

# A LAKE DISTRICT CUPBOARD

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Until recently, the splendid three-tiered cupboard illustrated in figure 1 was built into a farm-house in Calthwaite, near Penrith, Cumbria where it had been a fixture for many years. Such pieces, in a domestic setting, can provide useful clues to the identification of other furniture from the same region. But caution must be exercised in using them as yardsticks: their regionality may be broader than first impressions suggest.

When first acquired by its present owner in Yoxford, Suffolk, the cupboard was in unrestored condition, with about four layers of dark paint and a top coat of black pitch-like varnish on all its outer surfaces except the top, back and one end. These paint layers were thought to date from the early nineteenth century and later. The back was whitewashed, while the top and end were 'raw', with no evidence of paint, polish or exposure to light. The existence of so many paint layers on the rest of the piece indicates that it must have been fixed in the house for many generations, possibly for the whole of its existence. In his introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition *Oak Furniture from Lancashire and the Lake District* at Temple Newsam in 1973,<sup>1</sup> Anthony Wells-Cole drew attention to the large numbers of surviving cupboards relative to other kinds of furniture recorded in the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments Inventory of Westmorland in 1936. Nearly all of them date from between 1650 and 1720 when, during a period of stability and agricultural prosperity in the region, large numbers of stone houses were built and furnished. Oak cupboards like the one under scrutiny were, after the bed, the most important items of furniture belonging to these households, and they were to be found in cottages as well as farmhouses. Many, like this one, bear dates and the initials of the owners, usually arranged in triangular fashion, with the initial letter of the surname at the top, that of the husband's Christian name on the left and the wife's on the right. In those examples where dates and owners' initials have been traced, such cupboards appear to be most often associated with the rebuilding or improvement of a house.<sup>2</sup> However, they are often referred to locally as 'brideswains' and some may originate in the custom of the 'bridewain' or cartload of furniture and household goods which was part of the marriage procession.<sup>3</sup> They are not thought to have been used as livery or dole cupboards as is sometimes suggested.<sup>4</sup> Their main purpose was for storing the family's valuables and for oatcake. Known in the region as 'clapbread', this was a staple made from oatmeal mixed with water and fat, formed into thin flat cakes and cooked on an iron griddle. The resulting biscuity loaves could be satisfactorily kept for months in the lower section of an oak cupboard 'within the influence of the fire'.<sup>5</sup> The cupboard was customarily placed opposite the fireplace in the 'firehouse' or main living room of the farmhouse. Sometimes it was centrally positioned against the wall between the doors leading to the buttery and parlour, but in many cases the cupboard actually formed the partition between the firehouse and the parlour. The canopy over the top tier was almost certainly a continuation of the



I. The Yoxford cupboard, seventeenth century, oak, from a farmhouse at Calthwaite, Westmorland

*Courtesy of Andrew Singleton, Suffolk House Antiques, Yoxford, Suffolk*

mediaeval canopy as symbol of importance. These cupboards were themselves status symbols and the top section was the place to display pewter, metalwork or ceramics reflecting family wealth. Just as the canopy over the dais in the mediaeval hall protected important diners from birds and their droppings, water from leaking roofs, dust and draughts, so the canopy over the cupboard would protect the treasured objects beneath it. A sloping top was not unusual, and would have averted accumulating dirt.

Until the nineteenth century, such pieces were revered as heirlooms by the descendants of the families that originally commissioned them, and were rarely sold out of the isolated communities where they belonged. In these parts, where tradition was more important than fashion, there was relatively little trading in old furniture until the late nineteenth century. A further deterrent to the removal of a piece like this would have been the sheer difficulty of transporting a lump of oak nearly seven feet wide and almost as high by horse and cart through some of the steepest and most rugged terrain in England. Its panel and frame construction implies that the different parts could have been made in one place and assembled in another but, apart from the

removable top tier, it is not made up from separate, portable parts like, say, bureau cabinets or seventeenth century oak chests of drawers. The panelled sides of the middle and lower sections are constructed as one, with a single continuous stile at the back. The forward stiles are in two parts to allow for the recessed central section of the cupboard, but both are mortised into the horizontal members. Once assembled, the cupboard would have been difficult to move even if it had not been fixed to the wall. The whitewash on the back of this one implies that it was one of those that functioned as a screen between the firehouse and the parlour, and it is probable that the cupboard remained in or very near to its original location until it was sold recently.

In appearance, the cupboard consists of three parts. The recessed top tier, supported on turned balusters at the front, has a carved frieze but no overhanging cornice, and the canopy slopes gently downwards to the back. The middle stage has a moulded, slightly overhanging lip above its frieze and this projects over the enclosed cupboards with pendant bosses at the corners. The base section, which comprises approximately half the height of the whole, has a moulded lip and carved frieze above two panel-doored cupboards enclosing the full width and depth of the piece. The corner stiles continue downwards to form the feet. The sides of the carcass are panelled, with decorative grooving on the middle and upper horizontals of the framework, and plain framing below. The combination of plain and decorated framing suggests that the cupboard was not originally designed with any particular built-in site in mind. The carved decoration is different on each tier. The top frieze has a guilloche border with a central panel carved with the initials WHM in a triangular arrangement and the date 1660 (Figure 2). The guilloche is formed by a flat strap-like twist, grooved at either side, with small indentations across its surface; each twist encloses a stylised floret. The frieze of the middle section is carved with leaf-embellished grooved S scrolls, and S-scrolls are used again, in a more geometric treatment, on the muntins flanking the central panel below. Here, the grooved scrolls are formed by straight diagonals with their ends rounded to form floret-filled circles, with flame-like leaves in the spaces between the diagonals (Figure 3). Separating the scrolls on the central frieze there is a small vertical motif consisting of a circle with a triform leaf above and below. A variant of this appears in a horizontal position between the carved florets on the outer muntins of the cupboards in the middle section. The central panel of the middle stage, framed by a deeply recessed moulding, mitred at the corners, is carved with the initials IM above a semicircular floret, flanked by a crude zig-zag pattern with triform leaves and concave-ended rectangular motifs above (Figure 4). The cupboard doors on either side have flat frames mortised together and carved with beaded borders, and the round-arched panels within are centred by palm-tree like motifs (Figure 3). The rectangular panels at each end, also with recessed moulded and mitred frames, are carved with grooved circles and half-florets above and below (Figure 1). The horizontal rail above the central cupboards, and the side stiles, are carved with the same beaded border as the cupboard doors.

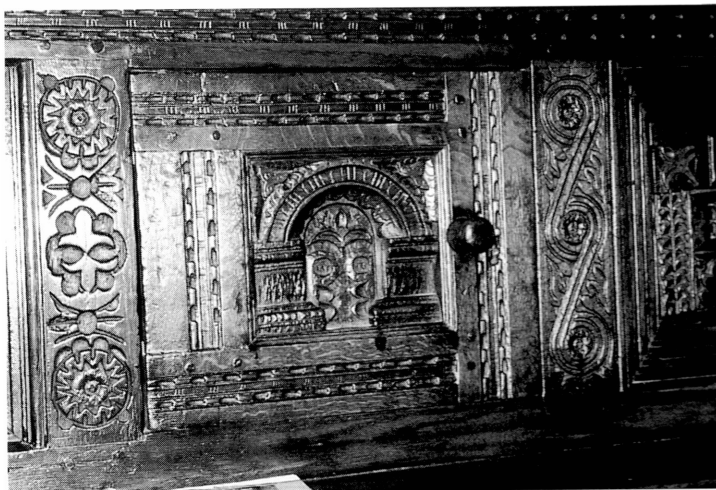
The nullified frieze to the bottom section surmounts a pair of panelled cupboard doors of striking simplicity contrasting with the complexity of the carving in the middle tier. Each door consists of four unadorned panels set into simple grooved frames swinging on iron hinges. The same grooving occurs on the side stiles of the top tier.

The three-stage cupboard is not peculiar to the Lake District, but was also made in West Yorkshire,<sup>6</sup> and in North Wales where it is known as a *cupwrdd tridarn*. It is usual for the top tier to be the same width as the main carcass, and the narrower top section of this cupboard, together with pronounced differences in the style of carving between this and the lower sections suggest that it may have been an addition, but probably at an early point in its history. Among the decorative elements of the Yoxford cupboard the gadrooned border of the top frieze and the S-scrolls of the middle stage are known to have been favoured by so-called Lake District carvers, but the Nordic interlace design which has been noted as a particular feature of carving in the Lake District<sup>7</sup> is absent. However, the cupboard shares a number of the constructional and decorative peculiarities cited by Peter Thornborrow in his study of provenanced three-tier cupboards from West Yorkshire.<sup>8</sup> The most striking is the grooving to the panel frames. While this feature does occur elsewhere, it has been noticed especially on furniture from the northern regions of England, and occurs on all five pieces discussed by Peter Thornborrow. The recessed and moulded panel frames with mitred corners on the central and two outer panels of the middle section of the Yoxford cupboard appear also on the Mayroyd cupboard at Bolling Hall Museum, Bradford, the oldest of the cupboards in Peter Thornborrow's selection. The joined frames to the cupboard doors in this section of the Yoxford cupboard are made in the same unusual fashion as those in the bottom doors of the Ponden Hall cupboard described by Peter Thornborrow. On the hinge side, the stile is mortised between the top and bottom rails while the stile on the opposite side extends over the ends of the horizontal rails. Both nulling and S-scrolls appear on Yorkshire as well as Lake District cupboards. The construction of the back, with vertical planks, and the base, with nailed planks laid front to back, is also common to cupboards and chests from both Yorkshire and the Lake District (Figure 5). Peter Thornborrow also drew attention to the different treatments of the same patterns within a single piece, suggesting that this shows the hands of different craftsmen and probable workshop construction, rather than the work of a single individual. Inconsistencies of pattern and chisel-work have been noted in many examples of genuine seventeenth century carved oak furniture,<sup>9</sup> and the Yoxford cupboard shows considerable variation in the carving of its parts. The treatment of the S-scrolls on the middle frieze is more flowing in character than that of the stiles flanking the central cupboard, for example. These and other differences in carved detail may signify the work of more than one craftsman when the cupboard was first made. Then there is the possibility, always a consideration with carved oak furniture, that it came under the hand of a later 'improver'.<sup>10</sup> This seems most unlikely in the case of the Yoxford cupboard, the carving of which bears all the signs of genuine seventeenth century work. A third conjecture is that the cupboard was assembled from pieces of other carved oak furniture: in view of its evidently long existence as a fixture in the farmhouse from which it was taken, this is highly improbable.

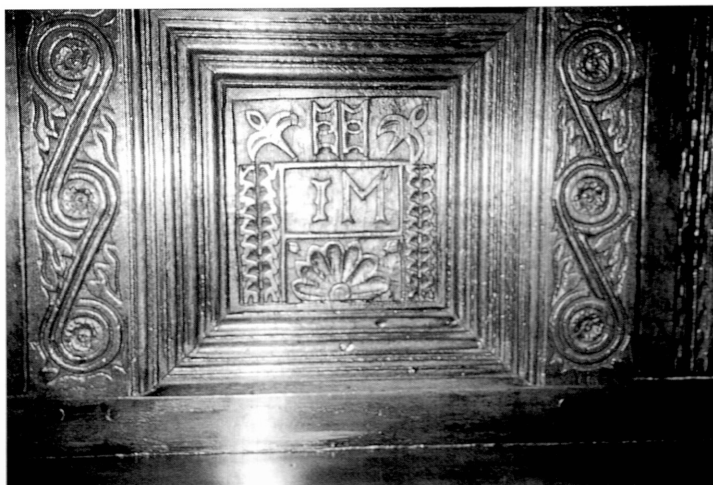
Could this cupboard, with its combination of Lakeland and Yorkshire characteristics, be an example of furniture made by a journeyman who travelled from one centre to another, working for a few months at a time, perhaps with other craftsmen, in estate workshops? While the farmers and gentry who commissioned such cupboards probably



2. Initials and date on the upper frieze



3. Scroll and floret carving and a detail of one of the side doors of the middle section



4. The central door of the middle section

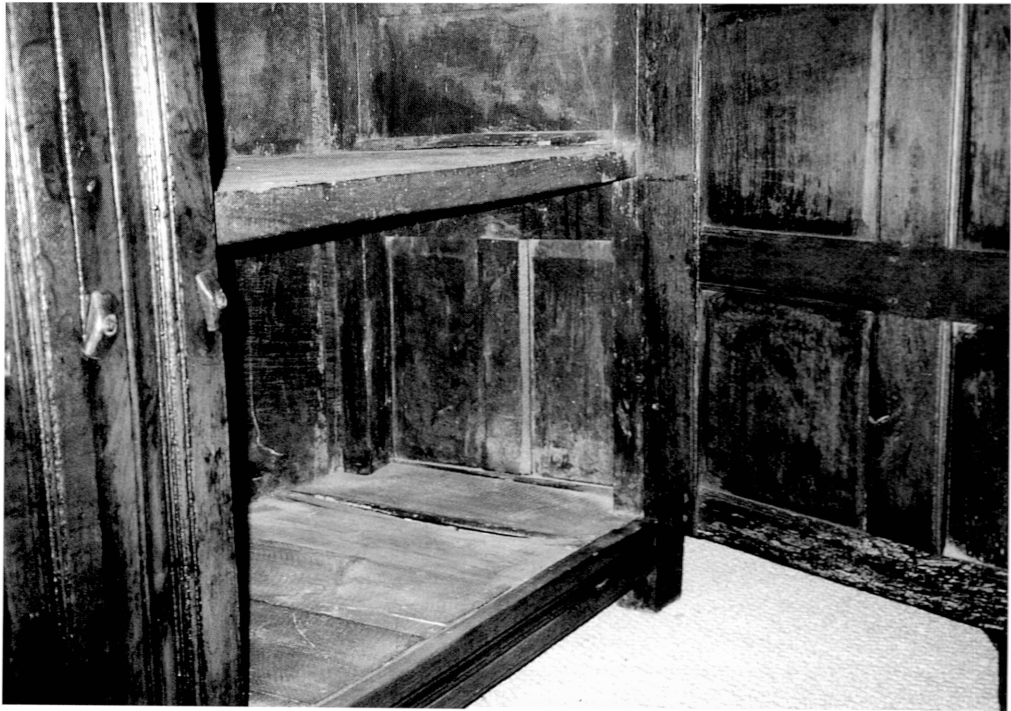
required conformity with their own local traditions, the craftsman's interpretation could be relatively broad, even crossing what we now consider to be regional boundaries at times.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

1. Anthony Wells-Cole, *Oak Furniture from Lancashire & the Lake District*, Temple Newsam, Leeds, 1973.
2. Information from Susan Denyer, Historic Buildings Representative, National Trust, Grasmere.
3. Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture 1750–1900*, Yale, 1991, describes the custom of the bride-wain as practised in east Yorkshire and quotes the explanation by the Reverend J. C. Atkinson, Vicar of Danby near Whitby during the mid-nineteenth century, of how the term bride-wain was transferred from the cart-load of goods to the large cupboard which once formed part of it: 'There were few farmhouses in which there was not one of those fine old black oak cabinets with carved panels, folding doors and knobby feet . . . a handsome press stored with linen and provisions was one of the customary wedding gifts and so by an easy transition of idea the piece itself came to be called a bride-wain . . .' (p. 40).
4. Information from Susan Denyer.
5. Susan Denyer, *Traditional Buildings & Life in the Lake District*, Gollancz/Crawley/National Trust, 1991, p. 25.
6. For a study of West Yorkshire three-tiered cupboards see Peter J. Thornborrow, 'Canopied Cupboards of the Aire and Calder Valleys', *Regional Furniture*, 1997.
7. Wells-Cole, p. xi.
8. Thornborrow, *Regional Furniture*, p. 80.
9. See Victory Chinnery, *Oak Furniture*, Antique Collectors Club, 1979, p. 25.
10. The furniture at Townend, Troutbeck, carved with traditional Lakeland motifs by George Browne in the late nineteenth century, is a notable example of the common practice of adding carving to previously plain oak furniture.



5. Inside the base of the cupboard, showing the planks running from front to back