

‘A LAST OUTPOST OF THE KNOWN WORLD’: VERNACULAR FURNITURE IN TUDOR AND STUART CORNWALL

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For a hundred years or more attempts have been made to provenance seventeenth-century English furniture at least to a general geographical area. Notable pioneers include J. W. Hurrell whose *Measured Drawings of Old English Oak Furniture*, published in 1902 and reprinted in 1983, drew most of its material from the north-western counties; and Percy Macquoid, whose *History of English Furniture: The Age of Oak* (1904) took a much broader chronological and geographical sweep and managed at the same time to make many attributions which can be validated today. If their example had been pursued systematically during the decades that followed our knowledge would be as advanced as knowledge of comparable furniture is in the USA,¹ but with honourable exceptions like Margaret Jourdain and R. W. Symonds little was done before the 1970s. Three exhibitions at Temple Newsam, Leeds, in 1971, '73, and '76, examined the furniture of Yorkshire, Lancashire and the Lake District, Gloucestershire and Somerset; Victor Chinnery, in his *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition* (1979), identified groups of furniture made in Salisbury and Shrewsbury; and I have in varying detail published articles on Dorset, Devon, and Hereford.² Clearly the geographical coverage of the country remains very inadequate and identification of individual makers virtually non-existent.

It may be worth re-stating the objectives of such regional studies as I have made. Their initial purpose is to identify a canon of securely provenanced items. Crucial to this process are examples of fixed woodwork and other decoration, especially on tombs and in plasterwork. The survival of a number of decoratively similar items of movable woodwork in a particular area may be used with caution to localise a decorative style. The resulting canon may then be employed for various purposes: for examination in its own right to discover the joiners responsible for individual objects; as a yardstick by which to measure comparable, unprovenanced, material; as evidence of the decorative impulses that propelled the carvers and plasters of a particular region, and so on. Eventually it should be possible to build up a picture of activity throughout the British Isles during the seventeenth century which will enable us to answer with some confidence questions of continental versus local decorative inspiration; the extent to which vernacular furniture (as opposed to other decorative arts) demonstrates continental influence; the importance (or otherwise) of artistic or commercial centres for the decorative personality of a region. The process was tentatively begun for the highly distinctive furniture of the Lake District in 1973 and, for instance, allowed the significance of Exeter as an importer of continental styles to be balanced against the more local influences at work on the furniture of much of the rest of the county;³ and provided a background against which the work of two Devon joiners, William

Searle and Thomas Dennis, who emigrated to America in the mid seventeenth century and founded their own workshop traditions there, could be studied.⁴

The Devon studies also provide a control by which the neighbouring county of Cornwall may be judged. Alec Clifton-Taylor wrote: 'In its building materials, as in so many other ways, Cornwall is of all English counties the most untypical...' (Pevsner, *Cornwall*, 1970, p. 29). Let us try to assess how true this is of its seventeenth-century vernacular furniture. It is tempting to see Cornwall at that time just as being geographically isolated, separated from more 'civilized' or 'advanced' parts of the country by the valley of the Tamar and by Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor. And it is true that, in the reign of Elizabeth, the Cornish did indeed form a homogenous, separate society 'So seem they yet to retain a kind of concealed envy against the English...'.⁵ Conversely, one has to remember, on the one hand, that the sea provided a ready means of communication for the Cornish, resulting for instance in their colonisation of Brittany, and, on the other hand, that the great families were able to maintain connections at court, and build great houses to reinforce their status: Cotehele, built by the Edgcumbes, and Mount Edgumbe by Sir Richard Edgumbe, friend of Henry VII; Penheale, built by Edgumbe's cousin Sir George Grenville; Lanherne and Trerice, built by the Arundells; Arwennack, by the Killigrews. They were well aware, too, of contemporary events in Europe: the diaries of William Carnsew, for instance, show him responding to the news of the 'Spanish Fury' at Antwerp in 1576.

One of the problems of discussing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century furniture throughout the country applies to Cornwall, too — the scarcity of dates. In Cornwall just over twenty Tudor or Stuart pulpits survive of which only seven bear dates. Whether dated or not, however, all are characterised by what may be described as a *horror vacui*, so that decoration covers virtually every available surface — perhaps a hang-over from the tradition of the late-Medieval period. These include those that may be amongst the earliest, perhaps even dating from the reign of Elizabeth, at Lanreath (Fig. 1) as well as those that may be as much as a century later, for instance, at St Winnow (Fig. 2). Both are comparatively architectural. The former has round arches supported on piers, separated by fluted pilasters which support a reasonably correct architrave, ornamented frieze and projecting cornice; in the arched panels are stylised flower and leaf devices, not over-elaborate. A comparable, though simpler, pulpit is at Bradoc. At St Winnow the joiner abandoned any pretence of architectural correctness although some references are still present, elongated acanthus brackets, frieze zone and so forth. The ornamental motifs have assumed what can easily be seen as a Mannerist complexity, particularly at plinth level, in the main panels and the frieze. A hint of strapwork, with its characteristic square 'blocks', between the panels in the plinth with their fantastic creatures of a somewhat Netherlandish nature, is another Mannerist telltale. Simple strapwork, used to divide panels into smaller elements, appears on the pulpit at St Eval and, as the main feature of the decoration, on the pulpit at St Kew (Fig. 3), although the panels of its lowest register strike a rather different note. Different again is the pulpit at Mylor (Fig. 4) which, albeit restored, has low relief strapwork and scrolls on the rails, and panel ornament consisting either of designs formed entirely from fleurs-de-lys or from geometrical interlacing bandwork of a distinctly Renaissance character. Again undated is panelling at Launcells (Fig. 5) in which the carver, who was certainly responsible for the font cover as well, achieved a sumptuous effect with limited variety of technical means; the motif in the frieze is notable and we shall return to it



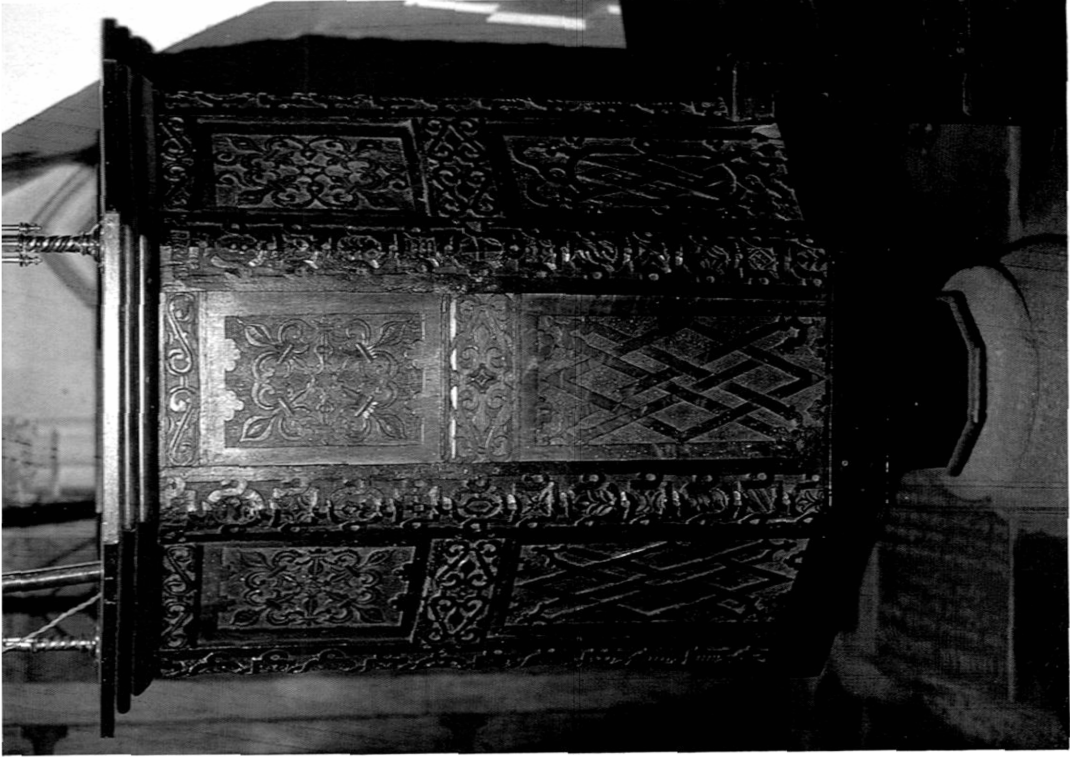
1. Pulpit at Llanrcath, perhaps Elizabethan



2. Pulpit at St Winnow, probably second half seventeenth century



3. Pulpit at St Kew



4. Pulpit at Mylor



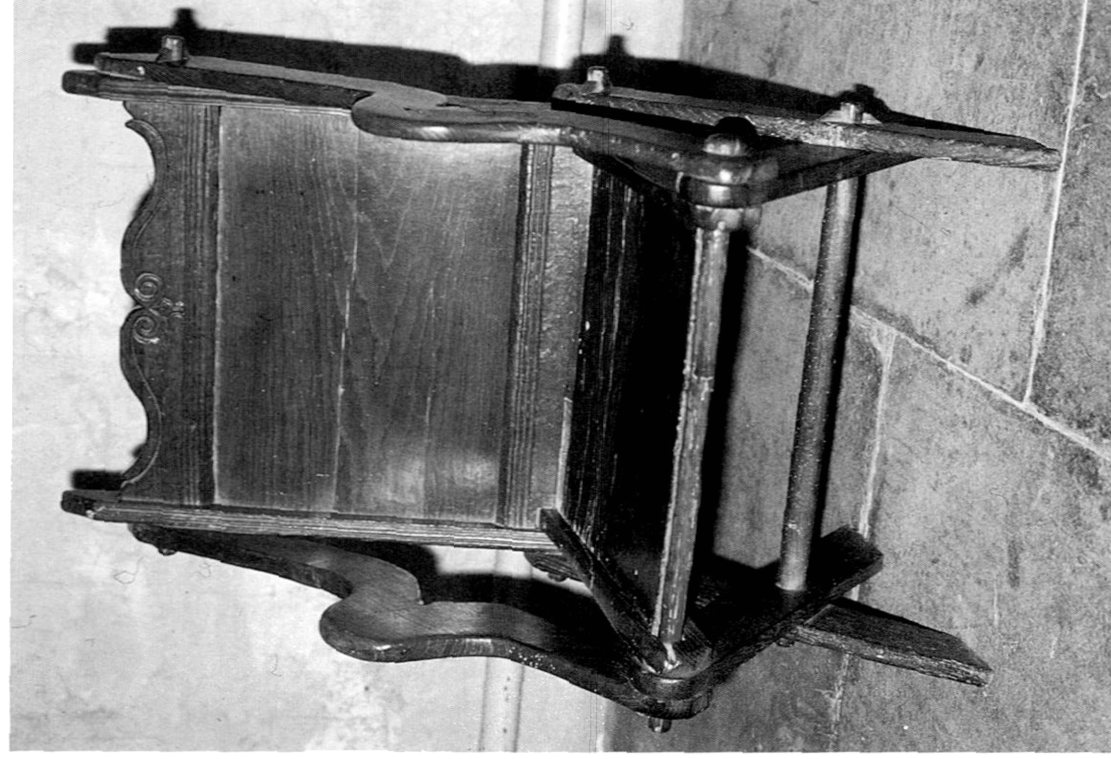
5. Panelling at Launcells



6. Pulpit at St Ives, dated 1700



7. Pulpit at Poundstock



8. Folding armchair of so-called Glastonbury type



9. Armchair, perhaps first half seventeenth century



10. Panel at Gorran, with polychrome decoration



11. Chest found in a Cornish farmhouse. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum

in due course. Perhaps earliest of all is panelling at Landulph which combines linenfold panels with Mannerist cartouches and channelled-out lozenges, the latter found also in Somerset, for instance at Selworthy.

Turning now to the dated work, the pulpit at Fowey, dated 1601, has tapering, acanthus-carved pilasters and vestigial capitals, masks on the blocks above and neatly carved multiple scrolls in the frieze; under round arches the panels have attractive shell-based motifs. Multiple scrolls have no particular regional significance although their treatment, as in the particularly elaborate examples in the gallery at Lanhydrock (dating probably from the 1640s), may be diagnostic. The decorative masterpiece of the 1620s is neither a pulpit nor panelling but a monument, at Lanreath, commemorating Charles Grylls (died 1611) and Agnes, his wife; the tomb was erected in 1623. The towering three-tier structure is extensively polychromed, marbled and gilded in imitation of contemporary metropolitan tombs but, *pace* Pevsner, for all its Mannerist elements — the openwork cresting, strapwork cartouche and term-figures (one of the masks above appears to derive from one in the well-known suite designed by Cornelis Floris in the 1550s) — much of the decoration is in the manner of contemporary woodwork, such as some bench fronts in the same church. From the 1630s date the pulpits at St Teath (and perhaps other panels incorporated into Victorian choir-stalls) and South Petherwin, while the confused decoration on the pulpit at Lawhitton, dated 1665, signals a decline of this decorative tradition. Nonetheless it persisted until 1700 on a remarkable pulpit at St Ive (Fig. 6) and perhaps even later.

Of the undated work which may belong to the seventeenth century, the pulpits at St Mellion and Stratton have plain panels, round-arched, the former very tall, the latter much shorter and in two tiers. Panels on pulpits at Marhamchurch have figures of humans and beasts, and at Talland they have floral decoration of extreme stylisation. The rectangular panels on the pulpit at Poundstock (Fig. 7) display an almost bewildering variety of motifs, though one is the in-turned scroll we have already noted at Launcells. Most exciting of all, however, is a section of panelling at Gorran (Fig. 10), in which motifs of an almost totemic bizarreness stand out against grounds painted red and blue, whilst the interlacing bands in the frieze alternate in the same colours. This is perhaps the place to mention also a manifest tendency, at least in the eighteenth century and perhaps earlier, to paint examples of movable furniture in a distinctive sea-green, conceivably at their time of manufacture; this colour was sometimes subsequently concealed by decorative scumbling.

Against all this the movable furniture surviving in the country is actually, for the most part, rather plain. This cannot be said, however, of a remarkably ornate chest in the Victoria & Albert Museum, acquired in 1909 (Fig. 11), with a tradition of having been found in a farmhouse in Cornwall. None of the decoration is impossible for the county — the elaborate panel design with the tendency of the plant stems to intertwine with more formal elements, the cursive ornament running up the stiles, the double-band circles and squares alternating on the muntins and, perhaps most of all, the frieze of inturned scrolls — although nowhere does carving of precisely this quality survive on fixed woodwork in the county. Nor does any other Cornish chest quite match this in exuberance although the chest dated 1662 (on a new top) noted by Pevsner at St Austell runs it fairly close, as does a chest at Trerice which has asymmetrical ornament on the muntins — a Cornish feature paralleled, for instance, on alternate tapering panels of the font cover at Lanreath. Occasionally the decorated part of a rail may have a curved section, in common with furniture in other western counties, and the



12. Slate from St Ive



13. Plate III from Clement Perret, *Exercitatio Alphabetica*, Antwerp, 1569.

Reproduced by courtesy of the Kunstbibliothek, Berlin

ornament used on these curved fields was often executed with much use of the gouge. At its simplest the chest could be of six boards, nailed together, with iron straps, a minimum of incised decoration and a date towards the end of the seventeenth century. The survival of a remarkable, metropolitan-style French *huche* in a Cornish church, just one of a number of continental pieces in the county, may be an indication of contacts across the Channel, whilst the characteristically elaborate interlacing decoration on the many friezes may be of a kind which inspired somewhat simpler examples on Cornish woodwork.

Although we are, of course, primarily concerned with carved ornament it is appropriate to mention in passing the considerable number of energetically turned chairs encountered, at Cotehele and elsewhere; perhaps they were indeed a preserve of the Celts. Very much more remarkable is a solitary example of a folding chair of what is traditionally known as the Glastonbury type (Fig. 8). Although substantial replicas of Victorian date occur throughout the country this is the only one which, when I saw it many years ago, convinced me of its genuineness in almost every element. The dimensions of the timber from which it was made are notably lighter than expected,⁶ consistent with its ability to be dismantled for travelling, and it can be seen that three joints on each side can be dissociated by the removal of a wedge.

Of the various carved chairs in the region only three which bear a close or sibling relationship in their decoration constitute a coherent, single-workshop, Cornish group. Of the three, two have a single round-arched panel; the third has a pair of narrower panels. The pilasters and arches are highly decorated, the spandrels of two having winged heads, whilst the panels have a greatly stylised organic motif. Between the backposts which bear guilloche or what may be intended for laurel ornament the deep top-rail is formed into one complete semicircular lunette, flanked on either side by a vestigial one, the central one being carved with radial flutes centring on a stylised rosette. Between the lunettes appears the most distinctive feature of the group, a bearded face (on two; on the third, the face appears in the spandrel of the double arch). The chair illustrated by Macquoid and reproduced here (Fig. 9) is fully characteristic except that its lower back rail and front seat rail are plain, where the others have, for instance, a band of intersecting arcades (another very typical West Country motif: a fine example occurs on a carved and painted slate tablet of 1655 at North Hill); and the turning of its front supports tends towards a baluster form rather than the elongated 'cup and cover' of the others.⁷ There is a fourth chair in the county which is related but less closely. The round-arched panel bears carving which is reduced to a more linear formula while a separate back rail (carved with inturned scrolls) sits between the posts surmounted by a cresting consisting of a single complete semicircular lunette with a pair of masks forming 'ears' either side. I have not been able or even attempted to pinpoint the workshop although I suspect it was located in the eastern part of the county: Launceston is a possibility, or Callington. It would certainly be worth trying to identify the maker of these chairs because of the possibility that a box dated 1681, at Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts, may echo in a simplified form this distinctive Cornish decoration.

Where did the joiners seek their inspiration? Round-headed arches supported on pilasters, and decorative devices like stopped-fluting, guilloche, paired or multiple scrolls obviously demonstrate a debt to Renaissance architectural decoration, and that Cornwall responded surprisingly early, in sculpture, to metropolitan work in the early-Renaissance style is evidenced by Prior Vivian's tomb (died 1533) now in Bodmin church. But the

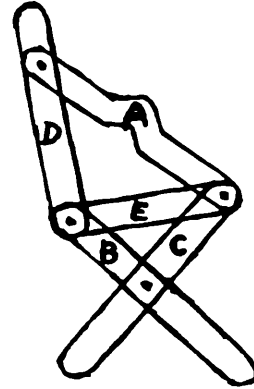
evidence suggests that no Cornish joiner had ever seen any architectural or decorative pattern book himself. The sometimes extremely simplified, sometimes highly elaborated organic motifs used for the decoration of panels may also derive, at some distance, from Renaissance designs. On the other hand, motifs like the in-turned scrolls which occur regularly on Cornish furniture, whilst existing in the Renaissance repertoire of ornament, are much more likely to derive from a much earlier, local, manifestation of sub-classical ornament, that of Romanesque fonts — for instance, at Lanreath — as I have argued elsewhere for other parts of the country.⁸ Liking for panels of asymmetrical ornament, remarked on above, is rare on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century furniture elsewhere in England. It is paralleled, however, on the exactly contemporary incised memorial slates which are such a feature of Cornish churches and churchyards and these certainly owe a debt to contemporary needlework patterns. A comparison between the Vincent slate of 1606 at North Hill or the similar slate of 1607 at Landrake and designs in the writing master Thomas Trevelyan's *Miscellanies* of 1608 and 1618 are very revealing. Thomas Trevelyan had a cornish-sounding name and may conceivably have worked for the Grenvilles of Stow in North Cornwall.⁹ From their elaborated initial letters, the interlaced hearts, the ornament of individual, recognisable flower species, it would be easy to believe that Trevelyan designed slates himself. Of the published designs only a handful of borders correspond at all closely with the decoration on furniture.

Cornish furniture gives very little hint that the brand of Mannerism popularised by Antwerp, which was so influential in Exeter masons' and joiners' shops, was known in the county, but once again tombs and the slates, and other decorative work, come to our rescue. We have noticed that a mask on the Grylls monument at Lanreath derives from a print designed by Cornelis Floris, and the strapwork cartouche and openwork cresting in the same monument are mannerist in style though derived from no particular source. Two plaster overmantels at Trecice, dating from the 1570s, also show an awareness of mannerist cartouches but the clearest indication that Mannerist prints were used in Cornwall is provided by two slates, probably by the same maker, one in St Stephen by Saltash, just on the Cornish side of the Tamar, commemorating W. Hitchens, his wife and ten children; the other, from St Ive, near Callington (Fig. 12), commemorating Sir John Wray who died in 1597.¹⁰ Their elaborate strapwork cartouches are derived from prints in Clement Perret's writing book, *Exercitatio Alphabetica*, published in 1569, whose cartouches (Fig. 13) were designed by the chief populariser of Antwerp mannerism, Jan Vredeman de Vries. One looks in vain for the influence on furniture of a later phase of Mannerism, elsewhere in England called Artisan Mannerism.

We are forced to conclude, therefore, that the decoration of fixed woodwork and, particularly, of movable furniture in Cornwall stands at a considerable remove from the mainstream of continental-inspired architectural decoration in England, but, equally, the county was no different in this, except in degree, from any other county. It is hardly surprising, in view of their less favourable position on the social scale, that local joiners found it more difficult to keep up with contemporary trends elsewhere than the gentry did, whose womenfolk, at least in furnishing their houses with textiles, 'would be verie loth to come behind the fashion, in newfanglednes of the maner, if not in costlynnes of the matter'.¹¹

REFERENCES

1. For example, Robert Blair St George, *The Wrought Covenant* (Brockton, Mass., 1979); Jonathan L. Fairbanks, Robert F. Trent and others, *New England Begins* (Boston, Mass., 1982); W. N. Hosley and Elizabeth Pratt Fox and others, *The Great River: Art & Society of the Connecticut Valley, 1635-1820* (Hartford, Conn., 1986).
2. 'Oak Furniture in Dorset: Some Introductory Thoughts', *Furniture History*, xii (1976), pp. 24-25; 'Understanding Oak Furniture: Some Lessons in Herefordshire' in *The Grosvenor House Antiques Fair 1983 Handbook*, pp. 43-44; 'An Oak Bed at Montacute: A Study in Mannerist Decoration', *Furniture History*, xvii (1981), pp. 1-19; 'Classical Inspiration in English Oak', *Antique Dealer & Collector's Guide*, February 1984, pp. 38-41.
3. *Furniture History*, xvii and *Antique Dealer & Collector's Guide*, loc. cit.; see note 2 for full references.
4. For Searle and Dennis see, for instance, Fairbanks and Trent, op. cit., 3, nos. 474-78.
5. Norden, *Description of Cornwall* (1728 ed.), p. 28.
6. The dimensions of the chair and its timbers are as follows (in inches):
h 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ w 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ (across top rail of back)
The rails are 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ \times $\frac{5}{8}$ timber, the legs 3 \times $\frac{3}{4}$
The measurements between the centres of the joints (see diagram) are:
A = 26 B = 11 C = 10 D = 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ E = 15
Sight size of panel: 12 \times 18



7. A small group of tables displays a consistent style of turned leg, slim in the upper part with one projecting ovolo ring, swelling from about halfway down before contracting again; one of the tables has a frieze of paired scrolls.
8. *Oak Furniture from Lancashire and the Lake District* (exh. cat.) (Temple Newsam, Leeds, 1973), pp. x-xi; *Antique Dealer & Collector's Guide*, *ibid.*, p. 41.
9. For Trevelyon, see J. L. Nevison, 'The Embroidery Patterns of Thomas Trevelyon', *Walpole Society*, xli (1966-68), pp. 1-38; Santina M. Levey, 'An Elizabethan Embroidered Cover', *Victoria & Albert Museum Yearbook*, 3 (1972), pp. 76-86.
10. This slate was removed from St Ive in 1924 and is now at Tawstock in North Devon.
11. Richard Carew, *The Survey of the County of Cornwall* (1602), p. 64.