

A NOTE ON FURNITURE MAKING IN RURAL FIFE, 1919–1923

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Manuscript account books left by wrights in rural communities allow the repertoires of these small scale but exceptionally versatile furniture makers to be documented with some precision. An insight into one such firm, run by William Swan, ‘joiner and contractor’ of Kingsbarns in Fife (population in 1921, 1,301) is provided by the survival of an unexpectedly rich source of information, in the shape of a 160 page *workbook* maintained by one of its employees, James Martin, between 20 February 1919 and 5 May 1923.¹

An account of the materials involved in the construction of a meal gernel for South Quarter farm sets the tone for much of this record, a great deal of which itemises work generated by the working needs of the local farming community, accounting, e.g. for the construction of troughs, hen houses, wheel barrows, corn and coup carts, plough shafts, clogs and corn kists. Coffins, crates, doors, ladders, gates and window frames—the staple diet of any significant joinery outfit—also figure prominently supplementing an assortment of minor works (e.g. shovel handles, hammer shafts and wheel spokes) that may have assumed greater than usual significance as a consequence of the economic uncertainty of the immediate post War period.

Importantly, the *workbook* provides conclusive evidence that the firm engaged in furniture making. Although never as important as orthodox joinery work, this was undoubtedly conducted on a significant scale, as a simple listing of items completed between 1919 and 1923 clearly reveals. In addition to numerous repairs to existing furnishings, this includes three wardrobes, two bookcases, two chests of drawers, a clock case, hall stand, bed, mirror frame, draught screen, two dressers, two stools and numerous tables (these including a gate leg table, a dressing table and several trestle tables).

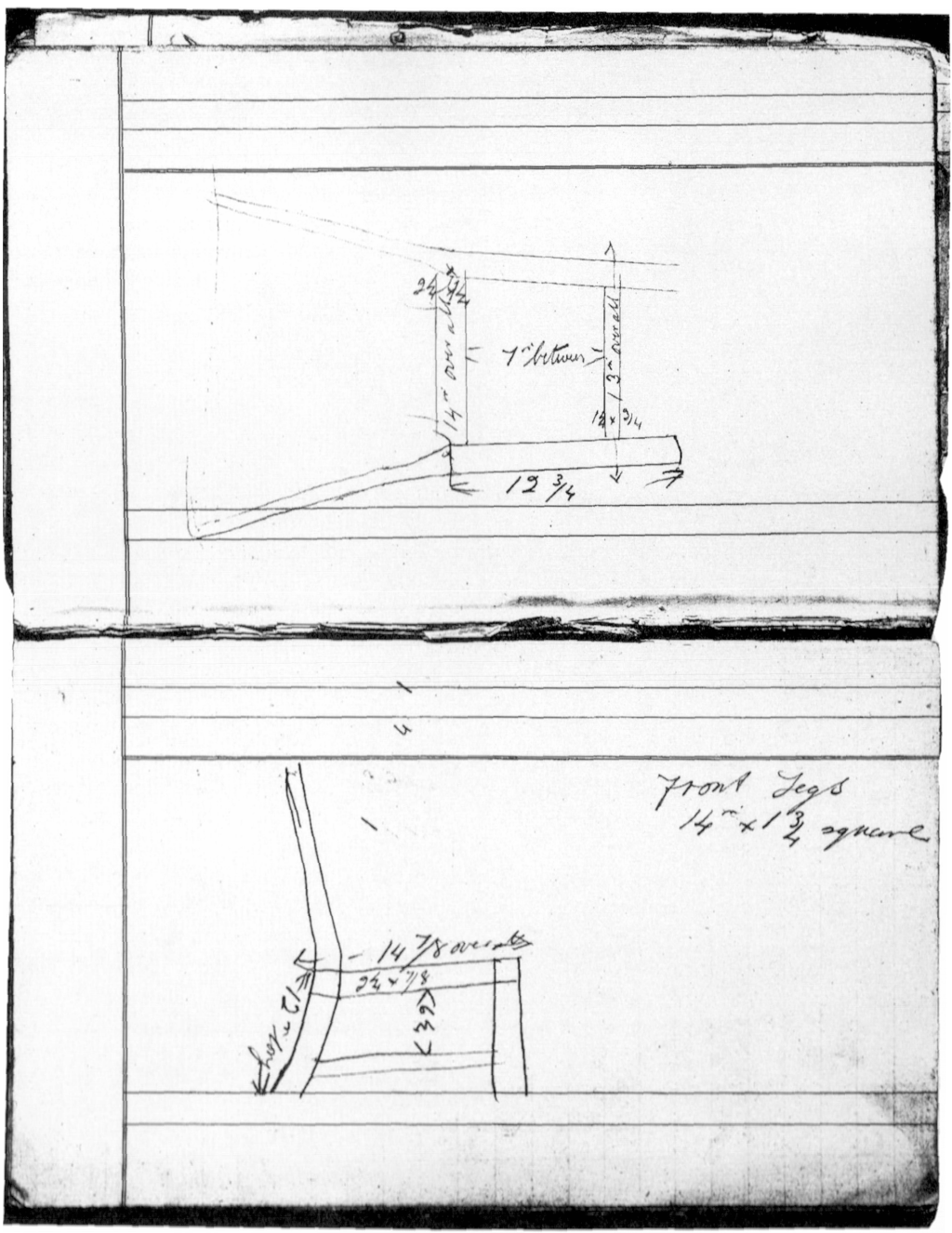
Frustratingly, no furniture from the Swan workshop can be identified with certainty, raising the probability that the bulk of what it produced was unlabelled. Martin’s thumb nail sketch for a child’s chair (Fig. 2) suggests that the firm’s output was of an unpretentious and utilitarian nature, that is perhaps to be identified with the survival of regional variants (in this case the Fife version of the so-called ‘Scotch’ chair). The 209 hours (stretched over fifteen weeks) spent on the construction of a dresser for Pitmilley House points, however, to an altogether more sophisticated level of production, making it all the more unfortunate that this particular property (which was also supplied with two bookcases, a table and extensive panelling) was demolished, and its contents dispersed, in the early 1960s. Further research is therefore necessary, and will focus on Kingsbarns parish, which accounts for all but a handful of the clients listed in the 1919–1923 record.

REFERENCES

1. I am grateful to Mr Andrew Sherriff (a nephew of James Martin) who kindly provided access to this document.

26	At Warminster	9	31st Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
27	At Warminster	3	1st Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
28	At Warminster	9	2nd Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
29	At Warminster	9	3rd Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
30	At Warminster	9	4th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
31	At Warminster	9	5th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
32	At Warminster	9	6th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
33	At Warminster	9	7th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
34	At Warminster	9	8th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
35	At Warminster	9	9th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
36	At Warminster	9	10th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
37	At Warminster	9	11th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
38	At Warminster	9	12th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
39	At Warminster	9	13th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
40	At Warminster	9	14th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
41	At Warminster	9	15th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
42	At Warminster	9	16th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
43	At Warminster	9	17th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
44	At Warminster	9	18th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
45	At Warminster	9	19th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
46	At Warminster	9	20th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
47	At Warminster	9	21st Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
48	At Warminster	9	22nd Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
49	At Warminster	9	23rd Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
50	At Warminster	9	24th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
51	At Warminster	9	25th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
52	At Warminster	9	26th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
53	At Warminster	9	27th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
54	At Warminster	9	28th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
55	At Warminster	9	29th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
56	At Warminster	9	30th Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2
57	At Warminster	9	31st Feb	Record for 1916	16 1/2

1. Workbook records, 5 February-9 February 1923



2. Sketch for a child's chair c. 1920