

AN ARTIST OF THE VERNACULAR: WILLIAM COLLINGWOOD'S LAKE DISTRICT INTERIORS

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The following article rounds up a small anthology of works by a painter who is notable for his specific studies of Lake District interiors. That artist is William Collingwood. While he was chiefly known for his Alpine and other landscapes in watercolour, he also produced interior views of two distinct types—romantic historicist scenes in baronial settings, and views of cottage and farmhouse kitchens, mainly in Cumberland and Westmorland. The historicist scenes give insights into Victorian antiquarianism and the cult of 'Merrie England', while the Cumbrian interiors throw light on vernacular traditions of furniture and room arrangement in North-West England. The two types provide significant contrasts, and at the same time they are not as unconnected as first appearances might suggest. Collingwood was one of a considerable number of nineteenth-century figures who not only delighted in the romantic interior and the antiquarian cult among the middle classes, but who also savoured the traditional buildings, furnishings and ways of life of country people. This interest was particularly strong in the Lake District and was to be strengthened notably by John Ruskin, William Morris (and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings), Canon Rawnsley and Beatrix Potter, who were among the pioneers of the vernacular conservation movement.

William Collingwood was not a northerner; he was born in Greenwich in 1819, in what we must presume to be comfortable circumstances. His father was an architect and his grandfather, Samuel Collingwood, had been Printer to the University of Oxford. The young William was sent to Christchurch where he was said to be 'a precocious scholar, especially in Greek'¹ but did not complete his studies owing to 'some scruple about the Thirty-Nine Articles'.² It is likely that Collingwood had already become a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a strongly anticlerical Calvinist evangelical sect with which he would remain closely connected for the rest of his life. On leaving Christchurch he joined the firm of Ackermann³ 'where he soon began to draw untaught'.⁴ He did not remain 'untaught' for long: he received lessons in drawing from a friend of his father, the artist J. D. Harding, and from Samuel Prout. His cousin, the watercolourist William Collingwood Smith, was another Harding pupil and is thought to have taught Collingwood too. In 1837 Collingwood won two prizes for landscape at the Royal Society of Arts and from 1838 he began to exhibit in London's artistic institutions. He exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1839 and 1860, and the Society of Painters in Watercolours between 1856 and 1890. He also exhibited at the Liverpool Academy, the British Institution and the Royal Society of British Artists. In all, he showed over 850 works in a long professional life. During the early years of his success he lived at Hastings, where he enjoyed the friendship—as well as the teaching—

of Samuel Prout and William Henry Hunt. There are certainly echoes of both these artists in much of Collingwood's work. In 1839 he became a teacher of art in Liverpool and for the next forty-five years he maintained an address there.⁵ It was as a painter of landscape that Collingwood became best known. His exhibited works suggest a good deal of travel, not only in England, Wales and Scotland, but on the Continent too. They include subjects in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Shropshire and Italy, as well as a great many in Switzerland. He probably made his first trip to Switzerland in about 1850, and soon afterwards he married a Swiss, Marie Elizabeth Imhoff; he was to return there again and again. The fact that the Plymouth Brethren were well established in Switzerland may explain his Swiss connection. In 1853 he exhibited Swiss scenes at the Liverpool Academy. Henceforth these were to constitute the majority of his contributions to exhibitions, and are likely to have been the most successful in commercial terms.⁶ Sprinkled among the landscapes were historical evocations like *The Last Hours of Mary Queen of Scots*; *The Visit of Sir Walter Raleigh to Cotehele*,⁷ and *The Royal Fugitive, 1624. The apartment at Cotehele remains entire, where the unfortunate Charles I found refuge in his flight*.⁸ Very occasionally there are references to cottage and farmhouse scenes.

Collingwood's historicist interiors tell us a good deal about antiquarian taste in the middle decades of the nineteenth-century and his landscapes follow a long and illustrious tradition in English watercolour drawing, but it is in the relatively little known farmhouse and cottage interiors that the regional furniture historian may find particularly intriguing insights. While great caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions about vernacular architecture, furniture or room arrangement from the work of a single artist, especially one steeped in romantic traditions, there is evidence to suggest that William Collingwood's views of Lake District farmhouse and cottage interiors portray them much as they really were with the minimum, if any, artistic licence. Collingwood was part of his period's serious interest in antiquarianism. This not only embraced romantic historicist interiors and picturesque, often ruined, buildings, but also the declining traditional ways of life of the countryside and the homes of farming communities.⁹ While many of his views have definite overtones of seventeenth-century Dutch genre—a fascinating form to the Victorians—there are reasons to believe that Collingwood was diligent in recording without sentimentality the details of Lake District and other rustic interiors as he found them. His allegiance to the Plymouth Brethren set him on a course of preaching and evangelising in the communities in and around Liverpool, and further north—an activity that could be conducted successfully in parallel with his painting, and which would have been more acceptable in the Lake District than in most parts of England: the area, probably helped by its isolated geography, had a long tradition of religious toleration in which various non-conformist minorities flourished. Such tours would have taken him into farmhouses and cottages in the country districts where, no doubt enjoying the traditional hospitality of the region, he would have had opportunities to stay and record what he saw. Collingwood seems only rarely to have exhibited his rustic interiors and it is likely that they were mostly done for personal interest rather than professional gain.¹⁰ Many of the scenes take the form of sketches or line and wash drawings of relatively small



1. William Collingwood: *A Farmhouse Lunch*, watercolour heightened with white, signed and dated 1850, 13 by 20 in.
Sotheby's

dimensions, in contrast to the more highly finished larger works in his antiquarian group.

The *Farmhouse Lunch* (Figure 1)¹¹ could well have been a souvenir of one of his preaching trips. The two men in shirts and waistcoats are wearing heavy boots: their garb suggests they are agricultural workers, while the third figure, with his distinctly genteel clothes and haircut, could be Collingwood himself. Due to the mountainous landscape and harsh climate of the Lake District, the farming communities there, generally concentrated in isolated valleys or dales, had been less affected by metropolitan or 'gentrifying' influences than most, and their vernacular traditions had survived with relative purity. An added factor was that the peace from border raids following the accession of James I (James VI of Scotland) in 1603 had resulted in a wave of domestic building in a distinctive regional style, and the parallel development of furniture types. This 'Great Rebuilding' lasted roughly from 1610 to 1760.¹² The availability of good quality materials—stone for buildings, and oak, ash, alder and sycamore for furniture—resulted in sturdily practical and harmonious designs which continued to be used and valued by succeeding generations. In determining whether or not the other pictures under scrutiny are of Cumberland or Westmorland interiors there are various factors to be considered. The first is the obvious one: the pictures' titles. Figures 2 and 3 are *A Cumberland Fireside* and *A Lakeland Farm Interior* respectively, and Figures 4 and 5 are both called *Cottage Interior in Ambleside*, *The Farmhouse*



2. William Collingwood: *A Cumberland Fireside*, watercolour and a little gouache, signed and dated 1866, 13 by 20 in., exhibited RWS 1867
Prue Heathcote-Williams



3. William Collingwood: *Lakeland Farm Interior*, watercolour, 10 by 14 in.
Rachel Moss and the Ruskin Museum, Coniston

Lunch; these titles are unhelpful and we have to make comparisons with known regional types of architecture and furniture. Further evidence may come from other artists known to have been working in the same area, for example John Harden¹³ earlier in the nineteenth century and Beatrix Potter in the early twentieth.¹⁴

While inventories and wills rarely give details from which specific items of furniture can be recognised, they do help to build an idea of what were regarded as important items in particular localities. According to Christopher Gilbert, who made a study of many,¹⁵ the items considered proper for cottage and farmhouse kitchens in the north of England included a dresser and pewter, a clock, long settle, table and chairs.¹⁶ Some of these furnishings can be seen in Collingwood's drawings, but others, like the status-enhancing clock, are notably absent. Small oak cupboards occur in three, and a carved chest in only one; in none of the drawings do we see the richly carved oak 'brideswain' or court cupboard, or the panelled armchairs that were traditional features of many Lake District farmhouses.¹⁷ These appear to be interiors of a more humble sort. Figure 2 shows a woman with a baby on her lap, sitting beside the open hearth and under the mullioned window with stone dressings that was typical of Cumberland cottages and farmhouses.¹⁸ The oak-beamed ceiling and stone-flagged floor also conforms to the architecture of the region. The settle opposite the hearth is of the straight-backed type usual for houses in the area; logs were often stored underneath, as seems to be the case here. Next to it, in the foreground, is an oak gateleg table. Open hearths like this one were generally being replaced by hob-grates by the mid-nineteenth century. The chair upon which the woman sits is a regional variant of the Chippendale type with a pierced splat and outward flaring top rail. The round-topped table with its three stick-like legs splaying outwards from the centre is of a distinctive type to be seen in other illustrations of interiors in this region and known as a 'round stand'. Small versions, used as stools, were known as 'coppies'. Above the pictures on the wall opposite the chimney is a food cupboard with turned spindles.

The *Lakeland Farm Interior* of Figure 3, another room with an oak-beamed ceiling and stone-flagged floor, includes a dresser whose upper stage consists of a moulded cornice and three shaped shelves slightly recessed above the base. This contains a two-door cupboard but no drawers. It is likely to be of oak, and it is of plain panelled construction with the stiles of the frame forming the feet; it has no drawers or carved embellishment beyond mouldings to the door panels and grooves to the frame. Further in the background is an equally plain chest of drawers, also probably of oak. The most obviously regional characteristics in the picture are the partition in the foreground upon which the coats are hung, and the design of the fireplace, with its V-shaped grate between stone hobs. The partition is typical of Lakeland houses and is known as a 'heck' screen; it shields the fire from direct draughts from the cross-passage, or 'hallan', which divides the building between the family's living quarters (the firehouse) and the utility areas (the downhouse).¹⁹

A similar fireplace, as well as beamed ceiling and flagged floor, can be seen in *A Farmhouse Lunch* (Figure 1). The men sit at an elegant but practical table with two drawers in the frieze. Along the wall is the type of backless bench known in the north of England as a sconce, supported on 'dog legs', while the man on the right seems to be sitting on a bench fixed to the chimney wall. The splayed legged stools represent a



4. William Collingwood: *Cottage Interior, Ambleside*, pencil, charcoal, wash and body colour, signed and dated 1841, 10 by 16 in.

Ruskin Museum, Coniston



5. William Collingwood: *Cottage Interior, Ambleside*, pencil and charcoal heightened with body colour, signed and dated 1841, 10 by 16 in.

Ruskin Museum, Coniston

perfectly practical type, often made from found or recycled wood with branches of gorse or coppiced wood for legs. The legs would be driven through holes drilled in the seat and fixed with wedges. These are vernacular pieces that are found in most parts of northern England. The arrangement of the table and sconce, under the window and at right angles to the fireplace, is traditional in the Lake District.²⁰

Figures 4 and 5 are sketches of cottage interiors at Ambleside, drawn by William Collingwood in 1841.²¹ Figure 4 shows a 'fire window' designed to light the chimney recess, with its oak spice cupboard in its proper place on the wall near the fire (to keep it dry). The fireplace is well furnished with a fire crane supporting a 'ratten-crook' or pot-hanger which could be swung across the fire.²² Figure 5 also illustrates a ratten crook with a pot suspended over the fire, but in this case the fireplace has been modernised with a hob grate. Both sketches include rocking chairs, which are more common in the vernacular furniture of the north-west than in most other regions of Britain. That of Figure 4 is a ladder-backed example, without arms, and with an unusual conformation of understretchers. Most chairs in this region have two side stretchers and one front and back; the front one usually has a decorative turning. This example has one plain stretcher on each of its four sides, while the knobs surmounting the front legs and the back uprights are a singular feature. Both the rocking chair and the armchair in Figure 5 have low backs of indeterminable form, but they are most likely to be spindle backs of the Dales type. The old lady under the window is sitting on a ladder-back of a characteristic north-west regional type. All four chairs are likely to be rush-seated and made of ash.

The oak corner cupboard and the mule chest in Figure 5 exemplify the furnishings of the 'Great Rebuilding'. The chest appears to have a carved inscription on its upper frame of the type associated with the Lake District; it may have been a marriage piece. The presence of these, the three chairs and the modernised fireplace signify more well-to-do circumstances than those of Figure 4 with its solitary chair and old-fashioned hearth, and where the chicken is allowed into the living quarters.

Serious study of vernacular furniture involves detailed fieldwork to gather both visual and documentary information about furniture in a given region, especially fixed items, those known to have remained in their original sites or those with watertight provenances. Paintings and drawings cannot stand by themselves as evidence of regional types and designs, but they are invaluable pieces in the jigsaw of information. This group of Lake District interiors by William Collingwood, little known, and here considered together for the first time, may prove useful in supporting the fieldwork that is being undertaken in the area by members of the Regional Furniture Society and others.

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REFERENCES

1. H. C. Marillier. *The Liverpool School of Painters*, John Murray. London, 1904, p. 87.
2. Marillier, *ibid*.
3. Rudolf Ackermann, publisher of the *Repository of Arts* and proprietor of the famous art emporium in the Strand—an influential figure on early nineteenth-century design and fashion.
4. Marillier, *ibid*.
5. He continued to keep a house in Greenwich, but by 1855, when he wrote to the Society of Painters in Watercolours on becoming an Associate, he was 'only occasionally resident at Blackheath'.
6. Judging from the number of repeated titles in exhibition lists, fewer of the alpine landscapes than British views of genre scenes were offered a second time, which suggests that they were sold at the first exhibition where they were shown.
7. In the OWS exhibition, 1854.
8. OWS, 1855.
9. Collingwood's son, William Gershom Collingwood, was to pursue these antiquarian interests and concern for vernacular traditions both on his own account and in his capacity as secretary to Ruskin, and his son (William Collingwood's grandson). Robin Collingwood, the art theorist and archaeologist, continued to align himself with the conservationists of the Lake District during the twentieth century.
10. A view shared by Victoria Slowe of the Ruskin Museum, Coniston. In a lecture given in Oxford in 1862, *The Value and Influence of Art in General Education*, Collingwood himself noted the problem of reconciling the artist's need to earn a living by painting what pleased the public with his desire to preserve artistic integrity by following personal inclinations as to subject and style.
11. Sold at Sotheby's, 26 June 1980, present whereabouts unknown; this picture is unrecorded in exhibition lists.
12. See Victoria Slowe, 'Heck, Mell and Bink: Cross-passages between Lakeland Farmhouses and the American Colonies', a paper presented at the Beatrix Potter Society Conference, Ambleside, July 1994, published in *Beatrix Potter Studies* vi, 58.
13. John Harden (1772–1847) was an amateur artist who lived at Brathay Hall, on Lake Windermere, and produced watercolours of interiors in his own house and in his locality.
14. Many of Beatrix Potter's children's books give glimpses of Lake District interiors with their comfortable fireplaces, antique dressers and hearthside chairs, faithfully reproduced from those she knew. Later in life she was a zealous conservationist, buying up farmhouses threatened by developers and furnishing them with locally found furniture. When she died in 1943 she left no less than 15 farms and 4,000 acres of land to the National Trust.
15. *English Vernacular Furniture 1750–1900*, Yale University Press, Newhaven and London, 1991, Chapter 4.
16. Such a list in East Anglia, for example, would exclude both the dresser and settle, which were virtually non-existent in the area.
17. There is a further poignant connection between Collingwood's antiquarian and his Lakeland interiors: in the nineteenth-century clamour for antique carved oak furniture, the Lake District was regarded as a particularly fruitful hunting ground, with the result that many traditional pieces were lost to the area. In the early twentieth century Beatrix Potter lamented the fact that oak cupboards were being 'riven out of ancestral cottages'. See Susan Denyer, *Traditional Buildings and Life in the Lake District*, Victor Gollancz and Peter Crawley in association with the National Trust, 1991, p. 42.
18. See Denyer, and William Rollinson, *Life and Tradition in the Lake District*, J. M. Dent, London, 1974, and Ronald Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture of the Lake Counties*, Faber, London, 1974.
19. See Denyer, Chapter 2.
20. See Denyer, p. 44.
21. Illustrated by courtesy of the Ruskin Museum, Coniston.
22. Rollinson, *ibid*, p. 35.