

ENGLISH WEST COUNTRY TABLES AND FORMS

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The design and construction of all farmhouse furniture was dictated by considerations of space and utility. The table, of which there was often only one, had to be large enough to accommodate the numbers living in the house and adaptable to many uses.¹ In an English West Country farmhouse the table normally stood closely-parallel to the window in the front of the house, which had a window-seat built in below it. One end of the table, therefore, was near the fireplace on the end wall, the other close to the inner opposite wall, where stood the dresser.

In use for meals all those living on the farm sat down together at each side and the ends of the table. William Cobbett wrote of 'a score or more of men' sitting down at one time. The order of seating was defined by social status, as described by Flora Thompson.² After the meal the housewife would spread a cloth or towel over the end nearest the hearth where the washing-up bowl could most conveniently be filled from the big kettle over the fire. As the dishes were dried by others they were stacked at the further end of the table from where they could easily be replaced on the nearby dresser.³ Apart from the preparation and consumption of food the table was used for many other domestic purposes. In particular it was used for laundry. For this weekly activity the top was reversed and the clothes scrubbed on the underside of the top.⁴ Another usage is recorded by C. H. Laycock. It was the custom in the remoter parts of Devon for travelling tailors to visit the farms at intervals, staying several days repairing the worker's breeches and clothing. To get the best light for their work the tailors would sit cross-legged on the table.⁵ To withstand such usage farmhouse tables were invariably stoutly made. They were as long as the room-space would allow and were generally fitted with drawers for extra storage. Although this made them less easy to sit at it must be assumed that table manners were less formal in the farmhouse. The placing of the table near the window meant that the drawers were on one of the long sides only, though a few tables may be found with a drawer at one end.

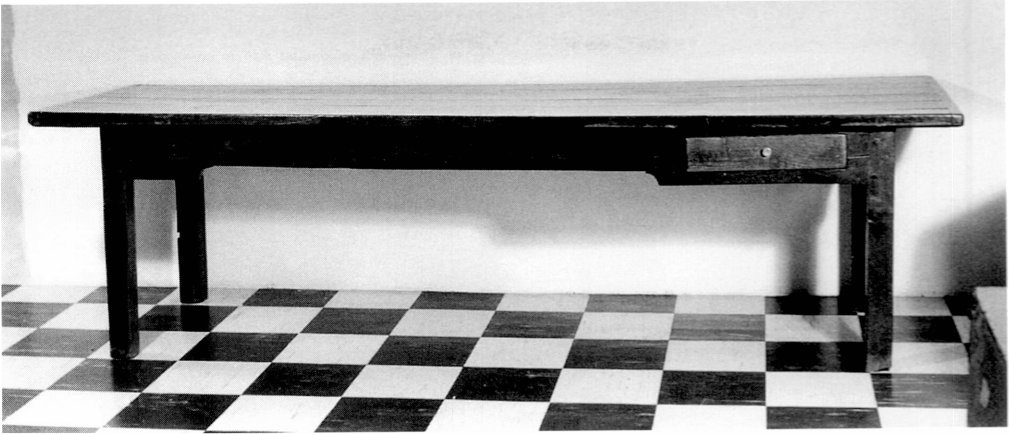
The typical West Country farmhouse table stood on four square tapered legs three inches square or more at the top with no stretcher rails below. The frieze rails, sometimes as much as two inches thick, were tenoned into the legs and double-pegged. The joint was often made more rigid by the addition of brackets cut out of the solid timber of the frieze rail. The frames of these tables were generally of oak, their oak tops of three or four boards cleated at the ends, the thickness varying from one to two inches. Other timbers, particularly ash, were sometimes used for the tops.⁶ Although few surviving examples are likely to have been made before the last quarter of the eighteenth century, there is no reason to believe that the square tapered legs are in any way the result of neo-classical influence. However, a small bead worked on the outer edge of the legs and a chamfered inner edge may well be concessions to earlier fashions.

The majority of these tables now have fixed tops. In some cases, where perhaps the laundry was carried out elsewhere in the 'backhouse', this may be original. In many other cases it may be noted that the fixing of the tops includes wooden dowels driven into the tops of the legs. As a fixing this is unsound woodworking practice, yet these pegs are likely to be original; their purpose was not to fix the top down, merely to prevent it moving sideways. Whenever the top was turned over these pegs could be driven down through the top to leave a level surface — a simple and effective form of reversible locating lug.⁷ Similar pegs may be found on many tables of seventeenth century joined type. Contemporary descriptions in probate inventories suggest many of these had loose tops.⁸ Tables of this period are outside the scope of this article, though many may have survived in use in farmhouses in the nineteenth century. Any regional characteristics in these are likely to be found in the carving or turnery.

Farmhouse tables served the same purposes throughout the country and shared the same general characteristics of simplicity and solidity, with loose tops. A group noted in Herefordshire had stretchers between the end legs which were united by a central flat board which evidently served as a footrest. One example seen had this board carpeted. The only table seen by the author with straight square legs came from Yorkshire. Sadly, in the 1950s and 60s large numbers were bought up by the antiques trade and sent up to London to be converted into the then fashionable 'trestle-ended refectory tables'.

Although the evidence from probate inventories indicates that a single table within the household was common, other tables are recorded. In the seventeenth century these were generally described as sideboards. From the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have survived many round tables. The particular use of one was described by Flora Thompson.⁹ There were two types of small round tables common in farmhouses. One was a provincial version of the eighteenth century pillared tripod table. Rural examples were generally made of oak, though other timbers may be found. When they have tilt tops the catches are of local ironwork. They are all copying, with greater or less skill, the fashionable mahogany type. They were common in many parts of the country, but show no obvious regional variations. The other kind of round table was what is nowadays erroneously called a cricket table. In the English West Country they were typically of framed construction with a shelf below, the thin top supported below by a batten across the grain. Three typical examples are shown.¹⁰ A small group of pine gateleg tables come from north east Somerset. The frame and the gates are of the same square section throughout, the flaps have heavy chamfered battens at each end. The quality of the timber and the iron backflap hinges suggest these tables are from the mid-nineteenth century or later. They may all be the products of one workshop. One example is illustrated. Several others have been observed in modern kitchens, their tops covered with formica.

Closely associated with the long table was the long form or bench. Documentary evidence suggests that the word bench referred to the fixed seats against the wall; where mentioned they are given in conjunction with the sealing (panelling) as tenant's fixtures.¹¹ The long form in the seventeenth century is described either as joined or as 'a plank for a form'. Joined examples follow the same patterns as those from more sophisticated houses. It should, however, be remembered that they were being made well into the eighteenth century, as were joined tables and stools.¹² Plank forms from



1. Farmhouse table, oak, eighteenth century, with loose top. From South Devon



2. Farmhouse table, oak, first half of the nineteenth century, with loose top. From North Devon

the West of England were made of oak or ash. The top was a single piece of timber two inches thick with square ends and heavily chamfered on the underside. The legs were of rectangular section, the widest side following the grain of the top. They were splayed in two directions and tenoned right through the top, the tenons held by double wedges. Generally the pair of legs at each end were united by a stretcher of round section bored through the legs and wedged. A small group from North Somerset have thinner tops



3. Farmhouse table, ash, late eighteenth century, with fixed top. From a farm near Martock, Somerset



4. Farmhouse table, oak, late eighteenth century, with loose top. From North Devon



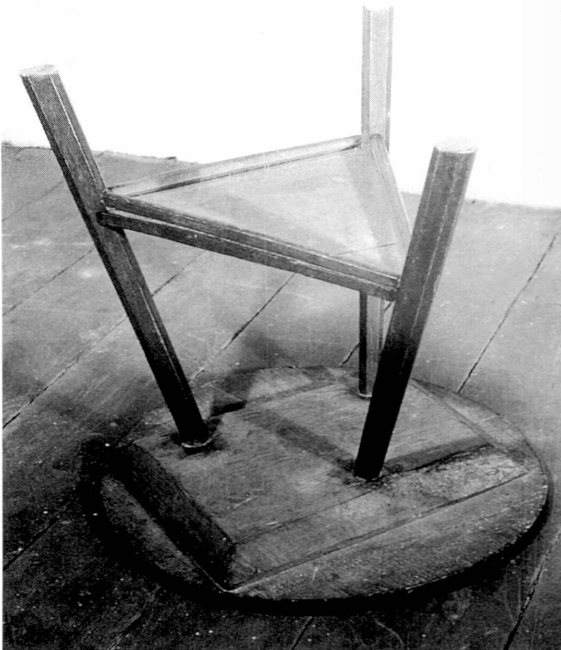
5. Tripod table, oak, late eighteenth century. From Somerset



6. Round table, elm, probably first half of the nineteenth century. From a house in East Reach, Taunton, Somerset



7. Round table, pine, nineteenth century. From the West Country



8. Underside detail of table in figure 7



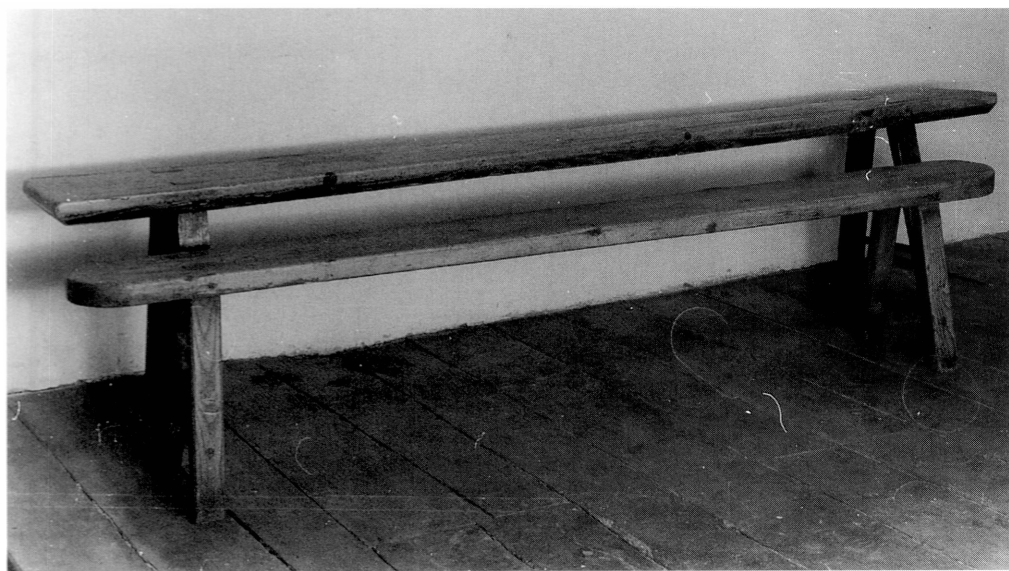
9. Round table, oak and pine, nineteenth century. From Devon



10. Gate leg kitchen table, pine, late nineteenth century. From North Somerset



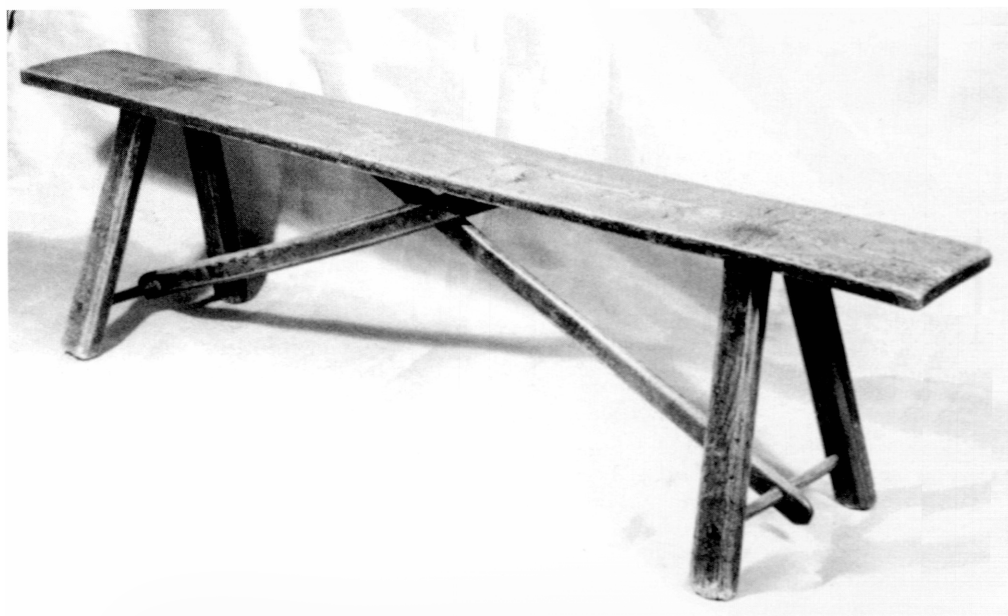
11. Form, ash, c. 1800. From the West Country



12. Two forms, the one behind English West Country, the one in front Welsh



13. Cricket stool, oak, probably early nineteenth century. From the West Country



14. Form, ash, probably late nineteenth century. From North Somerset.

and are strengthened with diagonal braces. Some of this type were made in pine. The commonest and most typical stools to be found in the West Country have many features in common with the long forms. Though smaller and lower they have similar thick tops chamfered below with rectangular section legs fixed as in the forms. Many, though not all, had rounded stretchers between two of their legs. In addition the tops were decorated with beaded edges and notching on the ends, similar to that found on many West Country coffers and boxes. This particular form of decoration on stools appears to be unique to the region. One or two stools of this type were to be found beside the hearth where they were useful seats for those cooking or tending the fire. This was the fireside seat known as the cricket and was also the traditional seat of the story teller on long winter evenings.¹³

The severley functional nature of farmhouse tables and forms admits of few variations on which to base a typology of date or regional origin. The examples shown here illustrate the simple and effective quality achieved by makers in the English West Country.

NOTES TO THE ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Oak farmhouse table 9 ft 6 in. long with loose top. Note that the drawer opening is cut out of the solid frieze rail. Eighteenth century from south Devon.
2. Oak farmhouse table with two drawers and loose top. The beading round the drawers is applied to the openings in the frieze rail, which is 2 in. thick. The frame is stained dark red, the top scrubbed white. The drawer knobs are original. First half of the nineteenth century from north Devon.
3. Ash farmhouse table with three drawers and fixed top (nailed to the base). The drawer handles are original. Late eighteenth century, from a farm near Martock, Somerset.
4. Oak farmhouse table with end drawer and loose top. The quality of workmanship is exceptionally good. The integral brackets on the frieze rails are finely cut and the legs have a bead worked on their outer edges. Note that the rail below the drawer is double pegged. The rail above the drawer is dovetailed into the tops of the legs. The turned yew wood drawer knob is original. Late eighteenth century from north Devon.
5. Oak tripod table, typical of those to be found in English West Country farmhouses and cottages. This example has a fixed top. The turnery of the pillar is the simplest possible. The shape of the legs follows that of fashionable furniture, reduced to a silhouette cut from a flat board. Probably late eighteenth century, from Somerset.
6. Framed three-legged round table in elm. The frieze rails are tenoned and pegged into the legs and enhanced with a bead on their lower edges. The top is supported with a batten which can just be seen to the right of the photograph. The lower tier is a single sheet of elm, 0.5 in. thick, held by nails driven through the legs. The slight curve echoing the top is a particularly pleasing feature. Probably first half nineteenth century. From a house in East Reach, Taunton Somerset.
7. Round table in pine on three splayed octagonal legs. West Country, nineteenth century.
8. Underside of foregoing showing the large elm block into which the legs are dowelled. Whatever the construction, West Country tables of this kind all have an under tier.
9. Round table in oak with pine shelf below. Note the pegged construction. Splayed tapered legs are a frequent feature of West Country furniture. This table may well have come from a public house. Nineteenth century from Devon.
10. Pine gateleg kitchen table. One of a small but distinctive group from North Somerset. Late nineteenth century.
11. Ash form typical of those to be found in the West Country. The deep chamfer under the heavy top is clearly visible. This example is 7 ft 6 in. long. Some shorter forms may be found without stretchers between the legs. West Country perhaps about 1800.

12. Two forms, the one behind English West Country, the one in front Welsh. Apart from being lower the Welsh example is not chamfered and has rounded ends, which are not found in the West Country.
13. A typical West Country cricket with beaded edges to the top and notched ends. Some crickets have round stretchers between the legs each end, like the forms. Made of ash. Perhaps early nineteenth century.
14. Ash form with diagonal braces. The tops of the braces are nailed to the underside of the top. The positioning and fixing of the legs is similar to that of figure 10 although the top is thinner. Other examples of this type have been noted in pine, all of them showing traces of red stain. From North Somerset. Probably late nineteenth century.

REFERENCES

1. C.f. Gabriel Olive, 'Furniture in a West Country Parish', *Furniture History*, xii, 1976. See also Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture*, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 44.
2. Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, Oxford, 1945.
3. Personal recollection of the author, staying in 1933 at Ash Farm, Throwleigh, North Devon (Mr and Mrs Dunning).
4. A woman brought up on a remote farm in Pembrokeshire recalled her weekly duty as a girl of re-polishing the table top on Monday afternoons, after it had been turned back.
5. Charles H. Laycock, 'The Old Devon Farmhouse and its Furnishings part II'. *Transactions of the Devon Association*, 1922.
6. Loudon tells us that 'Kitchen tables are generally formed of the wood of the ash, as being white, hard, and durable', Loudon, *Encyclopaedia* (1842 edition), para. 1459, p. 698.
7. A Lady described to the author many years ago a table with turn-over top in her aunt's house in Northamptonshire, and she remembered that 'Aunty kept a special little hammer in the drawer of the dresser to knock the pegs back when it had been turned over'.
8. Olive, op. cit.
9. Thompson, op. cit. See also Gilbert, op. cit., pp. 38-39.
10. Gilbert points out that such tables were also used in inns, op. cit., p. 89.
11. C.f. Gabriel Olive, 'Furniture at Corfe Castle', *Regional Furniture*, iv, 1990.
12. A joined form in the church at Bishop's Cannings, Wilts is dated 1722.
13. Laycock, op. cit.