

EDITORIAL

As this number of *Regional Furniture* is being prepared for publication, two churches in the Hon. Editor's home town in Fife are being cleared of their original pews and other furnishings to make way for new, tiered seating and space for modern Kirk activities. These changes reflect a trend in up to date liturgical practice that is affecting not just Scotland but all parts of the UK and Ireland. For those interested in historical furniture and our common heritage, this is a revolution, and for furniture historians it is a crisis of serious scale.

Not many churches have survived tampering, it is true. Reformations, eighteenth century interior restorations, and wholesale replacement of box pews in the later nineteenth century have all been formidable revolutions in their own times, but it now seems that all furnishing in churches is under threat. A good part of the threat must be due to ignorance amongst ministers and their supporting laity, who are all too often ill advised about the importance of their church treasures. Some of the threat is posed by the new management initiatives of business Bishops. But in general, the situation is due to a pervading change of attitude; churches are no longer thought of as sanctuaries for interesting and curious old things, and the currently dominant impulse is to de-clutter (or to introduce new clutter to replace the old).

The Regional Furniture Society acknowledges two things; first, that our parish churches, chapels and meeting houses are perhaps the last relatively undisturbed places in which locally distinct furniture can be found in quantity. In other places, key pieces have been dispersed, making attribution very difficult, but in churches we have pulpits, communion tables and seating that still expresses a local dialect, whether it is Lincolnshire, Cornwall or Kincardineshire; the variety is astonishing.

Secondly, it is realised that many 'other' items of furniture have found their way into churches. This volume is entitled 'Furniture in Churches' rather than 'Church Furniture' precisely because not all contents have an ecclesiastical purpose. In the past, curious pieces have been bequeathed to churches, for safekeeping, because the donors believed that they would be valued and preserved in a place of responsible continuity. This is no longer so, and many items, particularly moveables such as chairs, cupboards and chests, some the only surviving examples of their kind, are now regarded as surplus to requirements.

This volume can only take a sample of contents, but it does cover a good repertoire, from choir stalls and screens to parochial library cases, stools of repentance to alms ladles; it deals with furniture in and from churches across a wide geographical area, including the Colonies. The concentration on particular regions, the south west of England being an example, perhaps reflects the richness of resources and the state of current research interest. Other areas, such as Yorkshire and the north east of England, for instance, are no less significant, but active research in these parts seems to have diminished over recent years. The emphasis of the present volume is upon Church of England and Church of Scotland premises, but the Society is by no means dismissive of furniture in religious buildings of other denominations. Catholic churches, Synagogues, Friends Meeting Houses and the host of different Nonconformist tabernacles that retain their contents deserve our urgent attention. It is hoped that a future special number of *Regional Furniture* might make these its subject, whilst including a look back to survey the success, or possibly failure, of the recording and rescue effort that this volume has tried to encourage.

David Jones