

# ENGLISH WEST COUNTRY CUPBOARDS

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In the West of England early farmhouses and cottages had typically one principal room heated by a large open fireplace at one end, built within the outer main walls. At each side of the chimney breast was a recess from 2 ft to 3 ft wide and 18 in. deep.<sup>1</sup> One of these recesses generally gave access to a back door; the other was occupied by a ladder or cupboard staircase to the upper floor. By the early eighteenth century the typical English West Country farmhouse was built with a central staircase rising straight from just inside the front door. Most older houses had also by this time acquired new and more convenient staircases.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional fireplace however remained and the space formerly occupied by the stairs became a china cupboard. In many cases these cupboards were built in and formed architectural features of the house. Figure 1, from the first half of the eighteenth century, is perhaps an exceptional example where the whole end wall has been panelled with a simple carved pine fire surround flanked by two near-matching cupboards. The whole effect is more urban than usual. A similar cupboard is illustrated by Karin Walton in *Furniture History*, XII; it is signed and dated 1739. The maker, Joseph Hurdacre, calls himself a joyner.<sup>3</sup> A more primitive set of china shelves appears in the background of a watercolour now in the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, showing the interior of a cottage in Compton Bassett, Wiltshire, and dated 1849.

Occasionally the same fireside recess was filled with a free-standing china cupboard. Two examples are illustrated, Figure 2 in oak from East Somerset and Figure 3 from Devon. Even out of context the proportions of these pieces and the arrangement of shelves indicate clearly their original position and use. All the above-mentioned cupboards would have been used to house the 'best' china, which came into the house as a result of the rising popularity of tea drinking during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. China and other utensils used every day were kept on the dresser.

China cupboards to fit into a corner may also be found. Figure 4 is an example in elm from the upper Exe valley, North Devon. The construction of this cupboard reveals several techniques characteristic of much country-made furniture. The door panels are of timber carefully chosen to show a 'wild' grain. Traces of red stain inside the doors indicate clearly a desire to imitate fashionable mahogany veneers. The cornice is cut from the solid and shows from above the unwrought shape of the trunk or branch from which it was cut (see Figure 5). The country craftsman was always conscious of the source of his material; he may well have felled it and almost certainly converted it himself, so he made the most of every scrap.<sup>4</sup> Figure 6 shows how the multiple mouldings at each side of the piece have been built up. This type of construction, dictated by the use of house-joiners' moulding planes and ignorance of cabinet-making practice, may be found in the cornices of many West Country dressers.<sup>5</sup>



1. Chimney piece and built-in cupboards, Ivy Farm, Bayford, Somerset, first half of the eighteenth century

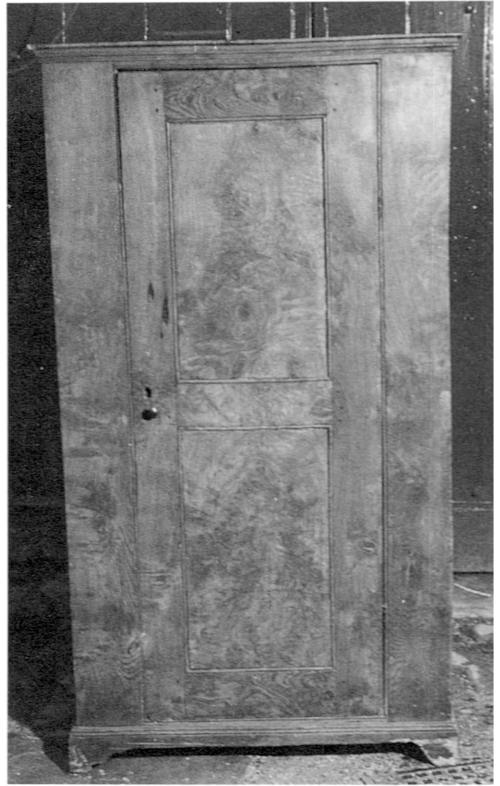
As its name suggests the buttery was a room in which ale was kept.<sup>6</sup> Other provisions were also stored there. Early inventories specify in the buttery not only casks and vats but often also an aumbry. One example from Devon of seventeenth-century type is illustrated in Figure 7. Ventilated cupboards of this kind do not appear to have survived in the West of England in such numbers as in Wales and the North of England where examples from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may be found.

Inventories of the seventeenth century mention also livery cupboards or tables. While the main meal was taken communally in the middle of the day, it was the practice to take some food privately at other times. Livery cupboards or tables were provided in some upper chambers in which to keep this food. Figure 8 is a fine example of a livery cupboard from the seventeenth century. It bears a number of inventory marks which suggest it was in a wealthy household, but several features of its decoration are of purely West of England regional origin; the turnery of the legs, a vase above a drum, is typical as are the long palmettes on the styles and in particular the reversed lunettes on the frieze rail.<sup>7</sup>

Milk and milk products were kept in the dairy or milk-house but dry and preserved foods were kept in the kitchen. Salt in particular had to be kept in a dry place, near the fire. Many old fireplaces have a small recess in the back wall beside the hearth where a salt box could stand. Alternatively the salt was kept in a box hung on a nearby wall. A



2. Oak china cupboard, Yarlington, Somerset,  
c. 1800

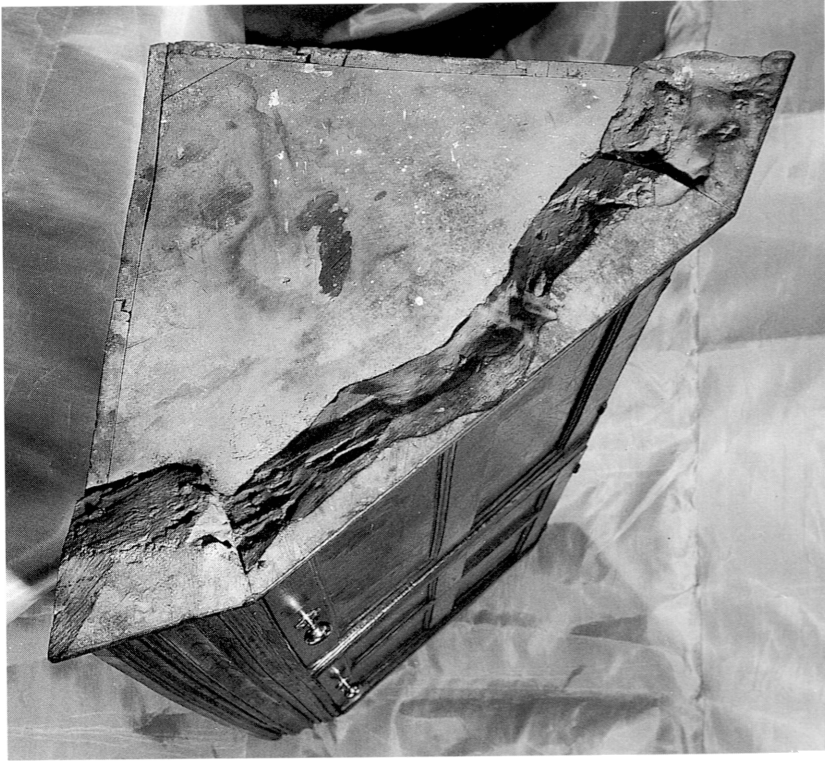


3. China cupboard, elm, from Honiton area,  
Devon, c. 1800

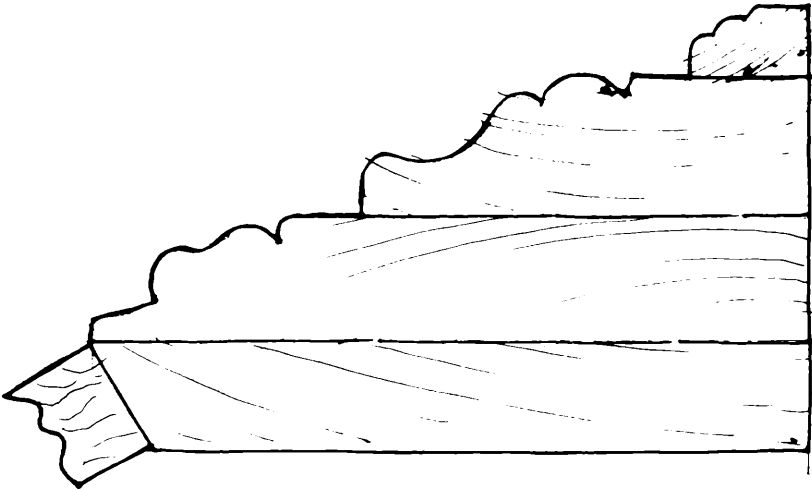


4 Corner china cupboard, elm, from North Devon, late eighteenth century





5. Cupboard in Figure 4 viewed from above, showing the unwrought shape of the trunk from which the cornice was cut



6. Section through left-hand side of cupboard in Figure 4, showing mouldings



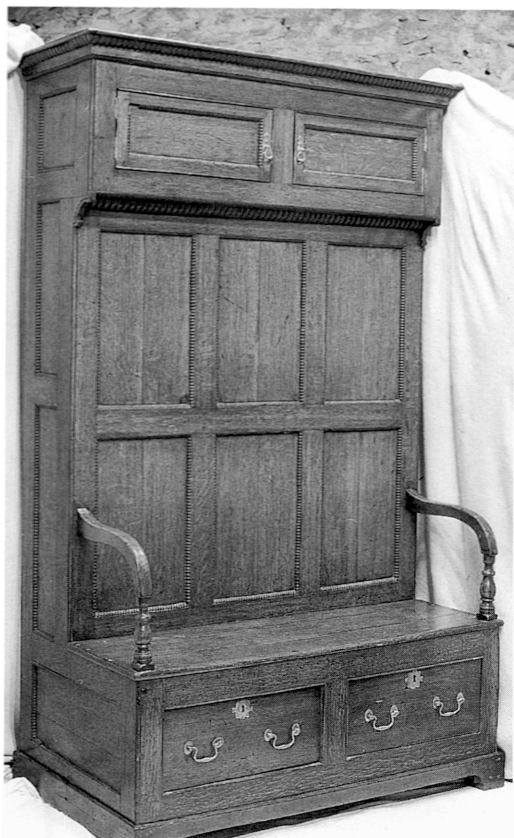
7. Oak aumbry from mid-Devon, late seventeenth century



8. Oak livery cupboard from Devon, second half of the seventeenth century

recess about two feet square in one of the outer walls housed spices and other condiments. Such recesses were fronted with a single panel door within a frame planted on the surface of the wall; they were usually decorated with Jacobean style carving. The majority of these have now been removed and converted into separate wall-hung cupboards.<sup>8</sup>

Bacon, one of the staples of the countryman's diet, was also stored in the farmhouse kitchen. In the West Country bacon was usually eaten 'green' — unsmoked.<sup>9</sup> After salting, which was done in a special trough (called a 'zylt')<sup>10</sup> for six or eight weeks, it was hung up to dry. For this purpose a rack with slatted bottom was hung from the ceiling. A common piece of furniture for the storage of bacon in the West of England was the bacon settle. This was a settle with a narrow cupboard at the back. It might be straight or curved, the doors might be at the front or back and below the seat might be drawers or a locker. Many had extra cupboards at the top, overhanging the seat. Figure 9 is a typical example.<sup>11</sup> In a few cases a separate bacon cupboard was provided for the purpose (see Figure 10). Close to the back door was a bin from which the housewife could conveniently scoop corn or meal to feed the poultry in the back yard. Where this was in the back-house a very simple piece as shown in Figure 11 sufficed.



9. Oak bacon settle from south Somerset, early nineteenth century



10. Bacon cupboard, pine, from Taunton area, Somerset, nineteenth century

Some of these bins were given the appearance of more genteel pieces of furniture as in Figure 12. Corn bins were invariably made of pine.<sup>12</sup>

For the making of bread a dough bin was required.<sup>13</sup> This was a trough, invariably made of elm, with sloping sides standing on legs at a convenient height for kneading dough. Since the dough when kneaded had to be left in a warm place to rise, the dough bin stood near the fireplace. It was provided with a removable lid and could be used as a table when not in use for baking. English West Country dough bins, of which Figure 13 is a typical example, were very plain. Their survival rate is low, large numbers having been used as plant troughs out of doors.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these specialised pieces, foodstuffs such as corn, cheese and potatoes were frequently stored in chests or coffers. Mouseholes in the bottom corners of old chests indicate this was a common practice.

The old farmhouse and the cottage housed many more people than today. Each formed a community which was largely self-sufficient. Diet was limited and governed by the seasons. That which could be preserved without refrigeration became an integral



11. Pine corn bin with elm legs, form Dorchester area, Dorset, nineteenth century



12. Pine corn bin form Taunton area, Somerset, nineteenth century



13. Elm dough bin from Somerset, c. 1800

part of the surroundings in the one heated living room. As William Barnes, the Dorset poet, wrote in 1844:

Up in chimney tha did hitch  
the salt box and the bacon flitch.  
And ther were bacon up on rack  
and plates to eat it up on tack,  
and round the walls were yarbs a-stowed  
in papern bags and blathers blowed.<sup>15</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Robert Byles for some helpful comments and to Alison Lee for tracing some illustrations of built-in cupboards.

#### NOTES TO THE ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Built-in cupboards and fireplace, first half eighteenth century, at Ivy Farm, Bayford Somerset. The left-hand cupboard has plain shelves inside. Photographed before removal in 1955.
2. Oak china cupboard, c. 1800, from a cottage, now demolished, at Yarlinton, Somerset. The closely spaced shelves inside have scalloped edges.
3. Elm china cupboard, c. 1800, from Honiton area, Devon. The unusual full-length door has led to this being used as a hanging wardrobe, but signs of original shelves indicate its first usage.
4. Elm corner china cupboard, late eighteenth century, from North Devon. The handles and bottom rail are replacements. Owing to woodworm damage at the base it is not now possible to determine whether there was once a plinth.
5. The cupboard in Figure 4 viewed from above, showing the natural surface of the timber behind the cornice.
6. Section through left-hand side of Figure 4, showing build-up of the mouldings.
7. Oak aumbry from mid Devon, late seventeenth century. The hinges are not original.
8. Oak livery cupboard from Devon, second half seventeenth century. There is a pattern of fine ventilation holes in each end panel.
9. Oak bacon settle from South Somerset, with doors at the back. It has been suggested that the cupboards at the top were designed for keeping hams. The shape of the arms indicates a date early in the nineteenth century.
10. Pine bacon cupboard, nineteenth century, from Taunton area, Somerset.
11. Pine corn bin, nineteenth century, with elm legs from Dorchester area, Dorset. The swept front legs give added stability when scooping out the contents. The lid was originally detachable.
12. Pine corn bin, nineteenth century, from Taunton area, Somerset. All the upper drawers are simulated.
13. Elm dough bin, c. 1800, from Somerset. In this example the lid appears, unusually, to have been always hinged.

#### REFERENCES

1. In the West of England it is generally reckoned to be impossible to build a stone wall ('coursed rubble') less than 18 in. thick. External walls are often thicker.
2. Two surviving examples are illustrated in 'The Devon Cottage', by Bruce W. Oliver, Plate 5 Figure 1 and Plate 9 Figure 1. *Report and transactions of the Devon Association*, Tavistock, 1949.
3. *Furniture History*, xii, 1976, 97, 98, Figure 39.
4. Timber with the bark still on has been noted on the backs of dressers.
5. B. D. Cotton, 'A painted Corner Cupboard from Hanley, Staffordshire, 1827', *Regional Furniture*, iv, 1990, 113-16.
6. O. E. D. derives the word from Butt (O. F. Botte), a large wine vessel.
7. Cf. panelling, formerly forming the Mildmay family pew in the church at Queen Camel, Somerset.
8. Two cupboards from the West of England still *in situ* are illustrated by E. H. D. Williams in *Period Homes*, Vol. 4. James Ayres illustrates a fine example from Cumbria and points out that most were fitted with locks—suggesting the value of spices. James Ayres, *The Shell Book of The Home in Britain*, Faber, 1981.
9. '... for smoking is a great deal better than merely drying; as is the fashion in the dairy-countries in the West of England.' William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, no. VI, 1821-22, para. 150.
10. Also in old inventories called a 'sylting trow'.

11. Further examples of bacon settles are in Gabriel Olive, 'West Country Settles', *Furniture History*, xvii, 1981.
12. An ark in the middle entry of a long-house at St Fagans served the same purpose.
13. By the early nineteenth century bread was no longer being baked in every household. Cobbett writes that '... in the evidence recently given before the Agricultural Committee, many labourers, especially in the West of England, use potatoes instead of bread to a very great extent.' Cobbett, *op. cit.*, no. III, para. 77.
14. Elsewhere the legs are often united by stretchers. Some very elaborate examples come from northern France.
15. William Barnes, *Poems of Rural Life*, 1844. The version here given has been simplified from the original dialect.