

FURNITURE MAKING IN COUNTY CLARE: THE O'HALLORAN BROTHERS

Dabheoc Rynne

Miltown Malbay in County Clare is a small town of less than a thousand inhabitants. It is situated about a mile from the Atlantic Ocean on the south west coast of Ireland. It was here that Tommy and Paddy O'Halloran set up a small furniture making enterprise in 1944. Alongside this they ran an undertaking service, a hardware shop, a joinery and a general builder's providers. As well as furniture, they made coffins, doors, windows, skirting boards, and everything essential for house building. They supplied all the wood fittings for the houses in 'The Crescent', Miltown Malbay. This well planned curved row of two storey houses, with a green in front, was built in the 1950s. They made all kinds of furniture from settlebeds and bed presses to simple stretcher tables with formica tops. One of the most popular pieces was the glass case (Fig. 1). These replaced the older locally-made open dresser. They retained a similar design, but with an added four glass doors on the top half. This would have been considered very modern at the time, hygienic and easily maintained. The bottom two stained glass doors hid the jam jars and food from the visitor's gaze and behind the top two doors china could be displayed. Paddy O'Halloran reckons they sold over 200 of these glass cases, over a remarkably small area, namely the three local parishes of Inagh, Mullagh and Miltown Malbay.

Paddy O'Halloran served his time under Edmund Moroney, a local carpenter and undertaker in the 1930s. Edmund had spent time in the U.S.A. working as a carpenter. He returned with new ideas like the use of dowels for constructing furniture. But the O'Hallorans never used this system, instead reverting back to the older and better mortice and tenon joints. During the war years the better imported pine timber became impossible to get, forcing carpenters back to using home timbers, sitka spruce and larch for furniture and chestnut for coffins.

The brothers ran the furniture business themselves, but after a period they took on apprentices. Not more than two, they would serve their time for up to four years. No mechanical wood working equipment was used until 1970 when a multicore saw was purchased. Previous to this hand tools served all their needs. A carpenter by the name of Willie Clancy made and sharpened a lot of the O'Halloran hand tools. Planes were made from beech which Paddy remembers being soaked in linseed oil for a week before being used. Knobs were also made on the premises. The brothers closed down the entire operation in 1986 and sold their premises. Retired now, Paddy lives in the North East and Tommy still works as a local carpenter.



1. 'Glass case' by the O'Halloran brothers, c. 1945-55. From Spanish Point, County Clare



2. Stencilled maker's mark on reverse of cornice cresting of glass case shown in Fig. 1