

BAKING OATCAKE, YORKSHIRE

John Boram

The watercolour painting illustrated in Fig. 1 was exhibited at the first Leeds Corporation autumn exhibition of works by Yorkshire artists in 1885, held in the Municipal Buildings. 'Baking Oatcake, Yorkshire' a painting by Alfred Walter Bayes was catalogued as No. 179 and priced at £12.00. It was later exhibited in London at the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour and priced at £15.00.¹ A. W. Bayes was a noted genre painter and etcher who exhibited, from 1858 onwards, at the R.A. and R.I. His style has been described as that of a meticulous pre-Raphaelite follower.

The painting shows a lifestyle no doubt common in many Yorkshire homes during the second half of the nineteenth century. Both the title and subject emphasise the important dependence upon oats as the staple diet of the Dales.² Since different culinary traditions of making oatcakes and the equipment used in their preparation were specific to particular parts of the Yorkshire Dales, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it may be possible to identify more closely the locality of the interior illustrated in figure 1. Although the term oatcake is often used in a generic way today, to cover a diversity of products made from oatmeal, historically it was a distinctive vernacular term used in Yorkshire to denote 'thrown' or 'poured' oatcakes, which were traditionally made in an area stretching from Wharfedale to Bowland.³ The tradition of making 'poured' oatcakes predominated from the 1850s. In upper Ribblesdale and Ingleborough a similar derivative, made from an oatmeal batter mix, was called *riddlebread*.⁴ By contrast, in the North Riding of the Yorkshire Dales, it was traditional to make *havercake* and *clapbread*, using a stiff oatmeal paste.⁵ Figure 1 provides a convincing representation of one of the contemporary methods used to make oatcakes utilising a masonry fire box supporting a built-in 'bakstone', which had become popular towards the end of the 18th century.⁶

Installation would have been relatively easy, since the flue could be linked into the main flue of the fireplace. Detailing of the adjacent fireplace suggests that a freestone hob had been installed either side of the hearth to support a grate suitable for coal burning. Such additions had become popular in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. However the presence of a substantial chimney cloth or fire cloth, to reduce excessive smoking, indicates that this solution was far from ideal. The wooden tub and ladle, as illustrated in figure 1, was called a *nakit* or kneading kit which was a traditional item of equipment used in the making of 'poured' oatcakes in the Wharfedale, Malham Dale, Ribblesdale, Ingleton, Benthams and Bowland areas.⁷ In some parts of Yorkshire, it was traditional to use earthenware pots in the preparation of oatcakes, as portrayed in Walker's illustration titled, 'Woman making oatcakes'.⁸ Walker's illustration of 1814 depicts the process of making 'thrown' oatcakes on a built-in bakstone, prior to being dried in front of the fireplace on a *flake* comprising five parallel strings slung between two end frames attached to separate ceiling joists. A similar wooden end frame with one line secured, is depicted in figure 1, a common

all rural households must be considered according to the different circumstances which pertained in these homes. This can be contrasted with the much more specific use of fashionable furniture types. Late nineteenth century and Edwardian parlour suites, for instance, expressed great social rigidity in that they contained pieces designed for particular sexes, including, principally, the combination of a large upholstered chair with arms for the use of a man, and small upholstered chair without arms for the use of a woman. They appear to have been manufactured for these purposes and were advertised as such in supplier's trade catalogues.⁷ The greater flexibility of common furniture is illustrated in other categories, such as that of children's furniture. In Scotland, photographic evidence shows that miniature 'children's' chairs were used by adults in working households such as those in fishing communities.⁸ Small chairs, being close to the ground, were more convenient for jobs such as baiting lines, and their light weight enabled them to be easily carried outside, where such work was usually done.

The real advantage of photographs over other sources which can be used in the study of regional furniture, such as inventories or furniture maker's account books, is that they can tell us a great deal more about the social use of the subject. Caution must be employed in determining how much re-arrangement of the furniture by the photographer might have taken place but it can be seen that even anonymous and undated views such as the Hamilton kitchen hearth illustrated here, can broaden our knowledge about common furniture traditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Elizabeth Hancock of Hamilton Museum, who has kindly made available for publication the photograph discussed here.

REFERENCES

1. Hamilton District Museum, Muir Street, Hamilton. No. ref.
2. A good example of this type of eighteenth century brander back chair with arms can be seen in D. Jones, *Looking at Scottish Furniture*, St. Andrews & Glasgow 1987, cat. no. 12.
3. See D. Jones, 'Scottish Chairmaking: The Case of Francis East & Co. and East Brothers, Dundee', Fig. 1, in this volume.
4. See C. A. Oakley, *Scottish Industry Today*, Chapter 8.
5. The turned chairs of the Irvine Valley are one such exception. See D. Jones, 'Darvel Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, Vol. IX, 1995, pp. 64-71.
6. See A. Carruthers (ed.), *The Scottish Home*, 1996, p. 53.
7. Suites of this kind can be seen, for example, in the *Illustrated Catalogue of Furniture*, published by the Falkirk firm Christie & Miller, c. 1880.
8. See D. Jones, 'Everyman's Furniture in Lowland Scotland', *Heritage*, edited by J. M. Fladmark, Aberdeen, 1993.

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