

# OAK FURNITURE AND THE TOWNELEY FAMILY OF LANCASHIRE

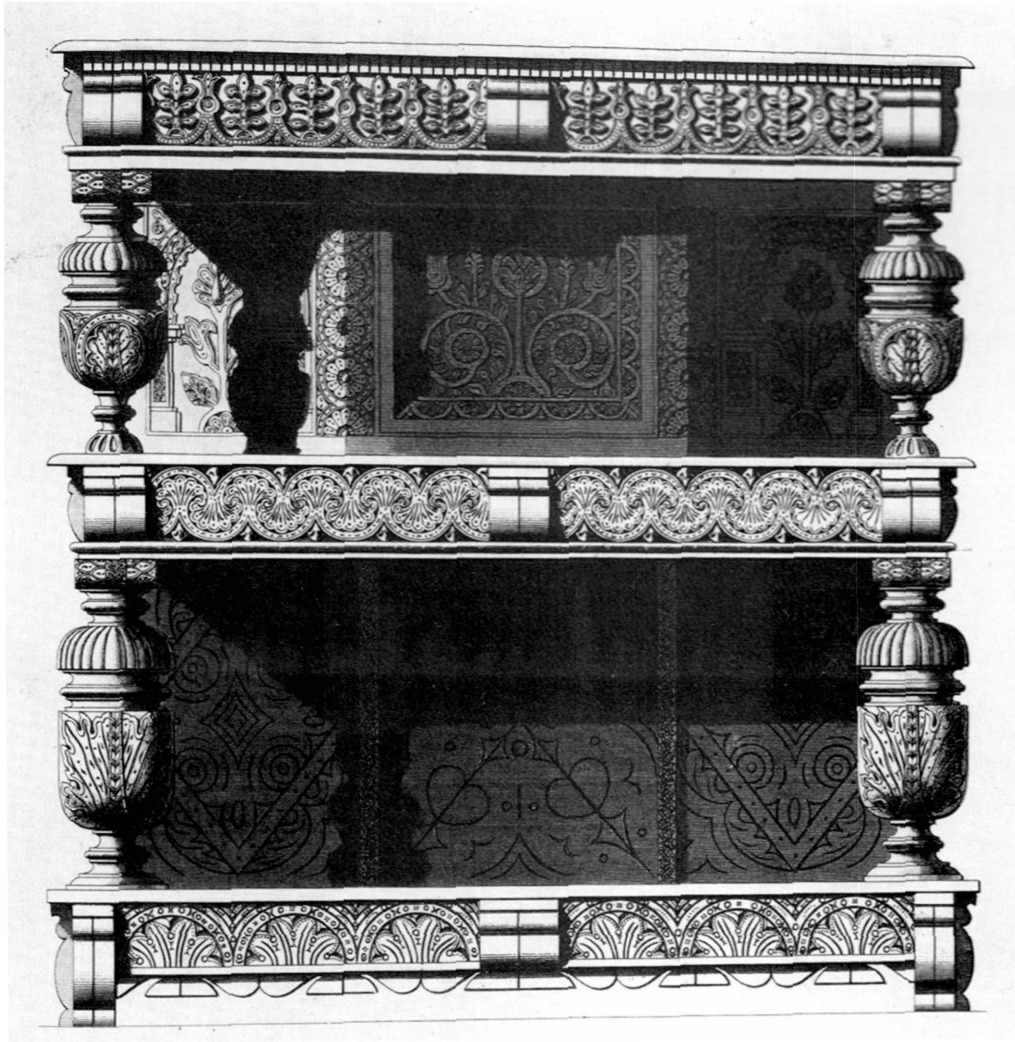
Susan Bourne

In 1884 Henry Taylor described the side wings of Towneley Hall, Burnley, as having 'Walls handsomely panelled in oak, and there is a profusion of fine old oak furniture'.<sup>1</sup> However, by 1902 when the home of the Towneley family was sold to Burnley Corporation by Lady O'Hagan (née Towneley), the house was almost empty and, with a very few exceptions, all the contents had been dispersed. Lady O'Hagan moved to a smaller 17th-century house on the estate, 'The Hollins', which she panelled with oak from another nearby 17th-century house, Barcroft Hall, so it is likely that she retained some of the oak furniture, but no record of its whereabouts has been found. In spite of the fact that Towneley Hall was purchased for use as an art gallery and museum, no record of the contents was made. Most of the oak furniture now on display was purchased from the dealers, J. W. Needham Ltd of St Annes Square, Manchester, in the 1930s and, although the collection contains some pieces from Lancashire, no oak pieces with a Towneley provenance have ever been acquired.

This poses one of the many problems associated with tracing 17th-century oak furniture and relating it to a particular region. Although antiquarian interest in oak furniture began in the 18th century and by the early 19th century an 'Elizabethan' revival in architecture was accompanied by the use of oak panelling and furniture, sometimes genuine and sometimes made up (albeit often incorporating original elements), oak furniture was most frequently valued and recorded for its often spurious historical associations. Late 19th-century newspaper accounts by the local historian, William Waddington, of receptions held at Towneley mention 'a remarkably well carved oak bedstead which was formerly the property of King James I'.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary documentary evidence of the 16th and 17th centuries is not usually available. Probate inventories in Lancashire do not normally describe the furniture beyond naming items such as 'plaine buffet stooles', 'longe formes', 'longe table' and 'a courte cupboard with a steyned coveringe'.<sup>3</sup> Bills, contemporary illustrations and the names of makers of this type of furniture are almost non-existent.

The first book describing old English furniture, Henry Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*,<sup>4</sup> unlike most of its successors, gives the location of all of the illustrated furniture (Fig. 1). A few 19th-century writers illustrated examples of regional furniture, but it was not until 1922 that Herbert Cescinsky and Ernest Gribble suggested a method of identifying local styles and accurate dating by comparison with fixed woodwork in churches and from there to fixed woodwork and furniture in similar buildings. This was not followed until 1948 when R. W. Symonds published the first of two articles in *The Connoisseur* on regional oak furniture, and as late as 1968 Wolsey and Luff wrote a book on oak furniture without referring to regional styles.<sup>5</sup> But in 1971 Temple Newsam House, Leeds, staged an exhibition, *Oak Furniture from Yorkshire Churches*, followed by *Oak Furniture from*



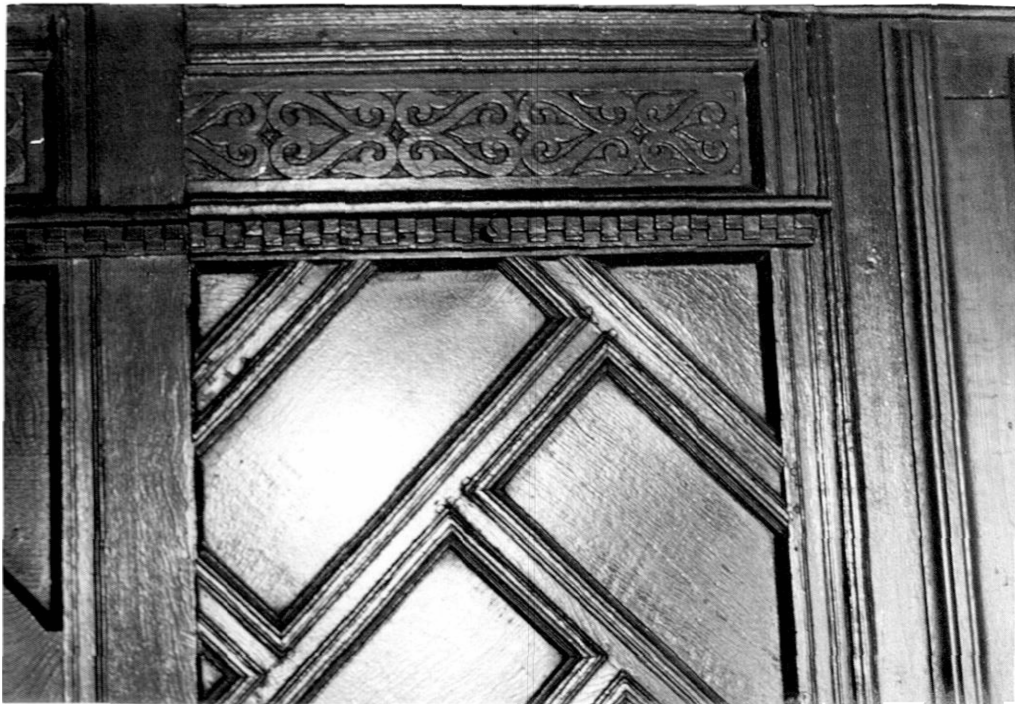
1. Henry Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836), pl. xxvi

*Lancashire and the Lake District* in 1973 and *Oak Furniture from Gloucestershire and Somerset* in 1976 based on research by Anthony Wells-Cole, using comparisons with fixed woodwork, with pieces of known provenance and with designs which occur frequently in an area. The catalogues for these three pioneering exhibitions have led to a greater interest than ever before in the identification of regional oak furniture, and Victor Chinnery's recent volume on oak furniture includes a section on regional styles.<sup>6</sup>

Of the fixed woodwork that remains at Towneley Hall; the late gothic chapel, the 16th-century long gallery with two late 17th-century bedrooms and the family dining room, it is the latter that is most useful for comparison. The room was installed in 1626 by Richard

Towneley (1566–1628)<sup>7</sup> and consists of chevron panelling with a strapwork frieze above a dentil moulding (Fig. 2). This rather unusual diagonal arrangement of panels is also found at Norbury Hall in Derbyshire, and identical panelling, moulding and frieze is found at Browsholme Hall some fifteen miles from Towneley. This panelling was given to Thomas Lister Parker in 1809 by James Taylor of Parkhead near Whalley, Lancashire, the ancient home of the Kenyon family situated seven miles from Towneley, and was probably installed in the library at Browsholme in 1809.<sup>8</sup> Although the frieze pattern cannot be exclusively assigned to Lancashire since variations are frequently found on 17th-century oak furniture such as a communion table probably made in 1634 for St John's Church, Leeds,<sup>9</sup> a similar version is found on a form of chair associated with South Lancashire and North Cheshire now at Towneley Hall (Fig. 3).

Further fixed woodwork associated with Richard Towneley is now in the library at Browsholme. This is the elaborately carved overmantel bearing the arms of Towneley (argent, a fesse and three mullets in chief sable) quartered with seventeen other families (Fig. 6). This detailed armorial shield of Richard Towneley also appears on a silver gilt seal matrix in the British Museum<sup>10</sup> and in the plasterwork of the great hall at Towneley installed in the late 1720s by Francesco Vassalli and Martino Quadri for another Richard Towneley (1689–1735) perhaps as a tribute to his namesake. The overmantel is said to have come from Hapton Tower, another Towneley property some five miles from Towneley Hall, and certainly it seems too sophisticated to have featured originally in the chevron



2. Detail of panelling in the family dining room at Towneley Hall, 1626



3. Chair, Towneley Hall Collection  
(FU/AN. 19)



4. Detail of the Barcroft Hall refectory  
table, 1613, Towneley Hall Collection  
(FU/AN. 1)

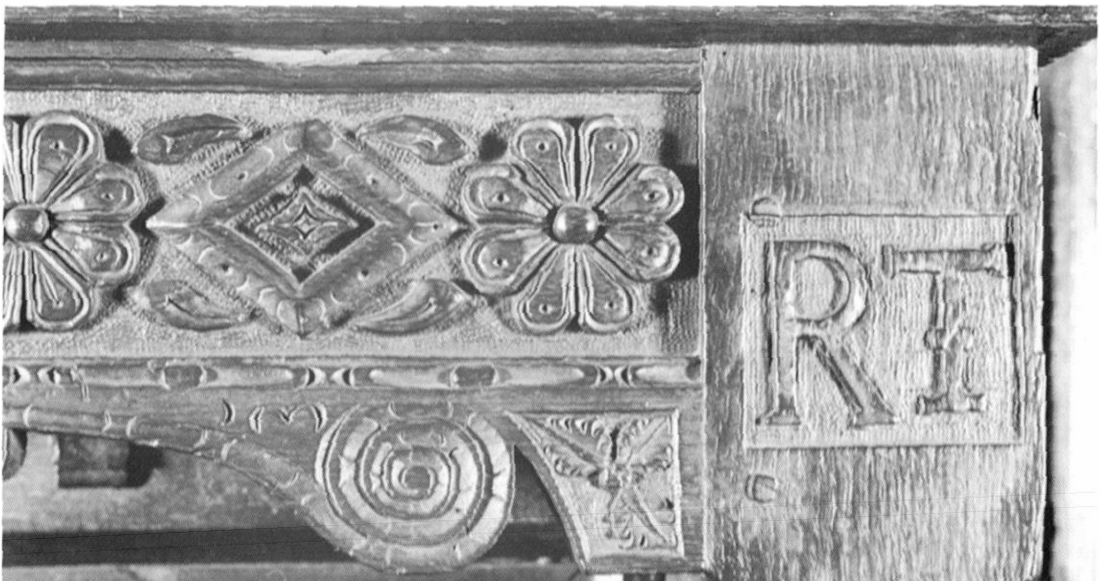


5. Cupboard in Browsholme Hall, 1607-28





6. Overmantel from Hapton Tower, now at Browsholme Hall



7. Detail of cupboard bearing initials of Richard Towneley

panelling of the family dining room at Towneley, the fireplace and overmantel of which were replaced by William Towneley in the 1740s. Hapton Tower no longer exists, it is thought to have been a barmkin or small fortified tower built in the early 16th century. Thomas Dunham Whitaker, the historian, records talking to an 'aged person' in the late 18th century who remembered the ruins in 1725.<sup>11</sup> The last member of the Towneley family to live in it had been Jane Towneley, Richard's widow, and the rooms are listed in her probate inventory dated 1634.<sup>12</sup> The Great Hall or the Little Hall seem the most likely locations for the overmantel. Unfortunately, this example with its provenance and clues as to ownership can tell us little about the regional styles of Lancashire furniture at the date, since it is an altogether too sophisticated piece which probably owes much to engraved designs and may well not have been made locally. The overmantel came to Browsholme about 1800 and was originally in the hall, but in 1806 it was moved to the library.

A movable piece of furniture associated with Richard Towneley also at Browsholme is the cupboard in the hall bearing his initials (Fig. 5). Richard Towneley was the son of the celebrated recusant, John Towneley, who spent much of the later part of his life in prison or confined to his estate at Towneley. He died and was succeeded by Richard in 1607, so it would seem that this cupboard was made between 1607 and the year of Richard's death, 1628, a fairly early date for this type of furniture. The cupboard is well carved with a variety of motifs. The frieze contains exceptionally lively carving of the lozenge, rosette and beak border; each repeat of the design is slightly different (Fig. 7). The motif has been found on furniture from both Lancashire and Yorkshire. It is seen on a South Lancashire style panel back arm chair in Towneley Hall and on a press cupboard in Turton Tower, Lancashire, combined with stylised panels of carnations and tulips found on much South Lancashire furniture. The lower rosette and guilloche frieze is seen on furniture from the counties of Westmorland, Lancashire and Yorkshire, and is often found with the elongated stiff-leaf design that occurs between the upper doors. Both feature prominently on a font cover in Lancaster Priory (St Mary's) dated 1631. The leaf design, this time surmounted by an acorn, is seen on a 17th-century panelled chest at Towneley Hall which is thought to have been in Burnley since the 19th century.<sup>13</sup>

The flat carving of the panels contrasts with the rounded depth of other elements of the upper half of the cupboard but shallow carving is found in some furniture from North Lancashire and the Lake District. The design is unusual but features rosettes often found on Lancashire furniture (Fig. 3). The reticulated design also occurs in an overmantel at Browsholme in the ante-room and formerly in the library. The paired heart pattern found in the six lower panels of the cupboard illustrates the dangers of assigning a single design exclusively to a particular area. It is found frequently in the West of England and on early American furniture.<sup>14</sup> The cupboard was given to Thomas Lister Parker by Col. Hargreaves of Ormerod Hall in Burnley.

Browsholme Hall contains much oak furniture, some of it made-up in the early 19th century using 17th-century panels from furniture in the North West. The house which originally dates from the 16th century remains much as it was in Thomas Lister Parker's (1779–1858) time, and reflects his antiquarian interests. In 1806 he employed the architect, Jeffry Wyatt, to rebuild and alter the house, one of the earliest examples of the Elizabethan Revival style. Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*, 1836, is dedicated 'To Thomas Lister Parker, Esq. A gentleman whose devotion to the arts of the Middle Ages, and kindness to

those engaged in their illustration, is universally acknowledged'. Certainly he was an extravagant patron of contemporary artists and commissioned John Buckler (1770–1851) and his son, J. C. Buckler, to paint numerous watercolours of Browsholme and its contents, one of which, dated 1807 and still hanging in the hall, shows the Towneley cupboard prominently displayed. It may be that he helped to find some of the Lancashire pieces depicted in Shaw. The most interesting to the regional furniture historian is plate XXVI (Fig. 1), an oak cabinet in the possession of T. R. Braddyll, Esq., of Cornishead (sic) Priory, Lancashire. A very similar cupboard is illustrated by Wolsey and Luff.<sup>15</sup> Conishead Priory near Ulverston was rebuilt between 1821 and 1836 in the gothic style and contained woodwork brought from Samlesbury Hall near Preston in 1834. Thomas Lister Parker seems to have stimulated interest in oak furniture. His close friend, the historian Thomas Dunham Whitaker of *The Holme in Cliviger*, near Burnley, incorporated misericords probably from Whalley Abbey and other early panels into the oak fire surrounds he installed into his 16th-century house and, towards the end of his life, Charles Towneley (1737–1805), the connoisseur best known for his celebrated collection of classical marbles, corresponded with him on the subject of oak furniture to be found in the lesser halls of Lancashire.<sup>16</sup> It also seems to have been the custom for gifts to be made to antiquarians. A large oak table in the hall at Browsholme was given to Thomas Lister Parker by Walter Fawkes of Farnley Hall, Yorkshire,<sup>17</sup> but as Charles Towneley's interest in oak furniture seems to have come late in life, he does not appear to have acquired much. His pocket books which survive from the 1770s and 1780s do not record any payments for this type of furniture although they do record payments to fashionable London makers such as Thomas Seddon. The oak-panelled long gallery at Towneley, which one might have expected to be furnished in an antiquarian manner with oak furniture and curios, is depicted in a watercolour of 1835 by John Weld as a bare room furnished only with seven high backed late 17th-century chairs and an uncarved chest and settle of 17th-century appearance.<sup>18</sup>

However, in 1795, Charles Towneley had purchased the adjoining Barcroft estate including Barcroft Hall dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. From it, came to Towneley a large oak refectory table and settle which now dominate the entrance hall, but which once stood in the family dining room (Fig. 4). The table bears the initials of William Barcroft and his wife, Susan, and the year of their marriage, 1613. In William Barcroft's will dated 6 January 1620, he gives 'to Robert Barcroft my son and heir apparent two tables in the hall, one table in the parler, and one standing bed in the chamber over the hall, and all my stone troughs, to remain as heirlooms'.<sup>19</sup> Sadly, this table with its excellent provenance, gives little help in tracing regional styles. It is of a standard type with a frieze of gouged decoration and plain balusters, but one small detail can be compared with the Towneley cupboard at Browsholme (Figs 4 and 7). A volute is separated from an angle by a tiny foliate spandrel ornament.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Mrs Parker, Simon Jervis, R. W. Lightbown and Ken Spencer for their help. Figures 5, 6 and 7 appear by kind permission of the Parker family of Browsholme.

## REFERENCES

1. H. Taylor, *Old Halls in Lancashire & Cheshire* (Manchester, 1884), p. 98.
2. 'Lady O'Hagan's Reception at Towneley' etc. Undated newspaper cuttings in the papers of William Waddington now in Towneley Hall.
3. Owen Ashmore, 'Household Inventories of the Lancashire Gentry, 1550-1700' *Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire Transactions*, 110 (1959) pp. 59-105.
4. Henry Shaw, *Specimens of Ancient Furniture drawn from Leading Authorities* (1836).
5. H. Cescinsky, *Early English Furniture & Woodwork* (1922); R. W. Symonds, 'Regional Design & Ornament of Joined Furniture' *Connoisseur*, 127 (no. 508), June 1948; R. W. Symonds, 'A Study of English Regional Furniture & Design', *Connoisseur*, 139 (no. 562), June 1957; S. W. Wolsey and R. P. Luff, *Furniture in England: The Age of the Joiner*. (1968).
6. Chinnery, *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition* (Woodbridge, 1979), chapter four.
7. A note in the Towneley Papers deposited in the Lancashire County Record Office, Preston (DDTO) states that Richard Towneley 'built the great building on the North side of the house where the kitchen is. It was finished about 1626'. A carved date in the room actually reads 1628, the date of Richard's death.
8. Information on Browsholme and Thomas Lister Parker has been kindly supplied by Mrs Parker and by Simon Jervis in a lecture, 'Thomas Lister Parker, FSA, Patron, Collector & Antiquary', given to the Society of Antiquaries, 11 December 1986.
9. *Oak Furniture from Yorkshire Churches*, (Exh. Cat.) Temple Newsam House, Leeds, 1971 (29).
10. BM + LA 1927, 2-16, 45. Illustrated in Richard Marks and Ann Payne, *British Heraldry from its Origins to c. 1800*, British Museum (Exh. Cat.), 1978 (152).
11. Whitaker, *An History of the Original Parish of Whalley 1* (1876), p. 64, note 1.
12. Transcript in the Farrer papers. Manchester Reference Library, Archives Dept. L1/S2/4/24.
13. The font is illustrated in the *Guide to Lancaster Priory* (1980), p. 6. The chest is illustrated in the *Guide to Towneley Hall* (1984), p. 22.
14. *Oak Furniture from Gloucestershire & Somerset* (Exh. Cat.) Temple Newsam House, Leeds, p. xiv.
15. Wolsey and Luff, op. cit., Pl. 30.
16. For many years the Towneley family papers were deposited in the Lancashire County Record Office (DDTO), but in 1985 the papers relating to Charles Towneley were sold at Sotheby's to a private collector. Mr R. W. Lightbown, kindly told me of the existence of three or four letters dating from 1804.
17. Simon Jervis, *Guide to Browsholme Hall*, (nr Clitheroe, Lancashire), 1980, p. 5.
18. Lancashire County Record Office, Weld Album. Illustrated in *Guide to Towneley Hall* (1984), p. 22.
19. Farrer papers, op. cit.