoration. The canopies have the identical interlaced fleur-de-lis carving, while all the main structural elements have scratch-moulded or planed mouldings with a recessed flat central strip flanked by two convex beads, just as on the 'Durham' chairs. In addition, the top front rail of the base and the broad posts between



13 Cupboards 2A and 2B represent the most widespread type made in the 'Durham' tradition, having the interlaced fleur-de-lis top rail, the double-S mid-rail and the same diamond and 'plant' panels as found on most 'Durham' chairs. 2A was sold from Moor House, Leamside, Durham, in 1928, and 2B was in the ownership of a dealer at Barnard Castle. *Peter Brears*

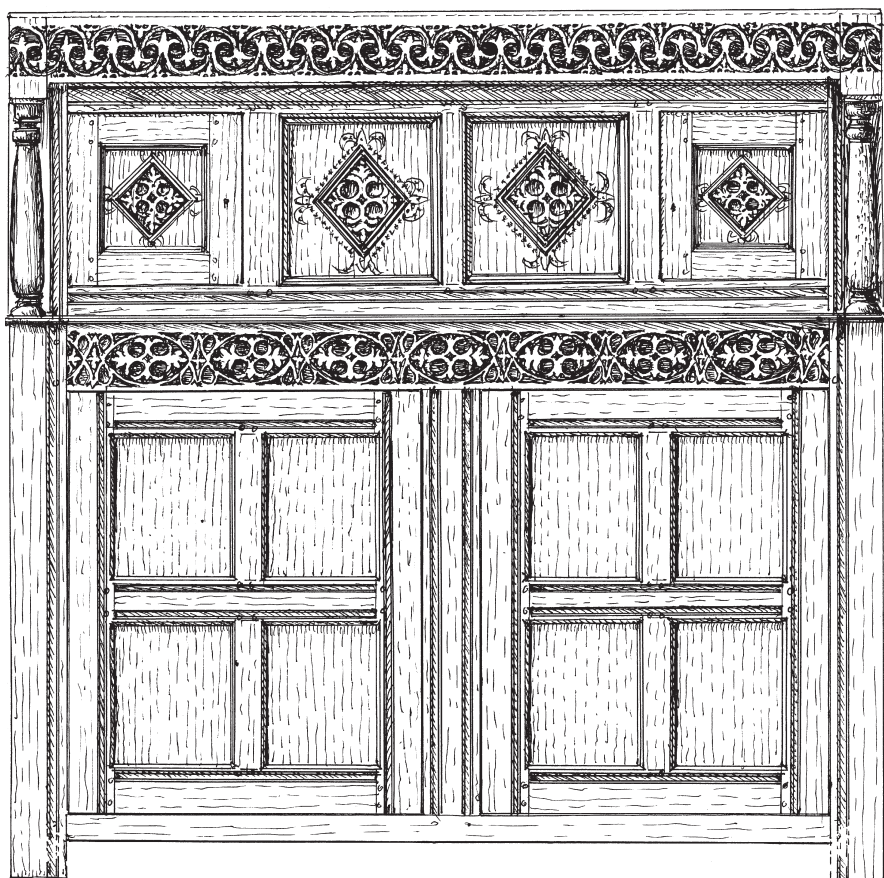


14 Cupboard 2G shows all the main features of this group, but has double fixed panels set between its upper set of cupboard doors. *Peter Brears*

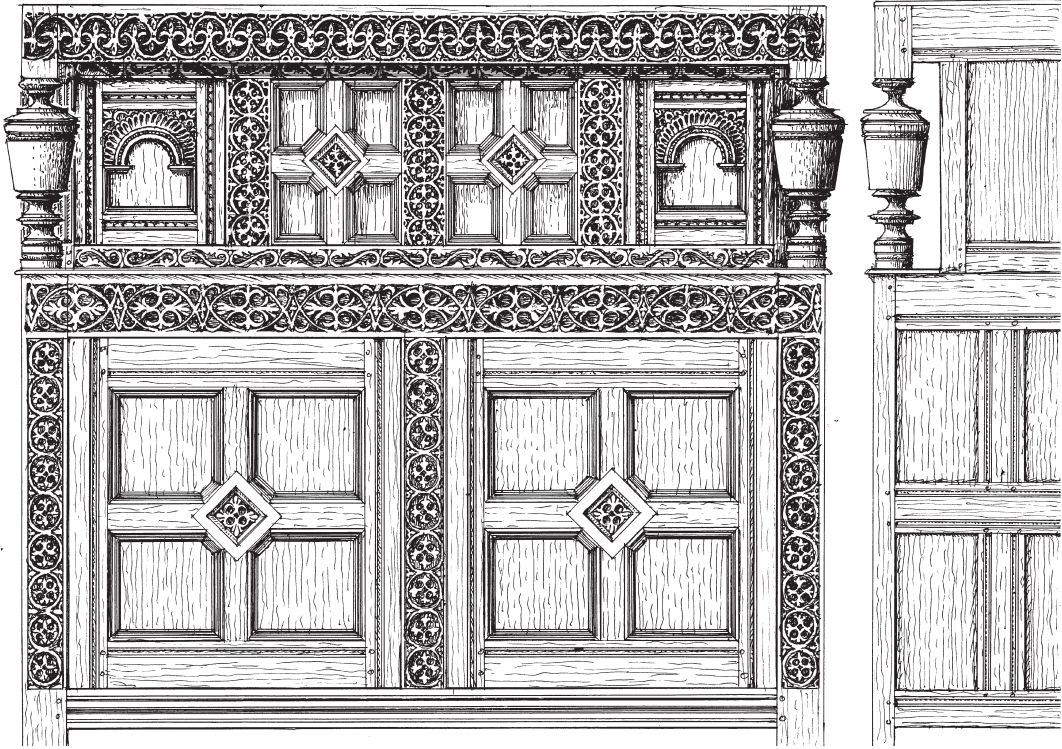
the cupboard doors are carved with a running double-S scroll design. The fixed central panel has a design identical to that of chairs 4A and 4B, while the door panels are carved with diamonds identical to those of chairs 1D, 2B, 3B and 3C. Cupboards 2G and 2H, only differ from the remainder of this group by having two, rather than one central fixed panel between the upper cupboard doors.

GROUP 3 (Figures 15–17)

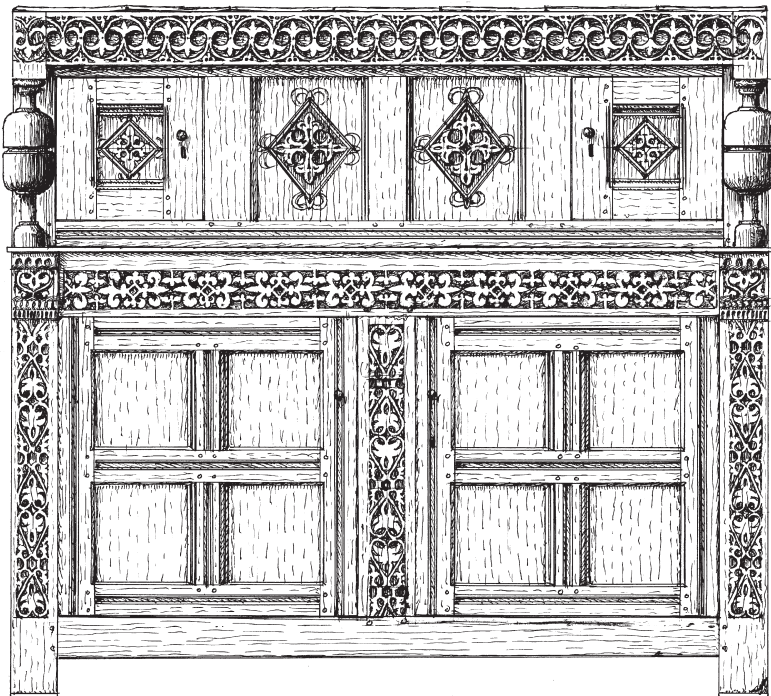
The constructional details of this group are identical to those of group 1, but have a number of different details, such as double fixed panels between the cupboard doors and the use of a cross within a vesica design on the top rail of their bases. Cupboard 3A only uses diamonds on its cupboard doors and fixed panels, and has unusually narrow balusters. 3B, meanwhile, includes a number of additional features. All the uprights of the front are carved with a row of crosses within circles, while the rails of the upper



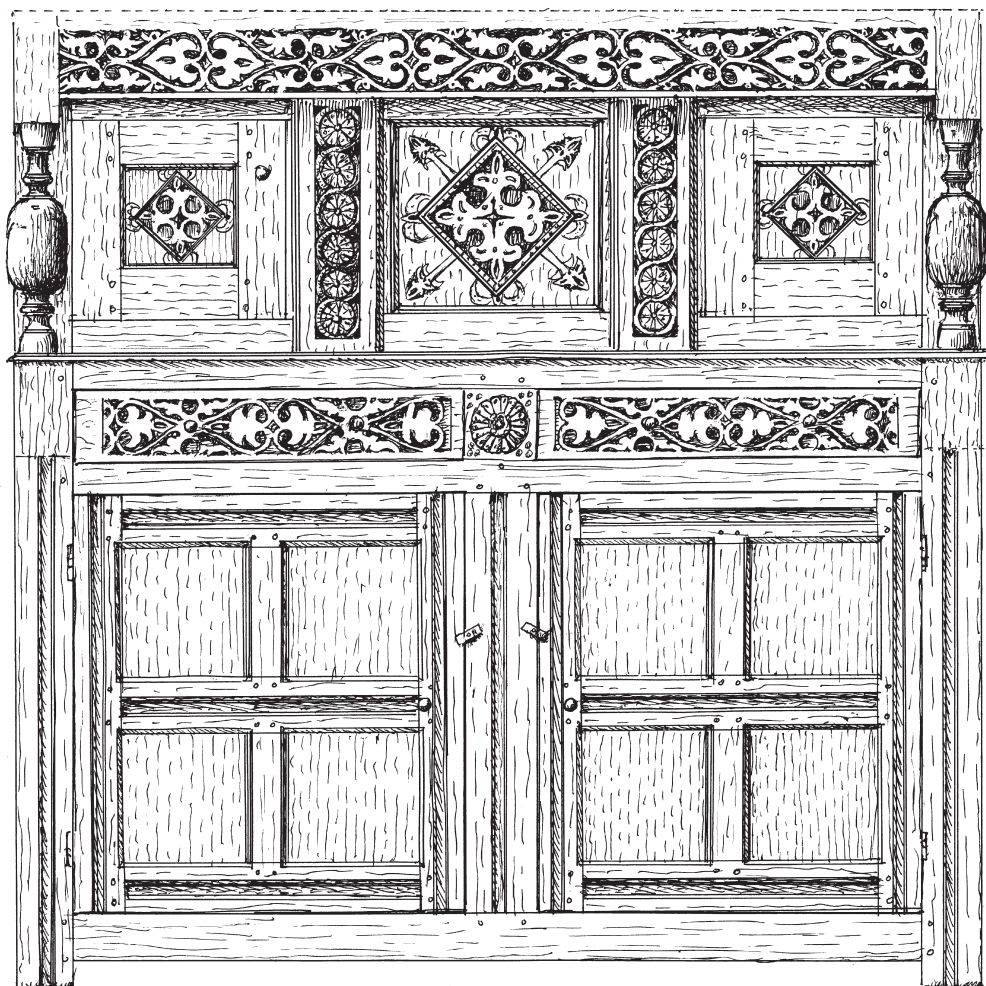
15 Cupboard 3A has the double fixed panels at the centre of its upper stage and the elongated cross within a vesica design on its mid-rail, both typical features of this group. Rather unusually, this example has only diamonds carved on its panels, while its apparently authentic balusters are unusually narrow. *Peter Brears*



16 (top) Cupboard 3B. The most ornately carved cupboard in this group, and one of the few to have diagonally-set inserts at the junction of its fixed panels and lower doors, may represent a later example, made when this tradition was already well established. *Peter Brears*



17 (bottom) Cupboard 3C. The design carved on the top rail of the base has not been found on any other 'Durham' piece to date. *Peter Brears*



18 Cupboard 4B. The insertion of a pair of drawers in place of a single-rail is probably a later development of 'Durham' cupboards. This piece not only has the same design of diamonds carved on its panels and double-S borders on its top rail and drawer, but also includes both guilloche and a rosette motif. *Peter Brears*

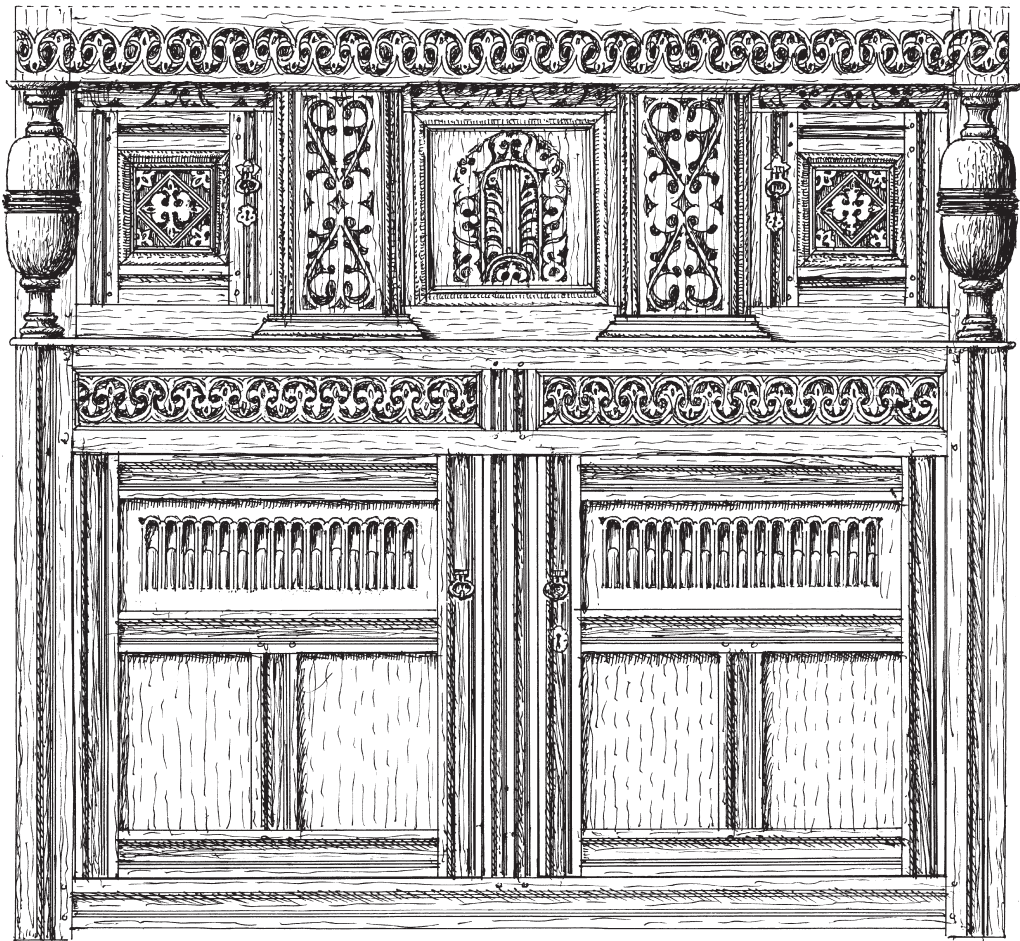
section have a single-S design. Each of the upper cupboard doors has a fluted arch motif, while both the lower cupboard doors and the fixed panels have a cross-shaped frame joined in the centre with a diagonal square carved with the typical diamond pattern of the chair panels. Instead of stopped mouldings, each of the large cupboard panels is surrounded by a mitred frame of applied mouldings. Cupboard 3C has the top rail of its base carved with a motif of small diamonds sprouting horizontal fleur-de-lis, not found on any other piece of 'Durham' furniture.¹⁸

¹⁸ There is a cupboard with this style of rail at Raby Castle, near Barnard Castle, but in other respects this cupboard does not conform to the 'Durham' group.

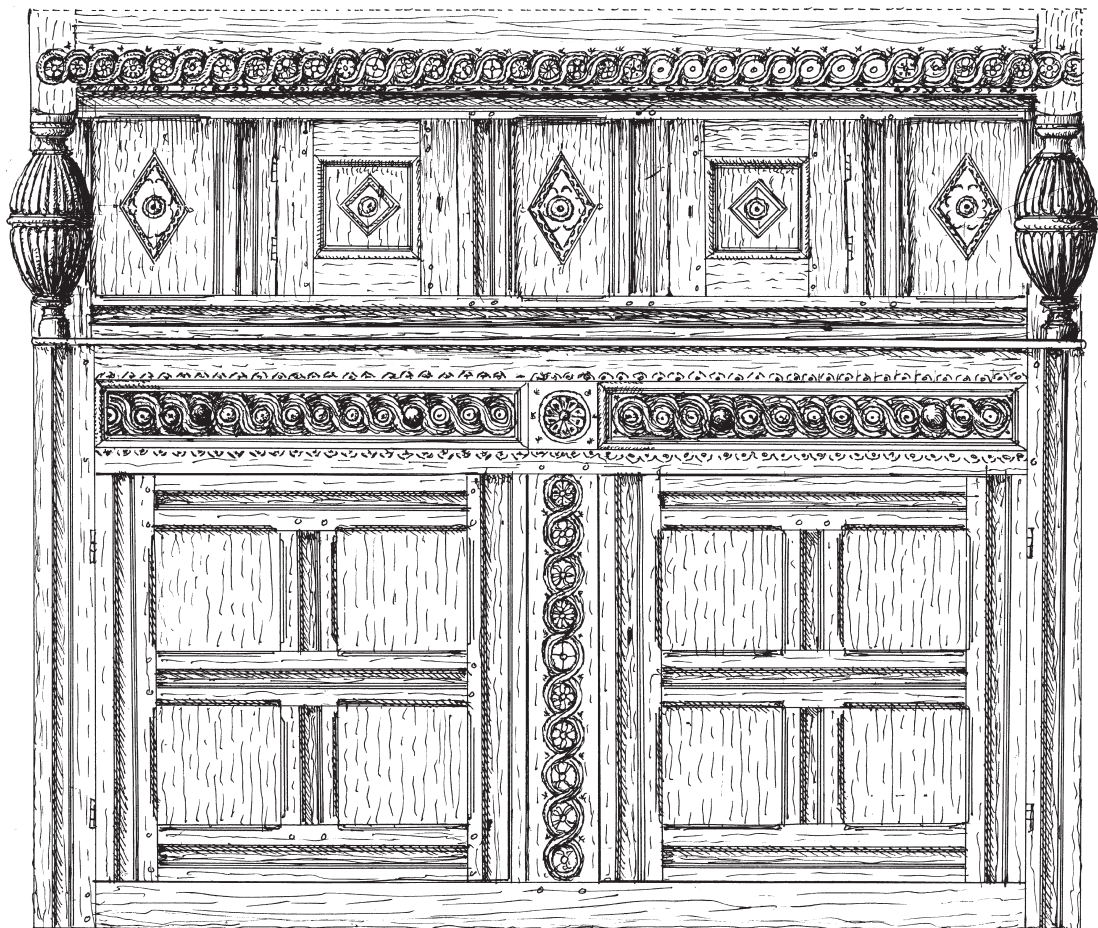
GROUP 4 (Figures 18 and 19)

These cupboards have a pair of drawers where the previous examples have a solid top rail to their bases, and a number of other distinctive features. 4A has a central fixed panel with a diagonal square set at the centre of its cross-shaped frame, for example, while the upper part of its T-framed large cupboard doors is filled with a vertical stopped-flute design. This is also found on cupboards 4C and 4E, all others of this group having doors identical to those of group 1.

Other motifs found on this group of cupboards include runs of guilloche and round flowers (4B), and double S-scrolls (4B, 4D).



19 Cupboard 4C has the interlaced fleur-de-lis top rail and drawers, diamond-carved panels, convex balusters and general constructional details of the other 'Durham' cupboards. It also shows the way in which the top panels of the large cupboard doors have been exchanged for a single horizontal panel decorated with a stop-fluted design. *Peter Brears*



20 Cupboard 5A has a long and sound provenance to the Annfield Plain area of County Durham, and has all the constructional features expected to be found on a 'Durham' piece. The diamond-carving of its panels is of a quite different design, however, as is the gadrooning of its balusters. These features, especially when combined with the use of drawers, strongly suggest that it is one of the later examples of a 'Durham' cupboard, and probably made by a different craftsman.

GROUP 5 (Figure 20)

These cupboards have the same constructional details as those of group one, but their carved designs show that they were the work of another craftsman working in the same tradition. The diamond patterns carved into their cupboard doors and fixed panels are of a much simpler type, while the guilloche is now carved onto any part of their frontal frames. The most apparent difference, however, is in their turned columns, which take the form of tall covered cups, their upper and lower sections covered in prominent vertical gadrooning.

TABLE 2 Dimensions of 'Durham' Cupboards (in inches)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2C	61.25	21	4.25 × 1	4 × 1	30 × 24	2.75 × 2.75	—
3A	64	22	4.25 × 1	4.75 × ?	30.25 × 25.75	2.75 × 2.75	4 × 1.75
3B	65	21.5	4.5 × 1.5	4.5 × 1.5	30 × 28	3.25 sq	4 × 1.5
4B	62	21.25	?	4 × 27	27 × 27	3.25 sq	4 × 1.5
4C	64	23.5	?	4.5 × 25	27 × 25	3 sq	4 × 1.5
4D	64	21.75	4 × 1	4 × 1	26.75 × 26.75	2.75 × 2.75	3.5 × 1.5
5A	63	22	?	4.5 × 29	27 × 28	3 sq	4 × 1.5

KEY

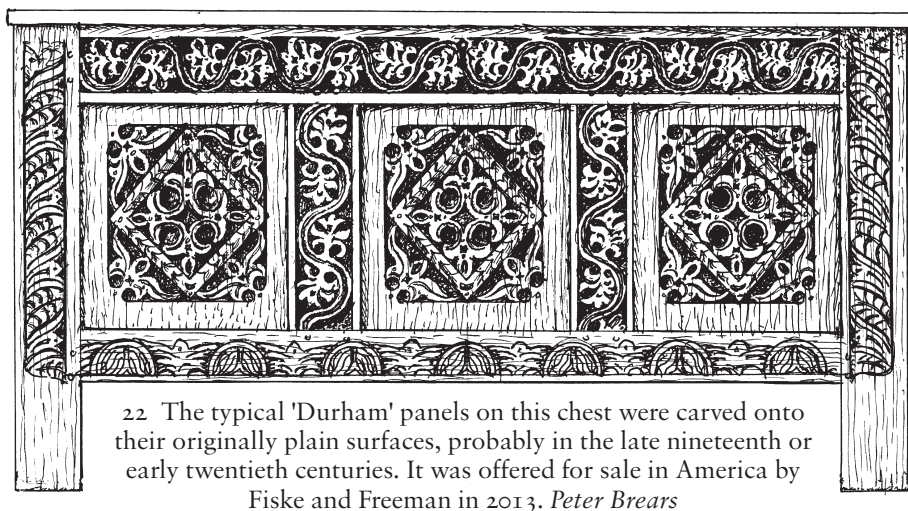
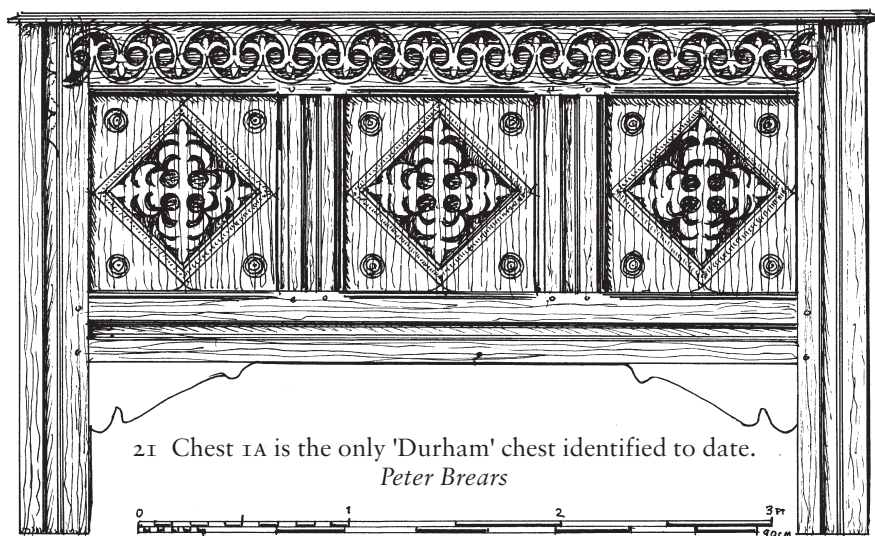
- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Height | 5. Height and width of large cupboard doors |
| 2. Front to back | 6. Front posts of canopy |
| 3. Top rail of canopy | 7. Front posts of base |
| 4. Top rail of base or size of drawers | |

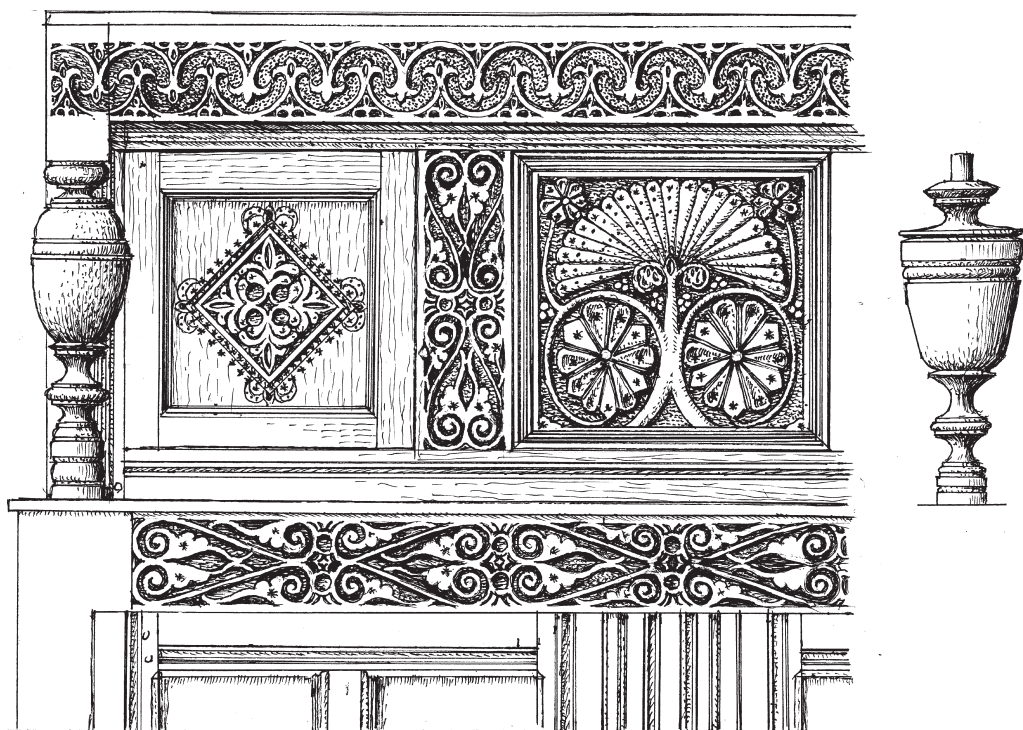
Note: Since many of the cupboards were only illustrated in catalogues etc., rather than measured, their detailed dimensions were not available, except for:

2A	66 ins long	4A	66 ins long
2B	58.5 ins long	4B	65 ³ / ₄ ins long
2F	55.5 ins long	4C	68 ins long
2G	66.5 ins long	4D	63 ins long
3A	64 ins long	5A	68 ins long
3B	68 ins long	5B	58 ins long

CHESTS (Figures 21 and 22)

In any group of regional furniture of the Stuart period, it might be expected that it would include a large number of chests, particularly as they appear so frequently in contemporary inventories. However, despite extensive research, only a single example has currently been found. Chest 1A appeared in a Barnard Castle saleroom, apparently from a local County Durham source. Its top rail and panels have the typical carved decoration of the 'Durham' group, the present brackets beneath the bottom rail and the single plank lid being later additions or replacements. A further chest offered for sale in America by Fiske and Freeman (1B) has panels superficially resembling those of the 'Durham' lozenge pattern, but close examination of detailed photographs suggests that these are later carved, perhaps in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.





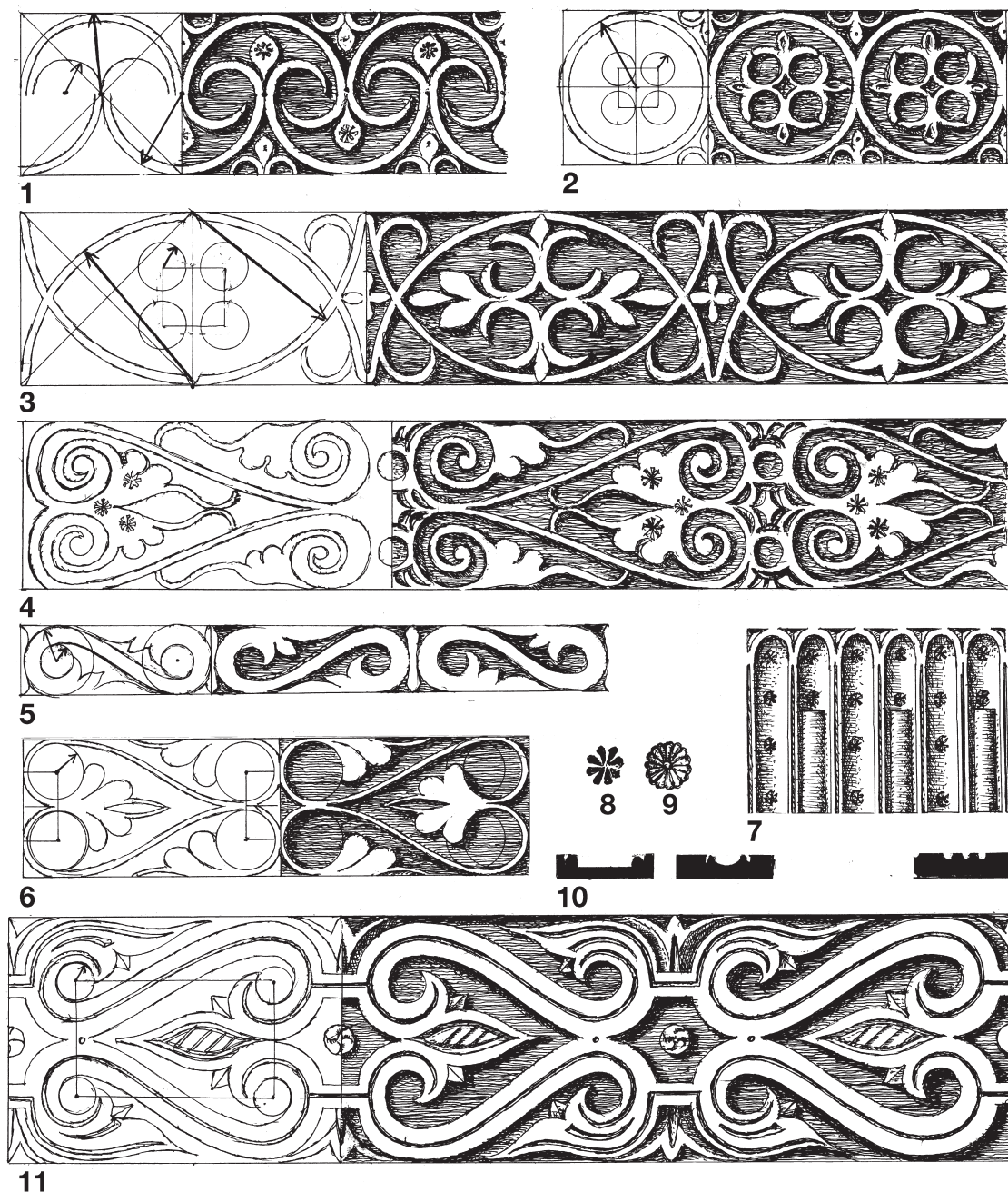
23 This detail of cupboards 2F and 4D show the characteristic features of the carved decoration, turned balusters and moulded frames typical of the 'Durham' group of chairs and cupboards. *Peter Brears*

DECORATIVE MOTIFS (Figures 23 and 24)

The design of the diamond-shaped motifs found on many 'Durham' pieces is not, so far as we know, found in any other part of the country. The second most common form of carved panel has a plant bearing a large fan-shaped flower above two large round flowers. This motif appears on carved chair backs from Gloucestershire attributed to the 1630–40 period, on a chair made for 'JOHN BOWER OF HORKSTOW – JULY-THE-8-1651' from Lincolnshire, and a settle attributed to late seventeenth-century Lancashire.¹⁹ The remaining panel design has a plant bearing a large round flower above a pair of smaller flowers and a pair of leaves all within an arch. Both of these floral motifs appear to be derived from a common source, perhaps a print or device on imported Indian chintz, dating from the early seventeenth century. It appears on an early seventeenth-century chair attributed to Humphrey Beckham of Salisbury, a chair-table dated 1658, and on a press-cupboard dated 1673.²⁰ As these examples show, the appearance of these motifs on a piece of furniture cannot provide close evidence for its date of manufacture. They certainly continued in use in the north-east through to

¹⁹ Chinnery (1979), figs 4.89, 4.90 and 3.51; Jellinek (2009), pl. 77.

²⁰ Chinnery (1979), figs 4.67, 2.181; Jellinek (2009), pls 115, 136.



24 Some of the motifs used by the 'Durham' tradition of furniture makers: 1. interlacing fleur-de-lis, 2. crosses within circles, 3. elongated crosses within vesicas, 4. and 6. double-S borders, 5. single-S border, 7. stopped fluting, 8. and 9. punched decoration, 10. typical sections of the reeded grooves found on the rails of both chairs and cupboards, 11. double-S border on a pair of bedposts. *Peter Brears*

the middle of the eighteenth century, being in widespread use on the back-panels of settles and other furniture which bear eighteenth century dates.

Of the various designs carved on rails and posts, those with single or double S-scrolls, guilloche and interlaced fleur-de-lis are all present on English oak furniture from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and cannot be used to provide a close date. The three-lunette top rail which characterises these chairs has few parallels in the vernacular traditions of other parts of England. Perhaps the nearest comparison is the chair owned by John Phillips, the early nineteenth-century geologist of York and Oxford. Now in the Yorkshire Museum, York, it has a large central lunette inscribed 'ANNO 1652' flanked by a smaller pair, each incised with a circular six-petal 'flower'.²¹ Other details of this piece have little in common with those of the 'Durham' groups, but it may possibly represent one of its earlier manifestations.

PUNCHED DECORATION (Figure 24)

Many of the pieces have been decorated with iron punches. These comprise:

1. a plain round, pointed punch on chairs 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 1E, 2A, 4A, and 4C.
2. An eight-petal flower or asterisk with no centre, on chairs 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 1E, 2A, 4C, and cupboards 2A-D, and 3A.
3. a fifteen-petal flower with a central dome, on chairs 2A and 4A.
4. A matting punch, with a row of small square spikes, used to texture the recessed parts of the carved designs, on chairs 1A, 3A, 4A and 4C and cupboards such as 2C. Chair 2A had a series of small individual spiked punchings to create a similar effect.

BRANDS

Brands burnt into the front seat rail, probably using a branding iron otherwise used to mark tools or the horns of livestock, appear on two chairs; 2B has 'AV' burnt in twice, and 3B has 'RM' burnt into its centre. Cupboard 1A has a symbol resembling a lower-case u at the top of its left canopy post.

RESTORATIONS AND REPLICAS

Having been in regular use for over three hundred years, many of the chairs have suffered the effects of either over-use or neglect. Those which survive give the impression that they had not been valued or respected as 'antiques' during the later eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century, a period in which many more must have been discarded. The lower section of the back of chair 3C, now in Wolsingham Parish Church, is deeply bruised, perhaps as tools or similarly hard utensils were thrown back across the seat. Other chairs have been modified for the convenience of their users, 1E having the protruding ends of its top rail and its ears or lugs sawn off, for example. Chair 2A, the constant seat of the warders sitting in their lodge in the gatehouse of Durham Castle, had its top rail and lugs completely removed to provide more space, and its original seat replaced with a softer one of padded upholstery covered in serviceable Rexine leatherette. Other chairs, including 1C, 4A and 4B, had also been

²¹ Morrell (1950), p. 167.

upholstered, this time in dark red velvet secured with domed brass-headed nails. Only two original boarded seats were found (1D and 1E). All the other seats had been replaced, frequently incorporating a new central support rail running between the front and back rails.

The most vulnerable parts of the chairs were the arms, lower legs and stretchers. Following the common practise of the early Victorian period, a number of the chairs had had their feet and stretchers cut off to enable their users to sit comfortably at their dining tables. This obviously caused additional stresses to the joints of the seat rails, leading to cracks and breaks.

From the later nineteenth century, when the knowledge and appreciation of Stuart oak furniture began to spread through the upper and middle classes, the surviving pieces were usually restored as closely as possible to what was believed to be their original appearance. Where sufficient of the damaged part still survived, it was generally reproduced with a high degree of accuracy, as in the front frames of chairs 1B and 1C. In some cases, however, a completely new design was introduced, as in the shallow ogee profile of the front seat rails of 1B and 4A. The replacement of missing feet and stretchers was usually carried out in a variety of designs, intended to hold the legs firmly in place, as in 1A, 1C, 2A and 3C.

Some of the 'Durham' chairs, initially recognised as such by their general form and the highly characteristic outline of their top/crest rails, looked to be good, completely authentic period pieces. However, the corpus of information gathered in this survey has shown that they are made-up pieces, their 'Durham' top/crest rails being neatly grafted onto carcases from other regions. Those of nos 5A, and 5B, for example, both come from type 3 chairs.

One of the most unexpected results of the survey was no. 1F. It is a detail-perfect 'Durham' chair, every feature conforming to the usual dimensions, turning and carved decoration. The only 'damage' is to the points at each side of the central lunette, these apparently having been broken off across the grain and subsequently rounded through later use. However, its oak and dark oak stain showed that it was in fact a replica of the highest degree of accuracy. It has no provenance before its recent arrival in the sale-room, but was clearly commissioned to replicate an authentic 'Durham' chair, current whereabouts unknown, in order to make a matching pair. Even in this form it is of some interest, since it records the use of the 'daisy' motif usually found on 'Durham' cupboards on a chair.

In comparison with the chairs, the cupboards usually remain in a remarkably unchanged condition, their crisp carving as sharp as ever. Minor details such as hinges, turnbuckles, knobs and lockplates have often been changed, as should be expected, but only 1D and 2B show any evidence of rebuilding. In 1D, the base has been lengthened and a new strip inserted down the centre for some reason, while 2B has had its central upper panels converted into hinged doors, its interior fitted with shallow cutlery drawers, and parts of its carcase renewed to make it suitable for use in a dining room.

The most substantial changes made to the cupboards have been the addition of decorative features. The original end-grain of the planked top looked unfinished when compared to the cornices of later cabinets, etc., and so nos 1C, 1G, 2A, 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D had cornices added to them during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

To those used to handling period oak, the turned balusters usually look to be far too good to be true, their crisp edges and smooth surfaces making them appear to be relatively modern reproductions, but there is no doubt of their originality.

ASSOCIATED FURNITURE

Recently a pair of square-sectioned pillars mortised to receive the tenons of bed-rails, and therefore apparently the lower sections of the posts of a four-poster bed, were recovered from a cottage near Hexham. Here they had been used to form a fire surround since the late nineteenth century. The double S-scrolls of their carved faces bear a strong similarity to those found on 'Durham' furniture (Figure 24: 11).

A number of pieces with very similar, but not identical, features have been noted, but are not discussed here. Two cupboards at Raby Castle fall into this category.²²

CONCLUSION

As a result of the initial survey undertaken to identify this particular group of furniture, some thirty-five pieces have been located to date. This has enabled the characteristic details of its construction, dimensions and decorative carving to be closely defined. Hopefully this will lead to the recognition of further pieces.

Although only a relatively small number can be soundly provenanced to a particular area, there are clearly sufficient to establish that they were made in the north-east of England, probably in the city of Durham, or, less likely, in the neighbouring town of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is regrettable that there is no archival evidence to link any of the pieces to a particular workshop, for the uniformity of the workmanship, together with its apparent concentration on only armchairs and cupboards, suggests that they were all produced in a single workshop.

Unlike the adjacent areas of the Lake Counties, none of this furniture is carved with identifying initials and dates. It had been hoped that its dating could be based on rather more than informed opinion, which would suggest a period extending from the middle of the seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century. However, this has not proved possible. However, the documented introduction of wainscot chairs and cupboards in the early seventeenth century and the carving on the chair from St Mary's Church, Gateshead, known to date from 1666, clearly indicates that many of the pieces could have been made before that date. It is probable that the different degrees of carving found on individual pieces is more likely to represent the purchasing ability of the various customers, rather than any identifiable chronological development. Perhaps the best clues for dating 'Durham' furniture come from the history of the region. In brief, its prosperity continued into the 1640s, when it was severely damaged by the invasion of the Scots in the Civil War, which caused a great disruption of the coal trade. Recovery began in earnest after the Restoration in 1660, the return of the king probably giving the inhabitants confidence to refurnish their homes. At the same time Bishop John Cosins commenced the refurbishment of the cathedral and castle in Durham, and his palace at Bishop Auckland. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that

²² The authors would be pleased to hear of any further items of 'Durham' furniture or associated archival material, which may be communicated to the editor of this journal.

this group of furniture began to be made from the 1630s through to the late seventeenth century, perhaps drawing on design sources from London and the south-east, (or the Low Countries and the Baltic?) with which it had very close trading activities. In some cases, the use of Dutch rather than Baltic wainscot almost certainly indicates a late seventeenth-century date.

Always keen to keep up with current metropolitan fashions, the well-to-do members of north-eastern society rapidly moved on to more up-to-date furniture towards the end of the seventeenth century. This would include the walnut day bed, caned chairs, and black and gold lacquered cabinets of the Shafto family, exhibited in Newcastle in 1934.²³ It is probable, therefore, that the 'Durham' pieces then slowly went out of production, certainly by the early-to-mid eighteenth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to record their sincere thanks to the numerous individuals and institutions that have given them access either to their collections or to information in their files. They include Rosy Allen, Tobias Jellinek, Bob and Luke Jordan, Malcolm and Janet Holmes, Lawrence Rees, the churches of St Andrew's, Haughton-le-Skerne and St Mary and St Stephen, Wolsingham, Ripon Cathedral, the staff at the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish, and a number of private owners. Particular thanks are also due to Anthony Wells-Cole for his pioneering work on the traditional furniture of the north-east. Susan Houghton has made an invaluable contribution to the production of this paper, as has Adam Bowett, the editor of this journal.

²³ Vereker (1934), p. 15.

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APPENDIX I

The list of 'Durham' pieces so far identified comprises:

CHAIRS

- 1A. Alnwick area, via a dealer in Wooler.
 - 1B. Morpeth area, via a dealer in Scotswood, Newcastle.
 - 1C. North Yorkshire, via a dealer in Gargrave.
 - 1D. Haughton-le-Skerne Parish Church.
 - 1E. Bamford's Saleroom, Derby, 18 March 2011, lot 1752.
 - 1F. Bourne End Auction Rooms, 20 November 2011, lot 178.
 - 1G. Knole, Kent, similar to 1D, photographed by Anthony Wells-Cole in 1997.
- Two further chairs belonging to group 1 are in a private collection
- 2A. Durham Castle, via a dealer at Hamsterley, Co. Durham.
 - 2B. Boardman's Saleroom, Suffolk, 18 October 2000, lot 205.
 - 3A. Amersham Auction Rooms, 2 August 2007, lot 255.
 - 3B. Ripon Cathedral Chapter House (now in store, but illustrated in Jellinek, p. 179).
 - 3C. Wolsingham Parish Church.
 - 3D. Edwin Willson and David Gill Collection (illustrated in Jellinek, p. 179).
- A chair similar to 3B is in a private collection in Italy.
- 3F. The Barons' Hall, Brancepath Castle, photographed there c. 1900.
 - 4A. A dealer in Sunderland.
 - 4B. Shafto family sale, Christie's 21 Sept 1995, lot 160.
 - 4C. Braisted Auction Rooms, Benendon, 5 December 2001, lot 61.
 - 5A. as 4B, lot 158 (top rail only).
 - 5B. Oak & Country Furniture Partnership, Woodstock, 21 September 2007 (top rail only).
- In addition, two further chairs now in an overseas collection have also been noted by Tobias Jellinek.

CUPBOARDS

- 1A. Peakfield Farm, Frosterley, in situ since the 1700s.
- 2A. Moor House, Leamside, Durham, sale of 10 December 1928, lot no 506.
- 2B. Dealer at Barnard Castle.
- 2C. Auction house in South of England.
- 2D. *Millers Price Guide at Antiques* (1996) p. 68, sold at Christie's in 1995.
- 2E. Durham Castle (top only, further access denied).
- 2F. Dealer at Barnard Castle.
- 2G. Beamish North of England Open Air Museum, acquired from the Alnwick area. Acc. no. 1975-143.
- 2H. M. & D. Seligman, Kensington Church Street, illustrated *Country Life*, 1 September 1988.
- 3A. Wilkinsons Saleroom, Doncaster, October 2004, now at Beamish.
- 3B. Mitchells Saleroom, Cockermouth, 15 June 2011, lot 1096.
- 3C. Wilkinson's Saleroom, Doncaster, 25th October 2012, lot 516.
- 4A. Willingham Auctions 7th May 2005.
- 4B. Bonham's, Chester, 13th January 2005, lot 219.
- 4C. Christie's, 10 November 2004, lot 358. Now at Beamish.
- 4D. Door and balusters only, from a collector's house at Hamsterley Mill, County Durham.
- 5A. Loud Farm, Annfield Plain, County Durham, *in situ* since the 1700s.
- 5B. Penrith Farmers & Kidd, 6 December 2000, See *Antiques Trade Gazette*, 23 and 30 December 2000.