

DESSERS IN THE WEST COUNTRY

Gabriel Olive

The life of an antique dealer offers wonderful opportunities for observation of furniture, often at source. Unfortunately too often the pressures of commercial life prevent the detailed recording of such observations. The following notes, therefore, are not as fully documented as might be desired, but they are based on thirty years' experience of farm and cottage sales in the West Country. For every example illustrated many similar have been seen, carefully examined, and passed into the corpus of remembered knowledge. The dresser in the West Country never seems to have achieved the social status which it had in some other parts of the country. It may be that early industrialisation in the area created a middle class who preferred to furnish their houses after the urban fashion and the dresser, except in the cottage and remote farmhouse, was banished to the basement kitchen. Whatever the reason, West Country dressers are comparatively plain, which perhaps explains why they have hitherto attracted so little attention. It is possible, in my experience, to define a number of characteristics peculiar to different parts of the region which in themselves may form the basis of a complete typology. I have found it less easy to define the limits of each area or to find evidence of sources of manufacture or design.

The most obviously special kind of dresser to be found in the West Country is the Bridgwater dresser. This type has already been noted in at least one publication.¹ Until the 1950s there existed in Bridgwater large estates of late eighteenth-century terraced houses and as part of the standard fittings of each house there was in the back room a dresser of the type shown in Figure 1. As will be seen the design and construction are of the simplest possible, a number of elm boards cut to shape and nailed together to form a set of shelves without any drawers. Not all dressers with trestle ends come from Bridgwater.² Dressers of this type were particularly common in the Quantock region, west of Bridgwater. All of these dressers show the same end profile as those from Bridgwater itself, as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, both of which are earlier in date. This particular shape is very similar to the supports under the seats of many West Country settles and can also be seen beneath a bench built into the porch of an early house in Nether Stowey. The Bridgwater dressers appear to be part of a long tradition. Figure 4 illustrates a curious variant from nearby which may perhaps be classed in the same group. One constructional detail I have noted in a number of dressers coming from the coastal area north of Bridgwater is a central strut supporting the shelves which is housed into a mortice cut into the top of the base. While this small observation may be insufficient to define a type, it is worth recording as something which I have not seen in any dressers from elsewhere. The dresser illustrated in Figure 5 shows this strut in position.

The very different dressers from east Dorset and east Somerset have also a peculiarity in their construction. The bases have three drawers above two cupboard doors flanking a fixed central panel. The shelves above are deeper than in most dressers, with end boards extended in width at the bottom in a bracket shape. These ends are fixed to the lower half by means of a long sliding dovetail cut into the top of the base. The majority of these dressers are in

pine, but examples have been noted in other timbers (oak and elm). Provenanced dressers of the type have all come from within the area known as the Blackmore Vale. The farthest north of which I have records is a cottage in Wincanton and the farthest south a farm at Broad Oak, near Wimborne. An oral tradition ascribes some of these dressers to a family by the name of Baker at Kings Stag, in the heart of the vale. It is possible that all were the product of a single workshop. Stylistic evidence suggests the type goes back at least to the late eighteenth century but I have not found evidence of the Baker family as carpenters before 1875 (Fig. 6).³

The early nineteenth-century boom in the Cornish mining industry is reflected in the Regency style of dressers from that county. This is noticeable in the narrow panels, like pilasters, at the sides of the shelves, together with an arched frieze below the cornice. This kind of architectural treatment appears on all types of Cornish dressers, whether in oak or pine, with cupboard bases or on legs. Like the houses most of the dressers are comparatively low. A number of those with cupboard bases were apparently made originally without back or bottom boards. These were presumably cottage fixtures. Figure 7 is a typical example in pine. A special type of Cornish dresser was made in and around Penzance. Here the same outline can be seen in the shelves, but they are bowfronted or sometimes breakfronted, the centre section narrower than the sides. The bases of these Penzance dressers are fitted with a number of drawers of differing sizes. Simple examples were, again, made without back or bottom boards. The dresser illustrated in Figure 8 is a particularly fine example from the town of Penzance, where there are many fine large Regency houses. Here even the cornice, of typical Regency profile, is bowfronted.

Devon dressers are generally very simple in appearance. Most are made of oak with three drawers in a base on four straight or tapered square legs. The rack stands on shaped shoes in the manner of many Welsh dressers. Their unique feature is in the shaping of the ends supporting the shelves. These are bowed so that the middle or lower shelf is wider than the rest. This bowing is not always in a regular curve; in many cases it appears more as a swelling in the side of the dresser shelves. Figure 9 shows this feature clearly. It is not, perhaps, always generally appreciated that many farmhouses were furnished with more than one dresser. In the kitchen, the main living room, the dresser was both for usage and display. In the little used parlour it was mainly for display. In the dairy it was an entirely practical structure. Under the open base stood churns, pails, and other large vessels. On top were stood the wide settling pans for cream, while the rack held small utensils. I have found no clear distinction in the West Country between dairy and household dressers, except that in the dairy the bases were always open. A number of long low dressers noted in west Somerset, often made of fruitwood and without racks, were perhaps made for the dairy. These probably stood below the window in the lean-to back room, any shelving being on another wall. In Devon there existed also another kind of dresser, known as the cupboard dresser, in the farmhouse kitchen.⁴ This was a totally enclosed piece of furniture. In early examples the lower half is similar to other dresser bases with cupboards. The top, also enclosed with doors, is slightly smaller, the junction between the two halves covered by a heavy moulding. Figure 10 is a typical example. This type of dresser developed later into a cupboard with glazed upper half, unrecognisable to most people as a dresser. Figures 11, 12, and 13 show the development. Some Victorian examples in pine are enriched with pillars at the sides of the top.

Finally I illustrate two very simple cottage dressers from Somerset which are so undistinguished as to be almost indistinguishable as a type. They are characteristic of much of the simplest furniture to be found in the West Country. Plain slabs of elm or pine form the ends.⁵ There are no feet. Many pieces stand directly on their own bottom boards, any plinth moulding merely concealing the edge of the base. Mouldings round panels tend to be narrow and cornices, though often elaborate, are built up out of a series of small mouldings (Figs 14 and 15). However humble, clearly the dresser in the West Country had a history of its own and within its traditions developed some interesting and unusual variations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the Chief Archivist, Dorset County Record Office, for information about the Baker family of Kings Stag. For photographs and permission to reproduce them I am indebted to the following: Figure 9 Wye Antiques, Stow-on-the-Wold; Figure 10 Robert Byles, Bampton; Figure 13 Forde House, Newton Abbot; Figures 14 and 15 R. Eggins, Limpley Stoke Hotel.

NOTES ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Bridgwater dresser in elm. The feet are a modern repair. There may well have been no feet originally. The pine cornice also appears to be a later addition. Late eighteenth century.
2. Quantock dresser with oak trestle ends 2in. thick, the rest in elm. The bottom bar is a later addition and the handles are modern. On the ends and between the drawers can be seen the scars of original split turned mouldings, which suggest a date just before 1700. Such a piece may well have been described in contemporary documents as a sideboard.
3. Quantock dresser in walnut. The pot board and centre foot are original. This is one of the few dressers from the West Country I have seen with a pot board. The replaced handles are of the same type as the originals, in the original holes. Mid-eighteenth century.
4. Unusual trestle ended dresser, made of oak throughout and entirely original. The inner faces of the end panels left rough and stained. Mid-eighteenth century. From a farmhouse in the upper Culm Valley.
5. Oak dresser from the Somerset coastal area north of Bridgwater, with central strut housed into the top of the lower half. The base of this dresser, with its three front legs and pot board, is more like some of those from South Wales, only a few miles across the Severn estuary, than any West Country dressers. When found this dresser had cupboard doors, clearly not original, fitted between the legs. The brackets are conjectural, matching original scars on the timber. Late eighteenth century.
6. Blackmore Vale dresser in pine, the top fitted to the base on a long sliding dovetail. The wooden drawer knobs are original. Profile of the cornice suggest a date c. 1840. From a farm at Broad Oak near Wimborne.
7. Cornish dresser in pine. The edges of the drawer fronts restored and the handles modern. The Regency style pilasters to the top are typical. The arched frieze below the cornice is more usually cut in a single sweep. c. 1830.
8. A very fine Penzance dresser in pine, with bowfronted shelves and cornice. The pattern of drawers in the base is typical of dressers from the area. c. 1820.
9. Devon dresser in oak, showing clearly the bowed shape of the shelf ends. Original condition throughout. c. 1800 From a farm at Rackenford, north Devon.
10. Devon cupboard dresser in oak. The cupboards and drawers in the base betray its origins as a dresser. The heavy moulding accommodating the difference in size between top and bottom is characteristic of the type. c. 1800. From north Devon.
11. Devon cupboard dresser with glazed top in elm. The moulding between the two halves is similar to the previous example. In this case the top is the same size as the bottom and the moulding is purely decorative, marking this as a transitional piece. c. 1800. From south Devon.
12. West Country cupboard dresser in pine with sliding doors to the glazed top. Both the shaping of the top rails of the upper doors and the diagonal matched board panels of the lower doors suggest the

influence of Victorian neo-Gothicism, but the slab ends betray its true ancestry. Mid-nineteenth century from a farm near Taunton.

13. At first sight this appears to be a standard Victorian pine bookcase/china cupboard, but the proportions of the base indicate that it owes its origins to the West Country cupboard dresser (cf. Figs 14 and 15). It is worth noting that there is no bottom board to the upper half, as one would expect in most cabinet work of the period. Mid-nineteenth century from a farm near Taunton.

14. Somerset cottage dresser in elm. Note the slab ends and absence of feet or plinth. The sides of the top are housed into the top of the base but not dovetailed. c. 1800. In original condition, as found in a cottage in Wincanton.

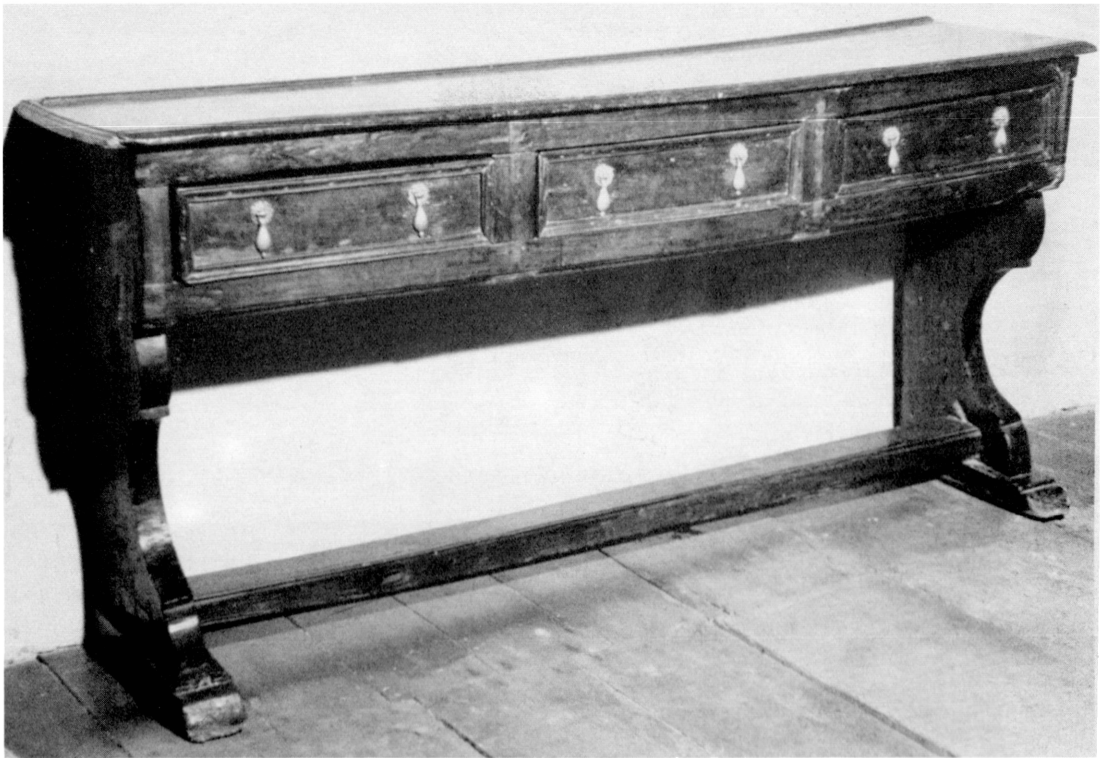
15. Somerset cottage dresser very similar to the foregoing. It is made largely of elm with elm slab ends, doors and centre panel of pine and ash drawer rails. c. 1840. From a cottage near Langport.

REFERENCES

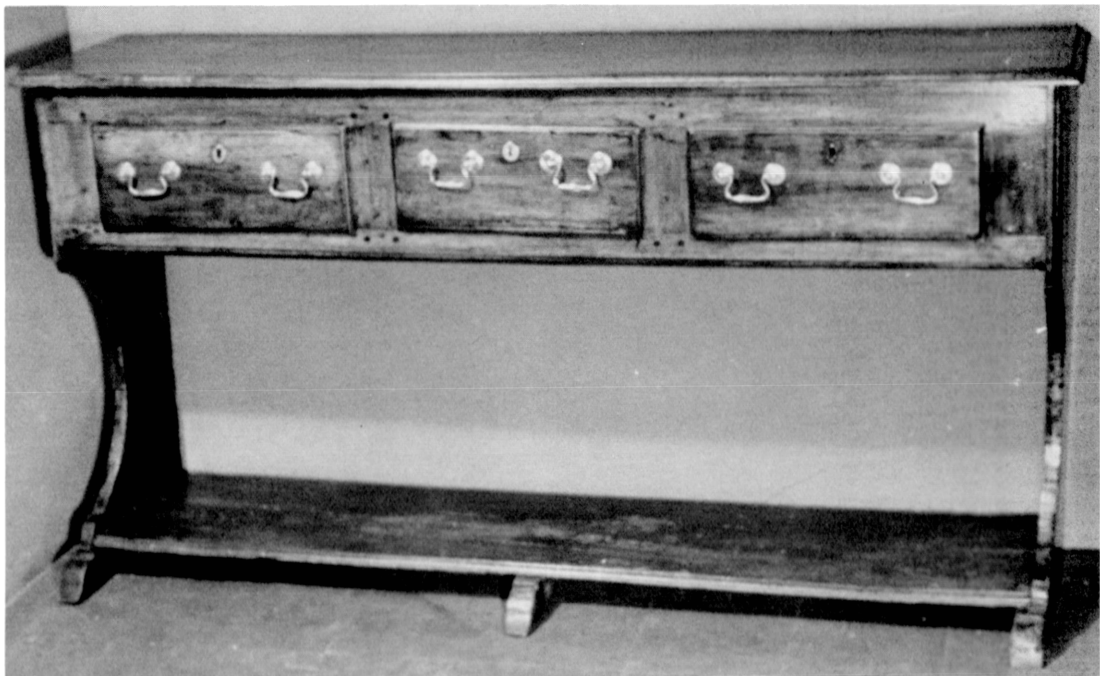
1. Jane Toller, *Country Furniture* (1973).
2. I have seen at least one example from Yorkshire and another from East Anglia, both very different from the Somerset type.
3. Kelly's Directories for Lydlinch, within which parish Kings Stag lies, give: 1875 BAKER John, Carpenter; 1880 BAKER John, Carpenter and farmer; 1890 BAKER John, Carpenter; 1895 BAKER John, Carpenters Kings Stag; 1903 BAKER James, Carpenter. Information about the Baker family as makers was given to me by Mr Warr of Townsend Farm, Pulham, where there were three of these dressers.
4. C. H. Laycock, 'The Old Devon Farmhouse and its furnishings', Part I, *Transactions Devon Association* (1922) Crediton Meeting.
5. Elm was used extensively as a timber for house building and furniture, particularly in Somerset. It is said that elm trees were popular because no other plant then known would draw so much moisture from the soil in the wetlands of that county.



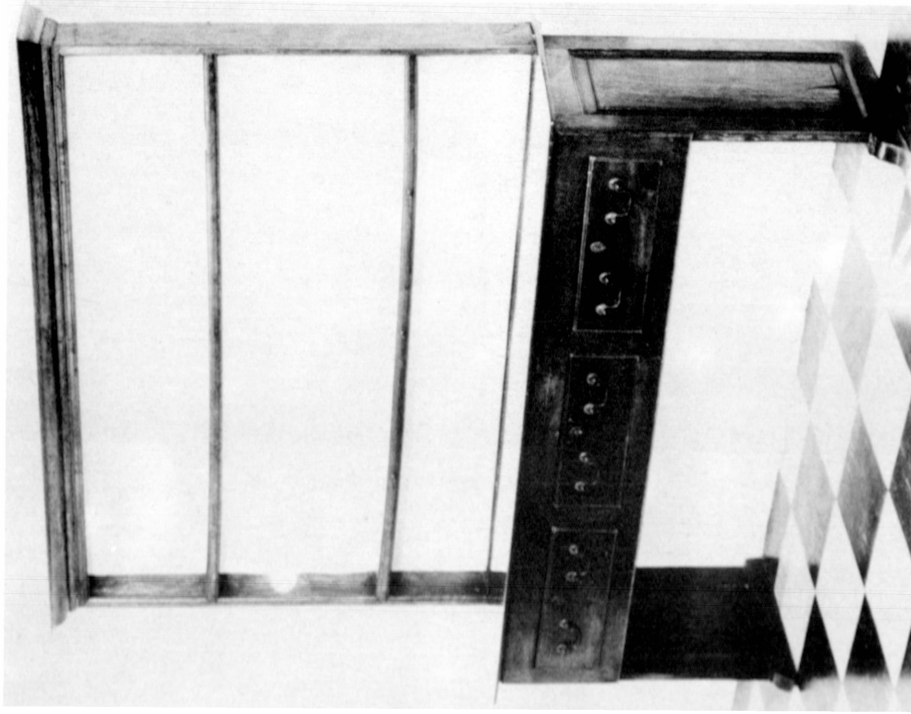
1. Bridgewater dresser, elm, late eighteenth century



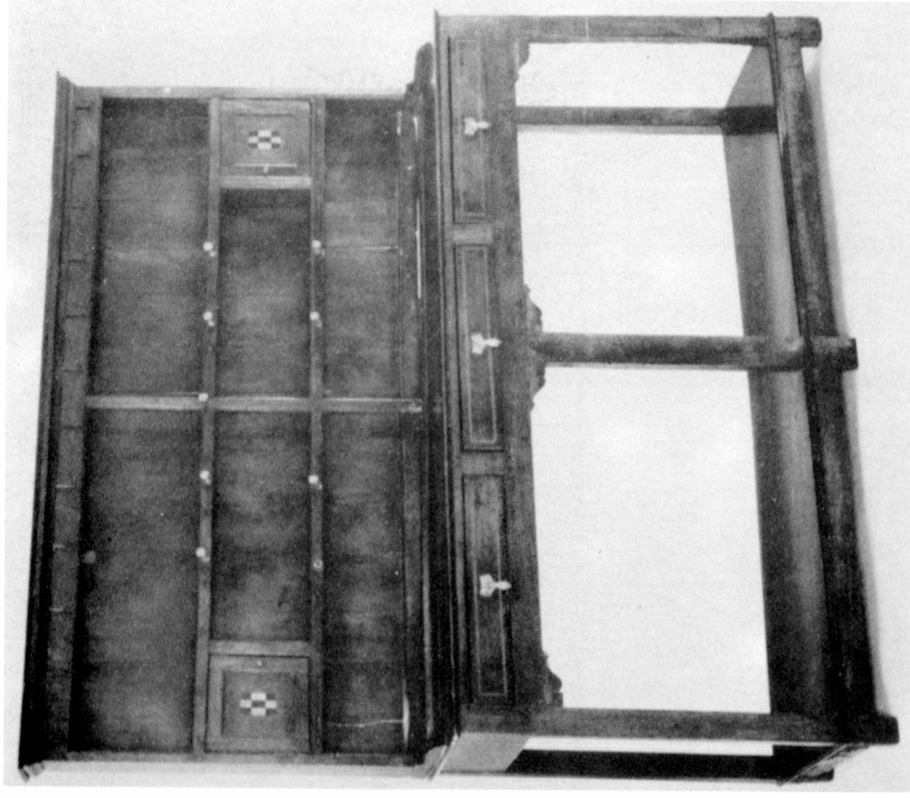
2. Quantock dresser, oak and elm, c. 1700



3. Quantock dresser, walnut, mid-eighteenth century



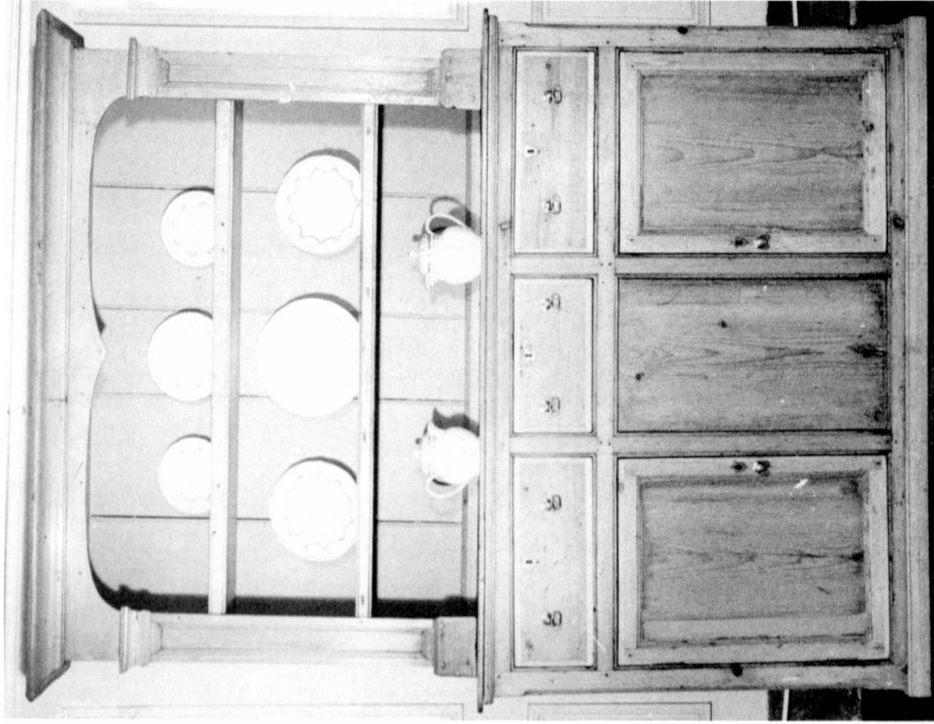
4. Dresser, Upper Culm Valley, oak, mid-eighteenth century



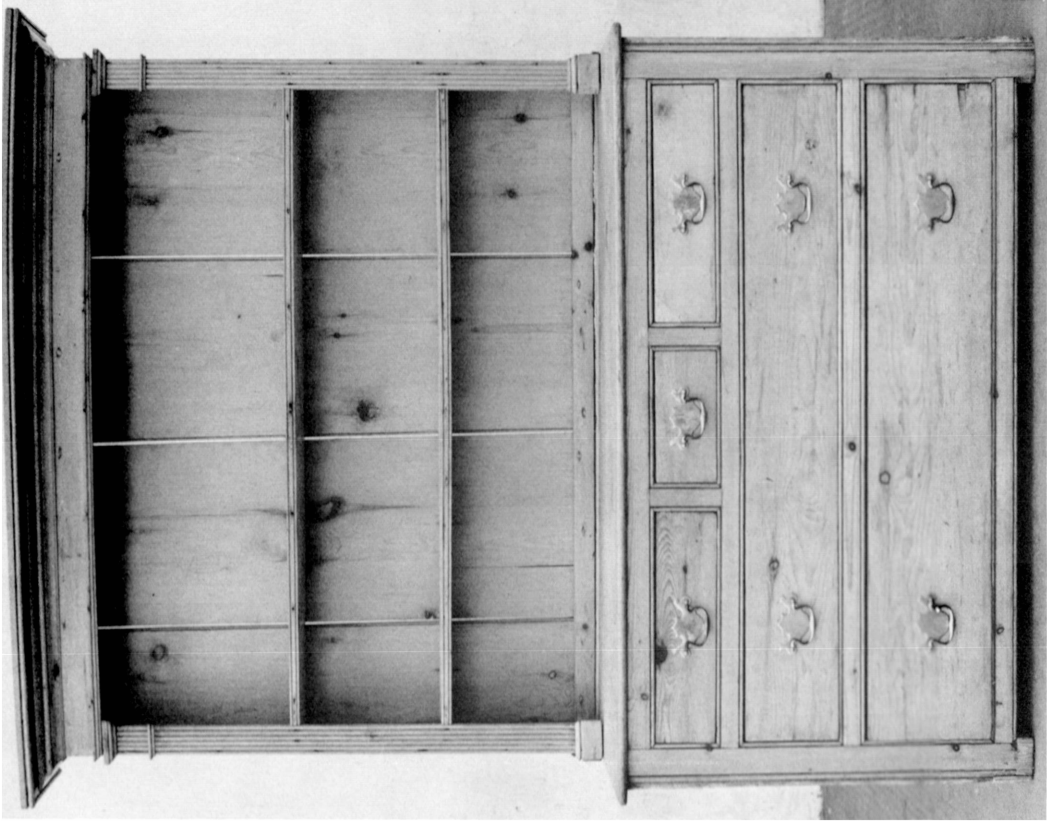
5. Dresser, north of Bridgwater, oak, late eighteenth century



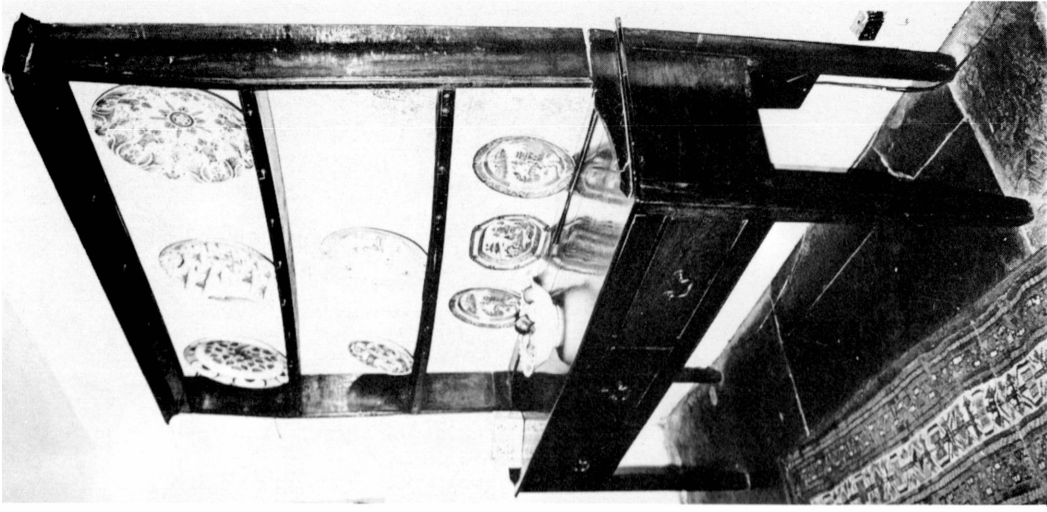
6. Blackmore Vale dresser, pine, c. 1840



7. Cornish dresser, pine c. 1830



8. Penzance dresser, pine, c. 1820



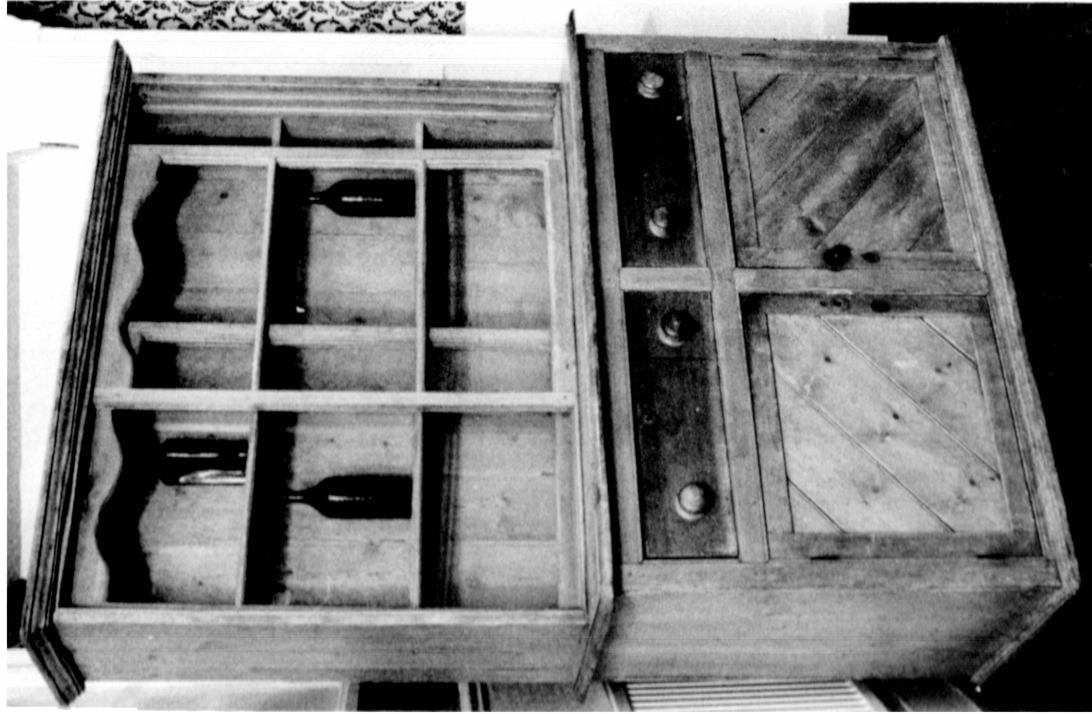
9. North Devon dresser, oak, c. 1800.
From Rackenford



10. North Devon cupboard dresser, oak, c. 1810



11. South Devon cupboard dresser, elm, c. 1800



12. Cupboard dresser, pine, mid-nineteenth century,
Taunton area



13. Cupboard dresser, pine, mid-nineteenth century,
Taunton area



14. Somerset dresser, elm, c. 1800. From Wincanton



15. Somerset dresser, elm and pine, c. 1840. From Langport