

EDITORIAL

When the Chairman asked whether I would like to act as guest editor for the 2008 Regional Furniture Journal I demurred, on the grounds that I was not sufficiently well informed about regional furniture. This objection was adroitly side-stepped by suggesting that this volume should be devoted to London furniture, on which I have been working for a number of years, and so my bluff was called. The notion of covering London in a journal devoted to regional furniture may at first seem contradictory, but to this editor it makes perfect sense. Regional or provincial furniture is often defined less by what it is than by what it is not. In other words, London, metropolitan or fashionable furniture is often the yardstick by which regionality is measured, and the difference between provincial and vernacular furniture is judged by the degree to which a given piece departs from the metropolitan standard. How then can we assess regional furniture without considering London, and vice versa? In regional furniture terms, London has always been the proverbial elephant in the room.

The second good reason to look at London is that it can in a perfectly valid sense be regarded as a region of Britain, with its own geographic, economic and social conditions and its own aesthetic values. In this light, it is no less worthy of study than any other region. It might be objected that this is the job of the Furniture History Society and that London furniture is already well covered by their Journal. But that is not necessarily the case, because the FHS generally takes a different approach to the RFS, one that is less concerned with establishing typologies and generic characteristics than with identifying the output of individual makers or chronicling particular commissions. The idea of considering London furniture as a regional manifestation is one which, as far as I know, neither society has considered before.

It must be admitted that this Journal does not achieve anything so ambitious as identifying and defining 'the London style'. What it does is to explore a number of different themes which throw new light on furniture making in London, explaining some of the circumstances and conditions which gave the London furniture trade its particular identity. Three of the articles are devoted, quite coincidentally, to the seventeenth century, and together they form an important new contribution to our understanding of London furniture and the furniture trade. Laurie Lindey's article on apprenticeships in the London Joiners' Company is the first of its kind, and breaks entirely new ground in delineating the social and economic character of the capital's principal furniture making Company. In the process, she has been able for the first time to provide statistical evidence of the extraordinary growth of the furniture trade in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, particularly in the period after the Great Fire of 1666. This is something which historians had long suspected, but until now had lacked evidence to support their suspicion. She shows how, in the process of growth and expansion, the Company was transformed from a relatively small, weak organisation, relying heavily on new blood from the provinces, to one that was largely self sustaining by 1720. Laurie also demonstrates that there was something unique about the Joiner's Company, in that it waxed larger and more powerful at a time when other City Companies were in decline.

Eleanor John's work on London inventories achieves a number of things. It tells us how

Londoners of the 'middling sort' furnished their houses in the seventeenth century, and proposes that there were real and objective differences between the furniture of London houses and of houses in towns outside London. These differences varied from place to place, and much more detailed work is needed before a clear picture will emerge, but Eleanor's work suggests a rich area of future study. Indeed, there are plans to carry the work forward in a collaboration at PhD level between the Geffrye Museum and the Royal Holloway College. The study of inventories also reveals the marked change in London furnishing styles which took place in the middle of the seventeenth century, exemplified by the disappearance of the 'hall' and the emergence of the 'dining room' and/or 'parlour'. This ties in well the evidence provided by Laurie Lindey of the accelerating growth of the furniture trade at the same time, but John suggests the change can be detected even before 1660.

David Dewing's article looks in detail at one of the most significant new furnishing types of the late seventeenth century, and one which influenced chair makers all over the country - the cane chair. In pulling together the published material, together with evidence from India, Portugal and Holland, David has come closer than any other historian to explaining the phenomenon of the English cane chair. He demonstrates convincingly that it was not only an English innovation, but one which emanated almost entirely from London, as a spin off of the East India trade. He suggests that the broad outlines of his argument are 'unlikely to be overturned'. He is probably right, but I hope that will not prevent aspiring scholars from pursuing the subject of cane chairs further.

The remaining articles are a miscellany. My own article on furniture timbers is an attempt to pull together evidence and ideas gathered over a number of years. It has proved less easy than I had hoped (impossible is perhaps closer to the truth) to deduce firm rules about the differences between the raw materials used in London and provincial furniture, but some interesting and potentially fruitful themes have emerged. In particular, the role of imported wainscot seems crucial to the development of a metropolitan way of furniture making, and the role of transport in making furniture woods available elsewhere in Britain was perhaps the single most important factor in the spread of fashionable furniture making outside London.

Finally, Bob Parrot adds to his lengthening list of publications on the subject of English Windsor chairs with a study of two late eighteenth century chair makers working in what were then the outskirts of London. Of course, it is a moot point whether these can be considered London furniture makers, since Hammersmith was certainly still a rural village in 1800, but there can be little doubt that their customers were in London itself. The notion of Windsor chair making as a metropolitan industry rather than a rural one is intriguing. Bob's research is steadily enhancing our understanding of the early years of the Windsor chair. Hitherto, Windsor chairs have been studied largely as a 19th century phenomenon, but at last their 18th century origins are beginning to emerge.

Adam Bowett
Guest Editor 2008