

# REGIONAL FURNITURE STUDIES IN THE LATE 18th AND 19th CENTURY TRADITIONS: AN INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH METHODS

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The identification of British furniture styles made for working people during the late 18th and 19th centuries is a major challenge to furniture historians. The confrontation of this task is long overdue, and indeed it has often been thought to be a field of study which was beyond development in terms of applying the conventions of rigorous academic enquiry. In any event, doubt has existed amongst some art historians as to whether the qualities of 'common' furniture, in aesthetic or design terms, warranted serious attention. Such inhibitions have largely arisen because of the presuppositions inherent in the British tradition of aesthetics which, in conventional furniture history studies reflects above all else, an appreciation of the decorative qualities of objects, and the pre-eminence of specialist designers or 'architects' of style. These approaches largely disregard the makers of furniture, and condemned craftsmen to a profound anonymity, which is similarly reflected in a disregard for structure and manufacturing technique. Disinterest in issues of production is not, however, typically extended to purchasers of such furniture, since the notion of patronage of the arts holds a respectable position within the propagation of 'accredited' crafts. In so recognising the role of the patron and the 'settings' for which furniture was made, the use value of furniture is minimised, and the accolade of significance is assured within a system of decorative arts.

Such approaches to furniture history studies, although fostering a wide variety of critical analyses of individual furniture items, histories of particular designers' work, and examination of the contents of houses, hold serious conceptual shortcomings. In limiting research to discrete empirical studies of form and their origins in designers' work, the importance of revealing the systematic elements of furniture styles is largely avoided, and the necessary relationship which these hold for the generation of a theory or theories of the cohesive elements of furniture design consequently remain unexplicated. Even where modes of analyses involving a recognisable theoretical framework have been brought to conventional furniture studies, for example, interpretive modes adopting classical iconography, such methodologies are typically implicit and unelaborated. Thus readers are denied the opportunity of a critical appreciation of the work which fails to reflect the common practices of research in recognised disciplines, since the research methods employed will reflect the structure of knowledge generated from them, and as such, is profoundly ideological.

Excitingly, recent work in vernacular furniture studies now proposes a radical re-appraisal of conventional modes of furniture analysis in undertaking the important work of

illuminating a wide variety of 'common' furniture, and, whilst retaining many of the conventional techniques and perspectives employed by the art historian, has extended the field of study to encompass many other socially relevant aspects of furniture history.

Within this new framework of investigation, furniture is taken to be central to the social life of its users; in the daily rituals of the home, at work, or in the many kinds of institutions for which furniture was made. To regard furniture in this way, as part of the symbolic 'community' of everyday life, expands and enriches the possible field of enquiry to include recognition of the reciprocal roles of both the producer of furniture as well as the user, where both were part of the same social group, sharing complex codes of design conventions, and a common sense of use. However, no one descriptive framework can adequately encompass the rich variety of British 'common' furniture, since the communities for which this was made were located within different geographic regions in which all material culture, including architecture and furnishings of all kinds, were the product of particular regional design codes and sub-codes.

It is within this notion of regionality that a sense of the coherence of vernacular furniture emerges, not as a single narrative, but as stylistic and cultural themes, or traditions, which reflect different regional conditions; historical, geographic, and particularly, economic differences. Such a view of furniture design, manufacture, and use, leads to the abandonment of misleading terms which have arisen to describe vernacular furniture, such as 'country' or 'oak' furniture. Vernacular furniture was made both for and in urban and rural settings, and with a range of soft and hard woods other than the widely used oak being part of the characteristics of different regional furniture groups. Greater variance of styles and higher levels of design elaboration were characteristic of the relatively affluent industrialised regions, contrasted with less elaboration and use of less expensive materials in non-industrial areas.

The programme of research suggested by regional furniture studies is, therefore, necessarily broadly based, and proposes that a blend of different types of evidence be brought together to form a collage of information. This approach may be divided into two major forms of investigation. The first involves recording and classifying furniture, with the intention of identifying regional furniture in general stylistic design terms, and ultimately to establish specific repertoires of stylistic motifs through which evidence of regional traditions may be systematically illustrated. Closely linked to this fundamental area of research lies the second avenue of enquiry which concerns the use of documentary evidence in creating a sense of the social and manufacturing context in which furniture was made and used. This includes evidence of the distribution, duration, and biographies of craftsmen, as well as details of family dynasties and communities of furniture makers. Information related to workshop contents, trade organisation, and apprenticeship conditions may also form part of the investigation. Other forms of documentary research are important, too, in illustrating the locations of regional centres of furniture making and the chronology of its manufacture. Such evidence is crucial in initiating research projects where the substantive evidence of furniture types is absent.

Importantly, new methods are now being tried, involving statistical analysis of furniture types. These techniques hold great promise in aiding research, through the analysis of quantitative and qualitative aspects of furniture and the investigation and correlation of implicit codes of design. Such relational techniques are largely inaccessible to observational

science, and may ultimately offer the key to identifying and relating regionally anonymous furniture groups.

The sources of information available to researchers in this field are considerable, and the intention of this paper is to provide a necessarily brief introduction to some aspects of furniture investigation, and documentary resources for those embarking on Regional Furniture research.

The most immediate and satisfactory form of access to establishing the regional origin and the period of manufacture of a furniture item occurs when it carries the identification mark of the maker in some form. This prized mode of achieving provenance is relatively rare, but diligent searching may reveal surprising and exciting evidence. Maker identification usually occurs by the use of a metal stamp with a raised name which is struck onto a surface. An example of this is shown in Figure 1 which illustrates a pine chest of drawers, painted with a simulated oak surface, of a kind typically made for use in the servants' quarters of large houses. This piece has the name of its maker, R. H. & J. Simpson of Lancaster (fl. 1865–90) stamped on the upper edge of each drawer (Fig. 2B). Complete marks of this kind occur sometimes on case furniture, and were commonly used by Windsor chair makers and by some rush seat chair makers. These stamps were often used to identify the workshop owner rather than the maker, and it is not uncommon to find separate initials stamped elsewhere on a piece which refer to the chair framer or cabinet maker. Other stamp marks being initial marks only are found on Windsor chairs, particularly those made in the Buckinghamshire tradition, and here the intention was simply to enable a maker or framer to identify his own work in a workshop where similar products were made. The least common of the impressed forms of marks found on furniture are branded names or initials made with a heated branding iron. These are sometimes found underneath Windsor chair seats, and occasionally in case furniture on the base or back framing. The branding of initials on 17th-century oak furniture often refers to its owners, although many William and Mary period caned walnut chairs bear journeymens' initials unobtrusively struck or branded on the frames.<sup>1</sup>

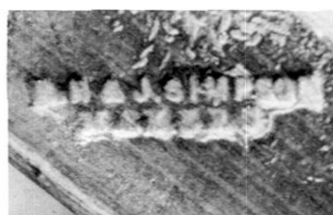
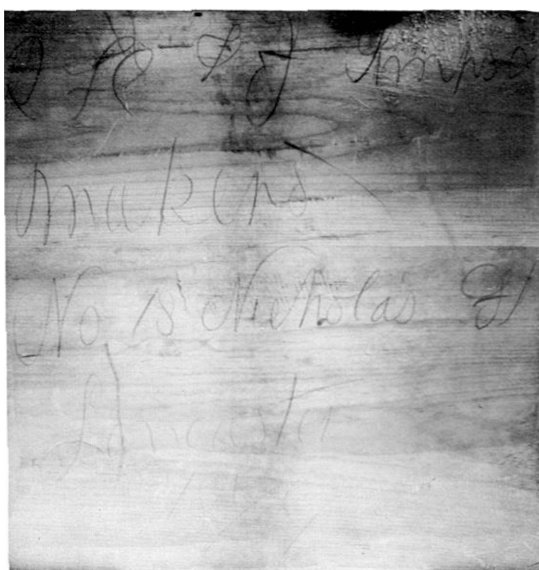
Both seating and case furniture may also carry printed or hand written paper labels, as well as stencils, giving the maker's name and usually place of manufacture. Cabinet makers and some North country Windsor chair makers identified and advertised their work in these ways. However, caution is needed in attributing regional provenance on the basis of a label or stencil, since many cabinet making firms were also household furnishers who, under their own label, retailed items which had been bought from other trade sources. Similarly, some chair makers brought in stock which they did not produce themselves, and sold under their own stamps and labels.

As more furniture makers' marks have been discovered in recent years, so have the number of places where these may be found. It is clear that some forms of identification were intended to advertise the maker, and these tend to be placed in visually obvious places, on drawer edges, side and rear edges of chair seats, on the top rear seat surface, and in at least one rush seat chair maker's work, prominently on the back uprights.

Labels and stencils are usually less conspicuously placed below drawer bottoms, on the underneath of Windsor chair seats, but nevertheless seem to have the role of advertising the supplier. Other marks have been revealed in obscure places, particularly in seating furniture, where they have appeared on the inside of the lower rear legs, for example, or



1. Pine chest of drawers, grained oak. The name of the manufacturers, 'R. H. & J. Simpson' is stamped on the top edge of each drawer, while a pencilled inscription reads: 'R. H. & J. Simpson. Makers. No. 18, Nicholas Street, Lancaster, 1879.'



2A. Impressed stamp of R. H. & J. Simpson, cabinet and chair makers of St Nicholas St and Friargate, Lancaster (this firm worked between 1865 and 1890)

2B. Inscription under the top right hand drawer

even on the concealed base of the leg where it touches the floor. These obscurely placed stamps appear to have no advertising value, yet their appearance is sufficiently common, in chairs particularly, that they warrant investigation of all surfaces for identification marks.

Other evidence may appear on furniture in written form (Fig. 2A) simply to give the name of the writer, or sometimes to record who made the piece and when, (but tantalisingly often, not where). Other inscriptions commemorate furniture as gifts on the occasion of a wedding, for example. These hand-written marks too may provide clues to regional origin, as well as social interest. Occasionally early newspapers were used to line pieces of case furniture, and these may give clues to regional origin and date.

Tracing further information about furniture makers for whom a reference has been achieved from a furniture item may require searches in many forms of documentation. However, recent major research projects designed to list comprehensively furniture makers and chair makers specifically, have culminated in the production of reference works which will be fundamental in tracing members of these trades. The first of these is the *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660–1840*. Edited by G. Beard and C. Gilbert (1986).<sup>2</sup> This work, which has its sources in a wide and varied repertoire of documents, lists other relevant detail of individual makers' lives in addition to location and work details. The dictionary will provide the first point of reference in searching for details of craftsmen, although its cut-off point of 1840 limits its value to researchers pursuing information later in the 19th century.

A second index which comprehensively lists provincial chair makers and turners 1790–1900 is to be published in regionally collated form as part of a reference work, *The English Regional Chair*, by B. D. Cotton, to be published during 1987.<sup>3</sup> This index is derived from a systematic search of Trade Directories from all English counties, with census return analysis being included for any major provincial centres of furniture production.

Both of these records will provide immediate forms of access to maker identification within their own terms of reference. Of the many other forms of documentary evidence available to furniture historians investigating late 18th- and 19th-century traditions, probably the two most significant resources are Trade Directories and National Census Returns. *Trade Directories* were compiled on a regional or conurbation basis, with different first publication dates from around 1760, but with publication in the 1790s of the first 'Universal' Directory produced for Britain as a whole. Other compilers published directories from that time on with intervals of a few years between updated versions. These volumes were intended to provide general information about towns and villages in each county, and to list inhabitants according to occupational and social status. Above all, they list members of trades and professions, although these are usually the owners of businesses or practices and not employees.

This important source can be consulted to seek further information about known makers who have been identified from furniture items, although this is not a precise reference since not all tradesmen or firms were recorded. However, the essential value of Trade Directories to the furniture historian lies in their ability to allow an understanding of furniture trades in a given region to be developed. Information taken from consecutive Trade Directories of the location and the working lives of furniture makers may be used to construct a demographic survey which will indicate the growth, distribution and decline of furniture making centres,

and enable an outline regional history of the furniture trade to be made. An extract from a Trade Directory of 1844 is shown in Figure 3.

This evidence of the trade may be collated in simple lists showing chronological and geographic information of furniture makers, or the information may be represented in the visual form of a map or graph showing development of a regional trade over time. Examples of this form of representation are shown in Figures 4 and 5. The listing of makers and the places where they worked over a period of time may also allow family relationships and movements of craftsmen to be traced, and in so doing, create circumstantial evidence about shared knowledge of furniture design and its possible distribution. This form of demographic evidence is readily available to the researcher wishing to create a framework in which the identification of locally made furniture items, workshop sites, and dating parameters for furniture may be studied. Surviving relatives of past woodworkers whose surnames are revealed through the Trade Directories, may also be able to provide oral or material information about their forebears' work.

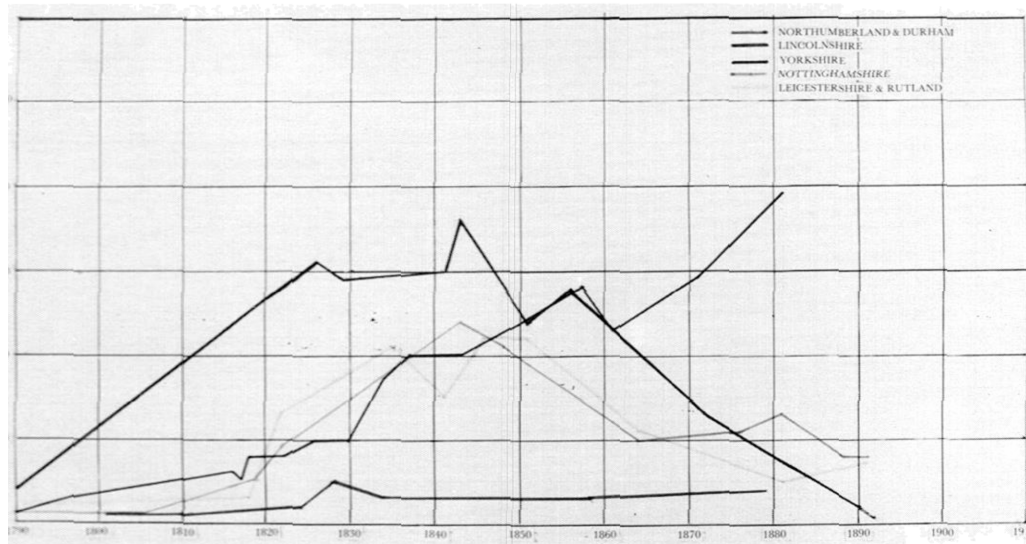
Where Trade Directory sources have indicated the location of a centre of furniture making, the data provided by Census Returns may be used to develop a further sense of both craftsmen and the community in which they worked. Beginning later in time than Trade Directories, the first **National Census Return** which listed members of households and their occupations, was taken in 1841, and has continued to be revised at ten year intervals since that time. Those currently available for research date from 1841–81. Like Trade Directories, local Census returns are available at local Record Offices throughout the country, and a national record can be viewed at the Reading Room of the Record Office in Portugal Street, London. The value of these records to the furniture historian cannot be overstated, since the information they contain may extend studies in significant ways. The simplest application for Census information occurs in establishing knowledge of known furniture makers where these have been identified from furniture pieces or from any other source, including Trade Directories, and where their working lives correspond with the Census returns currently available. In this event, the Census will allow biographical profiles of makers to be developed in which details of his home and family life are given identity and form. Subsequent Census information may trace the continuance and completion of his working life, list sons who may have followed in his trade, and thus establish a sense of the craftsman as a person within a particular community.

Further information may be gained in viewing the Census Returns of a particular community which may indicate the presence of other furniture makers, journeymen or apprentices, who may have lived and been employed in the same community by workshop owners, but who were not registered in Trade Directories. This information may illuminate the size and potential capacity of workshops, and, taken over several Census returns, indicate movements of workers, as well as indicating the duration of traditions.

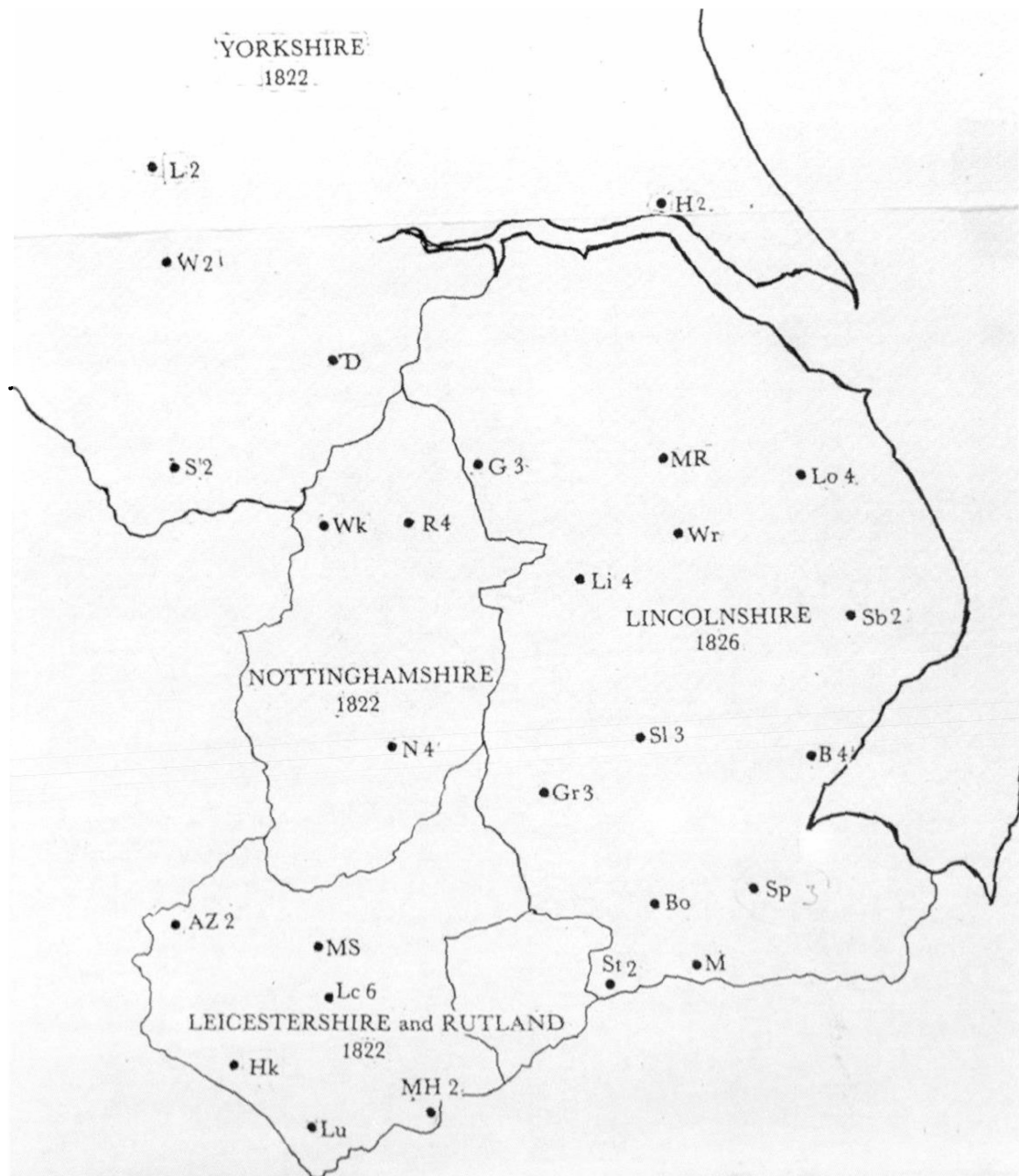
Where Trade Directory and Census Return searches indicate the presence of a community of craftsmen living in a particular town or locality, and where their home address, but not necessarily their place of work is given, it is sometimes possible to trace the workshop site by the use of 19th-century **Ordnance Survey Maps**. Many local studies libraries hold large scale copies of these which may be used to plot the dwellings of workers. Craftsmen who worked in urban settings often lived close to their place of work and near to their fellow workers, and the workshops in which they worked can be plotted in this way. Although all traces of

<p>North Church street Featherstone Wm., Station street Hingley Joseph, Milton's Head yard, Bunker's hill *Holbrook Jane, Alfreton road *Hooley John, Friar lane Jones Jph., Sneinton road, N.S. Hemm Saml., 9, Crown yd., Long row, E. *King Edward, Listergate *Mallet John, Castle road Malpas E. S., Poultry *Mason John, Skynner street Middleton Samuel, Skynner street *Palethorpe James, top of Derby road *Ridge Thos. (late Caroline Raynor), Thurland street *Taylor Chas. &amp; Son, 30, Clumber street Weston Nathl., Shelton street</p> <p><b>CABINET-MAKERS &amp; UPHOLSTERERS</b> <i>See also Joiners and Furniture Brokers.</i> Binkley George and Son, 38, Clumber st Blackwell Wm. J. (extra. of), 3, Long row East Brandreth Wm., 13, Milton street Brown and Smart, 2, Bridle-smithgate Carson Robert, Corporation road Clifford Silas &amp; Son, 6 and 7, Goldsmith st Cole Charles, Wheelergate Copestake John, 13, Convent street Foster Wm., 7 and 8, Long row West Gray Thomas, 90, Upper Parliament street Harrison Mathew, 19, Long row West Hawley Wm., Lower Talbot street Henderson Andrew, St. George's Hall, 58, Upper Parliament street Howell Richd. Wm., Wilson's yard, Derby</p>	<p><b>CARVERS, GILDERS, AND PICTURE- FRAME MAKERS.</b> <i>Marked * are Barometer, Thermometer, and Looking Glass Manufacturers.</i> Allen Geo., 2, Hockley Ashton Chas., 5, Houndsgate Ashton Fredk., 21, Milton street Bartram Isaiah, 6, Park street Bartram Saml., St. James street *Crosta &amp; Pelmingham, 17, Bridlesmithgt Dyer Jonth., 7, Trinity street *Guggiari Dominic, 15, Pelham street Hampton Geo., 25 Mount East street Lees Henry, Rigley's yard Middleton James, Stoney street Procter Wm., Rutland street Read Benj. A., Goldsmith street Shaw and Sons, Wheelergate Taylor James, (and importer of gilt and tancy moulding), 8, Bridlesmithgate Tiddiman Geo., Byardlane. Tiddiman Geo. junr., 32, Glasshouse street</p> <p><b>CATTLE DEALERS.</b> Briddon Thos., Vernon street Briddon Thos. junr., 14, Derby road Briddon Wm., Union road Holmes Wm., 19, Greyhound street Wright John, Union road</p> <p><b>CHAIR MAKERS</b> <i>See also Cabinet Makers.</i> Bates Wm., South Sherwood street Chapman Jas., 40, Greyhound street Griffin James, St. Mark's street Laughton Hy., St. Peter's gate Wilson and Wheatley, St. Ann's hill road</p>
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3. Page from a Directory listing tradesmen working in Nottingham in 1844



4. A linear graph representing the growth, distribution and decline of chair making in the North Eastern Counties. 1790-1890



5. Distribution map showing the centres of chairmaking in the North East Midlands region during the 1820s from the evidence published in Trade Directories.:

*Leics.* AZ = Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Hk = Hinckley. Lc = Leicester. Lu = Lutterworth.  
MH = Market Harborough. Ms = Mountsorrel.

*Lincs.* B = Boston. Bo = Bourne. G = Gainsborough. Gr = Grantham. La = Lincoln.  
Lo = Louth. M = Market Deeping. MR = Market Rasen. Sb = Spilsby. Sl = Sleaford.  
Sp = Spalding. St = Stamford. W = Wragby.

*Notts.* N = Nottingham. R = Retford. Wk = Worksop.

*Yorkshire* D = Doncaster. H = Hull. L = Leeds. S = Sheffield. W = Wakefield.

the majority of craft workshops have disappeared, visiting sites of workshops can be extremely revealing in terms of achieving a sense of the context in which trades were carried out: and in some cases, remains of workshops containing significant contents are still able to be found. The map of Grantham, Lincolnshire (Fig. 6) indicates the row of houses in which chair makers lived during the 19th century, and the site of the workshop opposite.

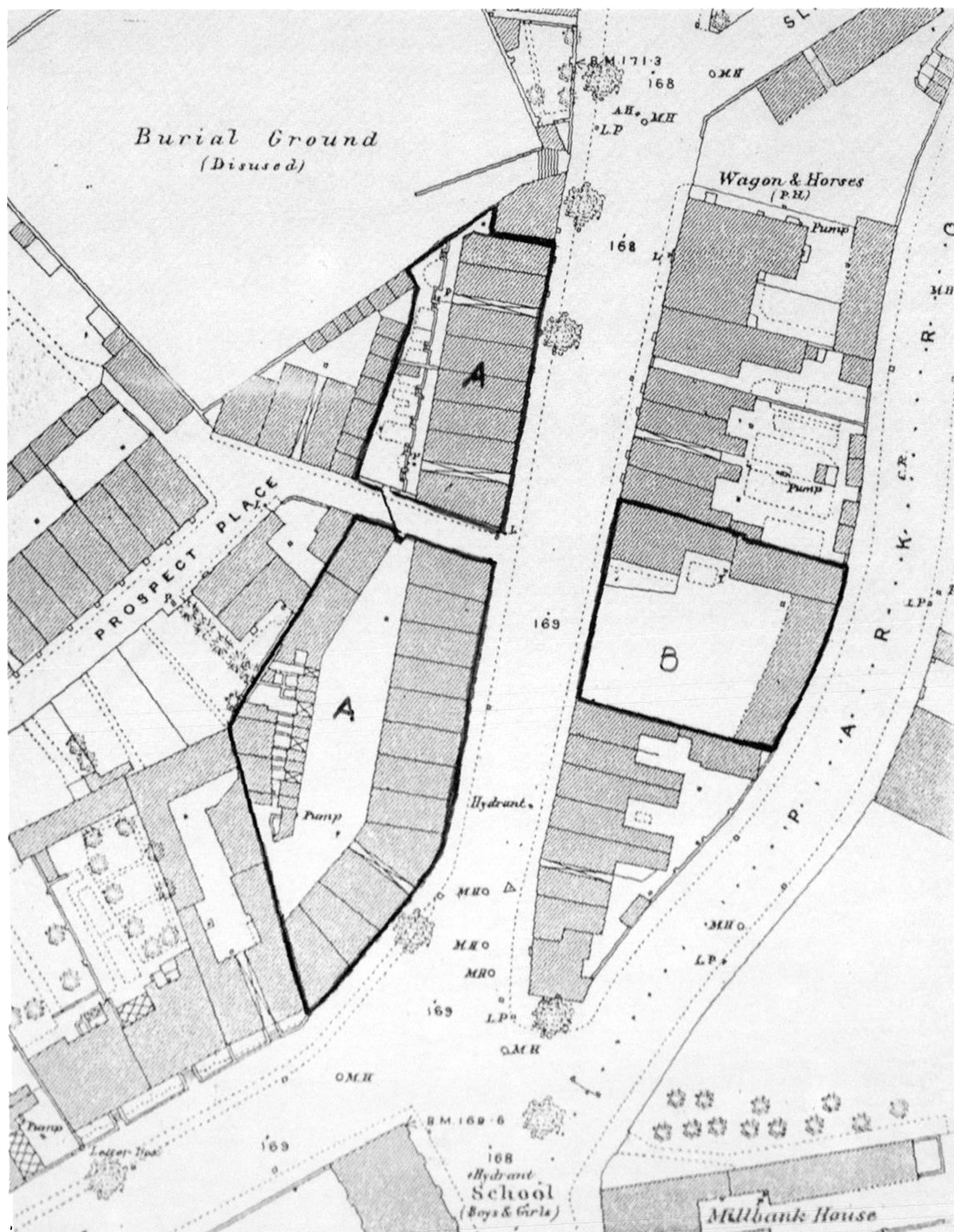
Tracing the biographies of furniture makers and trade developments in communities where furniture making traditions are shown in Trade Directories to exist prior to the 1841 Census, or where makers have been firmly identified to a known place by virtue of stamps or labelling of furniture, but fail to be revealed in Census Returns, may be aided by a further avenue of research which involves reference to **Parish Registers**. Prior to the first quarter of the 19th century, these records were kept on a local basis to record baptisms, marriages and burials of members of even the smallest communities. These registers were maintained by the Vicars of parishes, and vary in the detail they contain, with occupation being an optional entry. Where such evidence is recorded, the ancestors of known furniture makers and the development of local trades may be traced backwards to the extent that the registers allow.

The practice of each parish being responsible for its own records ceased in 1836 when civil listing became compulsory. After this date a standard form is used which is less informative than some Parish Register entries, although Parish Registers were and are still kept. The Parish Register from the 16th to 19th centuries, as well as copies of other local records are usually available in local record offices, rather than the local Parish Chest. Registers, Class leaders' notebooks, Elders Meeting books, and other 19th-century non-conformist church documents are similarly useful, and are often available at local record offices.

Where makers names alone appear on furniture items without also giving a place of origin, providing regional attribution may be problematic if these fail to show in the dictionaries of furniture and chair makers. However, where a sense of regional origin is noted, reference to Trade Directories from the area may provide identification. Where this fails to provide evidence, reference may be made to further historical listing of population made by members of the Mormon Church who have conducted a detailed search of Parish Registers as part of their belief in providing retrospective baptism. This record lists alphabetically by surname, the baptisms, marriages and deaths of individuals, county by county. The information from this mammoth project is now available for public use on microfiche in a majority of County Record Offices. Using these lists, the names of unidentified furniture makers may be checked against the recorded names as a way of establishing their possible location. However, the **Mormon Index** does not list occupation, and since several persons with the same name and initials may be recorded in different locations, much time consuming research may be necessary in tracing names through Parish Registers or Census Returns in order to establish that one has identified the maker to his place of origin.

Where craftsmen have been identified, further opportunities to develop more information about their lives is potentially available through public sources. Some of these are listed below, but the diligent researcher may move beyond these to consult the many other public document sources which may reveal further information.<sup>4</sup>

Amongst the more significant documents which may be kept at Public Record Offices are **Wills**. These are often indexed by name, and known furniture makers' names may simply be



6. Ordnance Survey map, 1886 showing Manthorpe Road, Grantham.  
 The terraced houses inhabited by the community of chair makers is shown in A.  
 The site of the workshop and yard which they worked in is shown as B

checked against this record. In some, but not all record offices, the Wills held are catalogued by occupation as well as name, and thus two avenues of enquiry are available.

The content of Wills varies from the very brief, to the most explicit which provide details of all a craftsman's possessions including the tools and devices of the trade, and to whom they were bequeathed. Where this form of detail is recorded, a picture of workshop practices and the type of work undertaken can be inferred. Such wills may indicate the interests and level of formal education of the craftsmen, and much about his domestic circumstances. An extract of the Will of James Thomlinson, a Windsor chair maker of Lancaster who died in 1848 is shown in Figure 7. This fullsome document shows the precise contents of his workshop, and how his sons were to receive them, as well as listing his domestic furniture and books.

If Wills indicate a summary of the final outcome of a tradesman's life, **Apprenticeship Indenture Documents** may tell us much about the beginning of his working life. The formal indenturing of apprentices has a long and honourable history, and places where a boy could properly learn his trade were highly prized. However, the obligations of both master and apprentice were strictly binding between them, and the duties of both were sometimes laid down in such specific terms that a rich sense of trade training may be achieved from them. Such a document was drawn up in 1830 between master chair makers, John and Edmund Goodwin of Wellow in Nottinghamshire, and an apprentice, Thomas Winks. The detail given in this indenture is sufficient to indicate the pay rates and obligations of the apprentice, as well as itemising his training over a four year period, with the order in which the various tasks were to be learned. These documents, although rare, can be of the greatest interest in creating a sense of the hierarchy of skills into which a trade was divided.

Tracing trade practices in this way is of primary interest to the furniture historian, and other documents were published in a number of English cities which extend knowledge of the tasks undertaken by chair and cabinet makers. These are **Price Books** dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries which were produced to provide a detailed analysis of the individual operations involved in making furniture of all kinds, with a cost price attributed to each task. These guides were intended particularly for the use of workshop owners and the journeymen cabinet and chair makers who they might employ on a non-permanent basis in order that a rate of pay be agreed. The contents of these price books vary in their usefulness to the study of vernacular furniture, but they do give a sense of terminology of their time, and may also give clues to the type of furniture made in particular regions.<sup>5</sup>

Other **Notebooks** hand-written by cabinet makers and chair makers exist which were used by them to record details of their own products, materials, stains used, and in one known case, the tools and devices used in the workshop. Such records are of the highest value, and further searches on a local basis are required to reveal the existence of other sources of this kind. An important recent discovery of a Chester cabinet maker's price book is discussed elsewhere in this volume.

A notebook kept by John Shadford, a Windsor chair maker from Caistor, Lincolnshire, provides a further example of the vivid insight which the personalised record of a working craftsman can give. For example, a page from the Shadford notebook illustrating a carefully drawn turning for a stool leg, with measurements, is shown in Figure 8. This record is interesting in illustrating the technical drawing competence which this craftsman had, and

This is the last Will and Testament of me James  
 Thomas Tomlinson of Lancaster in the County of Lancaster Turner Chair  
 maker and furniture dealer. In the first place I direct my Trustees  
 and Executors hereinafter named to pay all my just debts funeral and  
 testamentary expenses. I give and bequeath unto my three children  
 the following articles to be paid or delivered to them immediately after  
 my decease (for which they shall give a receipt to my Executors) namely-  
 To my eldest Son Thomas my watch, metal Tankard, my  
 longer Cramp, Bed brace, Hand screws, Holdfast, large Gun kettle,  
 two Mortice chisels, one pair of pinchers, one Trying Plane, a Turning  
 Saw, a Planing Saw, a wood square, Six chair bows, one Bench,  
 a Mattrass making box, a Drawing knife, a pair of Sheers, five  
 Saw files, one Screw Cutter and one Bed brace, and my Pike -  
 To my Son John my lesser Cramp, Iron Brace and bit, two hand saws,  
 one dovetail Saw, Axe, Adze, two Trying Planes, all my Smoothing  
 planes, one Turning Saw, my Bore, two Screw Cutters, one Drawing  
 knife, two wood braces, six mortice chisels, a pair of Pliers,  
 one Holdfast, a Bench, two pinchers, all my hammers, my oilstone,  
 all my paring chisels, two Spoke Shaves, a Planing Saw, a wood  
 square and four Saw files.  
 To my Daughter Margaret a pair of stained Bedsteads with  
 curtains cover and hangings and also a French Bedstead with  
 the Mattrass Bed and Bedding thereto belonging, also the oak  
 coloured chest of draw now used by her, together with  
 a set of china Tea things, six egg cups and work box and  
 two linen folds. All which said Tools so given to my said Sons were  
 scrupose part of the Tools used by me in my trade of a Turner and  
 chair maker but do not compose any portion of my Stock in trade  
 as a furniture and general dealer. I also give and bequeath  
 To my said three children my Books to be delivered to them immediately

7. The introduction to the will of James Tomlinson, turner, chairmaker  
 and furniture dealer of Lancaster, dated 1848

Courtesy Lancashire County Record Office

shows the manner in which a new design was created within the regional code of 'Windsor' turnings as a considered act of design.

Further biographical detail about furniture makers may be obtained by reference to 19th century **Local Newspapers**. This may be particularly useful if advertisements were placed listing furniture for sale. Alternatively, local news of events, often disasters, concerned with the furniture making trade may be found, for example, fires, deaths, absconding of apprentices, and bankruptcies. This often gives insights into trade practices beyond the content of the actual news. Other entries may discuss the retirement of long-lived craftsmen, and on occasions include photographs of them with items of their work. Obituaries, too, may contain personal details of craftsmen which contribute interesting details and insights into their lives. For example, the obituary for the long established City of Oxford chair maker, Stephen Hazell, given in the *Oxford Journal and County News* of 27 August 1898 hints at a life full of personal troubles in commenting that

He retired from business some years ago, although only 53 at the time of his death. He and his father before him carried on business in Speedwell Street as chair makers, and were the only makers in the city of Windsor chairs. Mr. Hazell was not lacking in capacity, but his domestic affairs had been for some years of a most unhappy character and thus doubtless militated against his public usefulness.

Anthologies of local newspapers may be kept at Local Reference Libraries, Record Offices, or Newspaper Publishers' premises. A comprehensive national library of newspapers is however kept at the British Library at Collindale, London. This archive provides normal free reading facilities, as well as a search and photocopy service for a fee.

Gaining a sense of the place in which regional furniture was used is a fascinating and important aspect of undertaking research, and constitutes an important project in its own right. Of the various documentary sources available the search for illustrations of **Paintings, Prints and Engravings** is an important avenue. Reference may be made to 18th- and 19th-century artists who painted thematically on the subject of British rural and urban domestic life. The Regional Furniture Society is collecting an archive of these images and a list of those on record will be produced. Paintings depicting domestic and other scenes containing furniture vary greatly in their accuracy in portraying the contents of homes; some artists produced scenes which are nostalgic and fanciful representations, whilst others provide considerable realism. Amongst the latter, certain schools of artists, for example the Newlyn School active in Cornwall in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, have left a clear record of West country cottage contents in paintings which exhibit much social sentiment. Other artists whose work is valuable in providing domestic insights include the Cranbrook Colony of Kent, particularly F. D. Hardy; Alfred Provis, W. H. Midwood, and J. W. Haynes.

Sources of paintings, prints, sketches and engravings which contribute to furniture history research in this way may be located in local and metropolitan collections. A second major source are the leading Auction houses who hold periodic sales of paintings and prints, as well as dealers who specialise in 19th-century works. An example of a regionally based painting showing a chair mender rush seating a West Midlands common chair is shown in Figure 10. **Photographs** can provide another valuable, if rare source of information about local furniture styles. Where photographs of cottage interiors exist, they are of the highest interest and often provide information beyond furniture to include a sense of furnishings generally and the regional codes of decoration and use. Sources for researching local photographs include collections held in Local Record Offices or in Local Studies Libraries.

and the major Auction Houses who hold periodic photograph sales. Many other locally orientated collections exist however, in private and public ownership, and these have been listed.<sup>6</sup>

Many opportunities still remain for taking photographs of interiors today, and with discrete introductions to homes where traditional furniture has been in situ or in one family's ownership for several generations, photographs of interiors or furniture items may be taken, resulting in the creation of important documentary evidence, which may be supported by the invaluable oral evidence of ownership and use within a particular family.

Other forms of evidence about furniture makers are occasionally found included in the collections of *Ephemerae* in Museum holdings, estate papers, or in furniture items. These might include *Invoices* which are often valuable in dating furniture and in giving price structures. Reports of local house contents sales can also be important sources, and the illustrations provided in *Sale Catalogues* are invaluable in creating a sense of regional furniture styles, although the humbler forms of furniture were seldom recorded. The details given on *Sale Posters* are also important in providing lists of house or business contents. Examples of these may be located in Local Studies Archives (Fig. 9).

*Catalogues* of products issued by furniture makers are sometimes located in *ephemerae* collections. Where these are found, they typically provide a high order of visual confirmation of regional styles and price structures. Publically accessible examples of 19th-century Windsor chair makers' catalogues are held at the Chair Museum at High Wycombe, and at Temple Newsam House, Leeds. The Regional Furniture Society also holds an extensive collection of furniture makers' catalogues dating from the early 20th century in its archive at the Chair Museum, High Wycombe.

The documentary searches described above are valuable and may enrich the subject of regional furniture history with a wide variety of fascinating information about craftsmen, trade practices and the society in which they worked. However, such enquiries may become comprehensive in their own right, yet fail to illustrate what craftsmen actually made. Extending the search to provide evidence of regional furniture styles is necessary in creating a full picture of local tradition, and the pursuit of visual evidence provides an exciting area of research.

Where the firm evidence of maker identified pieces is unavailable, the researcher's opportunities for revealing locally made furniture styles may take a number of forms. The most fundamental of these is the creation of a pictorial anthology of furniture items from a particular region. This record provides a way of identifying stylistic patterns, and ultimately of recognising those design 'signatures' or motifs which form the highly personalised codes of production which characterise regional furniture in the most profound, yet implicit way.

The **Construction Techniques**, patterns of measurement, woods used, inlays, profile shaping, embellishments, and staining or other surface treatments are all examples of the kind of information which, when systematically recorded, will ultimately lead to the development of statements about regional furniture design becoming available. Clearly, the researcher is better equipped for the task of recording furniture if he/she is a competent photographer, and courses for training in this area are planned by the Regional Furniture Society. A standard record card will also be available through the Society, and it is hoped that this will be formatted on a computer for use at the Society's archive.



**FRISKNEY.**  
TO BE SOLD  
**BY AUCTION,**  
**BY CROW & SON,**

ON THE PREMISES OF  
**Mr. M. Burchnall, Jun., Friskney.**  
On Thursday, the 31st of March, 1853,

THE FOLLOWING VALUABLE  
**LIVE & DEAD**  
**STOCK**  
**HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE,**

As consisting of  
FIVE Ewes, 3 She Hogs, 1 Ram, and 1 Ram Hog; 1 Drape Cow, 2 in-calving Cows, 1 Heifer in profit, 1 two-year-old Heifer, and 1 rearing He Calf; 1 three-year-old half-bred Mare, and 1 six-year-old half-bred Horse; 2 strong store Pigs, and 10 Fowls. Set of seed Harrows, Gig and Harness, Saddle and Bridle, Wheelbarrow, 2 Ladders, Grindstone, Plough Gears, Cartsaddle, Chain Traces, Heeltrees, Skeathe, Coulters, Pig Troughs, Water Tubs, Swill ditto, 45-gallon Iron Furnace, loose Wood, Ash Riddle, Strike, Forks, Rakes, Shovels, &c.

**The Household Furniture**

Consists of 1 small Bedstead, Mahogany Stand, Walnut Dining Table, Card Table, Stained ditto, Round ditto, Kitchen ditto, 6 Rush-bottom framed Chairs, 6 Turpin ditto, 1 Chamber ditto, Rocking Chair, good Eight days' Clock in walnut case, 2 swing Glasses, Copper Kettle, Warming Pan, Brass and Iron Candlesticks, Knives and Forks, Flat and Italian Irons, Fryer, Iron Pots, Pans, and Saucepans, a variety of Tin, Meat Saw, Chopping Block and Knife, Steadyards, Set of China, a variety of Delf and Earthenware, 2 Churns, Butter Bowl, Scales, Shovels, Cils, Pannicorns, Cream Pots and other Dairy Utensils, Racking-hooks, Sifter, Toasting Fork, and numerous other Articles.

**Also, at the same time will be Sold,**  
A Waggon House, Breast Shed, Spouting, 25-gallon Copper and Grate, Oven Door and Frame, 3 Fire Grates, Boiler, &c.

**Sale to begin at Two o'clock.**

Printed by Taylor and Hall, Bookbinders, Finsbury Paper-Hanging Depot, Walbrook.

8. Measured drawing for a stool leg from the notebook of John Shadford, Caistor, Lincolnshire. (fl. 1851-81)

Courtesy Lincolnshire Archives Office (Ref. Dixon 19/12/7)

9. Sale poster, 1853

Courtesy Sotheby's



10. *The Chair Mender* by B. W. Leader (fl. 1857-1922).

This scene set in Worcester illustrates a chair bottomer re-seating a West Midlands pattern chair

Courtesy Sotheby's

Achieving access to furniture items which may have local origins can vary from casual observation to highly organised searches involving media publicity, and the mounting of field work research programmes. Of these routes, those sources with a commercial interest in furniture are likely to provide the most constant and changing sources of new evidence. However, much furniture which is bought and sold originates from non-local sources and reflects a particular dealer's tastes, as well as customers' needs, but some furniture is purchased and sold by members of the antiques trade as the result of local purchases. The passage of furniture through this source can provide vital clues to regional styles and the opportunity to record furniture at this point is invaluable, particularly if details of the last point of private ownership can be obtained and recorded with details of the object. Local auction houses, too, are a major source of new material, and the opportunity to scrutinise furniture passing through regional sale rooms over a period of time often reflects a distillation of regional styles.

In recording furniture from trade sources, however, it should be noted that not all forms of 'common' furniture made for local use has an appeal to a commercial market. For example, simple bedroom items including wash stands, commodes, and linen boxes, may receive scant attention. Consequently, recording furniture from trade sources may provide a highly edited repertoire of items, giving an incomplete picture of domestic or other furniture anthologies. Overcoming this problem may require becoming acquainted with different forms of businesses involved in the dispersal of furniture.

Public collections may be similarly partial in the types of furniture which have been taken into ownership, and often little attention was given to ascribing provenance to furniture in the past. However, museums on occasion, do contain furniture items which were gifted from local people at a time when little dispersal had occurred, and may be very important in indicating regional styles. Other premises might allow public access and which may house locally made furniture made for particular uses. These may include Public Houses, Churches, and any form of institution which has inhabited the same building since at least the 19th-century, including Workhouses, Barracks, Schools, Servants' Quarters, and Hospitals, as well as many places of work, in retailing, and industrial and agricultural settings.<sup>7</sup>

These sources of information are all possible avenues of exploration for the enterprising researcher. However, the greatest source of new information lies in 'common' furniture in private ownership, and researchers may seek to invite notification of items through illustrated appeals in regional newspapers, giving talks on local radio, and lectures to community groups. This approach can lead to the mounting of field work programmes which, ideally, will involve the documentation of furniture, photography of extant interiors, and crucially, the recording of *Oral Histories*. This type of evidence represents a major way of creating historical records, since owners' memories of the use and origins of furniture can vividly illuminate social history, and help to indicate why different furniture anthologies occurred in different regions, and the importance of recognising that the reciprocal roles of user and furniture designer reflected social habits, as well as a sense of decorative design. The recording of oral history has a further function in that elderly people's memories may reveal information about local furniture types and traditions, or individual craftsmen who were related. Such evidence is rare, but when it occurs, it usually has a firm foundation.

Developing a record of furniture styles, or even one particular form of furniture, dressers or chairs, for example, will probably be a gradual process. The successful researcher develops a sense of detail in design and material terms, and as experience strengthens particular areas of perception, so other forms of furniture may come within the orbit of design codes. However, although observation and the crucial act of familiarisation will enlarge the researcher's evidence, important information will lie beyond the powers of observational research. This area refers to the implicit codes of manufacture of furniture; the dimensions of objects materials and design, and the relationship which individual items or groups of items have with each other. Such complex correlation analysis of all of these issues within a single framework is now possible using **Statistical Analysis** to illuminate the system of differences and similarities within furniture groups.

This form of investigation requires that the researcher systematically lists measurements of structural features as well as qualitative details of design and materials used, and to enter the data into a suitable programme of cluster analysis or correlation analysis type. This mode of investigation essentially offers techniques for producing classifications from previously unclassified data: to search for natural groupings within the data; to simplify the descriptions of a large set of data; and to generate hypotheses. This form of examination is particularly applicable to the needs of furniture analysis, since its primary function is to devise a classification scheme for grouping a number of objects into a number of classes, where the objects within classes are similar in some respects, and unlike those from other classes. The reasons for producing such data clustering analyses may include the following possibilities:

- |                                  |                            |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| i. Finding a true typology.      | v. Data exploration.       |
| ii. Model fitting.               | vi. Hypothesis generating. |
| iii. Prediction based on groups. | vii. Data reduction.       |
| iv. Hypothesis testing.          |                            |

Clearly all of these outcomes may hold interest for furniture research. However, the most directly useful benefits arising from such analysis may be (a) the development of true typologies according to difference/similarity criteria within groups of items, and (b), to test hypotheses grounded in hearsay or the observational evidence provided by the experience of the researcher.

The benefits of investigating the inter-relationships between the individual structure measurements, and the qualitative codes of items in this way are self evident: however, this form of approach is only valid where a sufficiently large group of items can be recorded. Sampling and the parameters of statistically significant groups are important factors in undertaking such examinations. Further evidence of the application of statistics in furniture analysis is available within the accounts of two published programmes of statistical furniture analysis.<sup>8</sup>

The pro-forma of research possibilities outlined above is intended as a review of sources, applications and techniques which have been tried, and found to be useful in creating a widely based sense of furniture history. Considerable interpretation of these avenues of enquiry is possible, and new sources of evidence may be successfully brought into the

scheme of work. The purpose of this paper is therefore to provide guidance for those wishing to undertake furniture research locally, or at the level of regional or national surveys.

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