

SCOTCH CHESTS

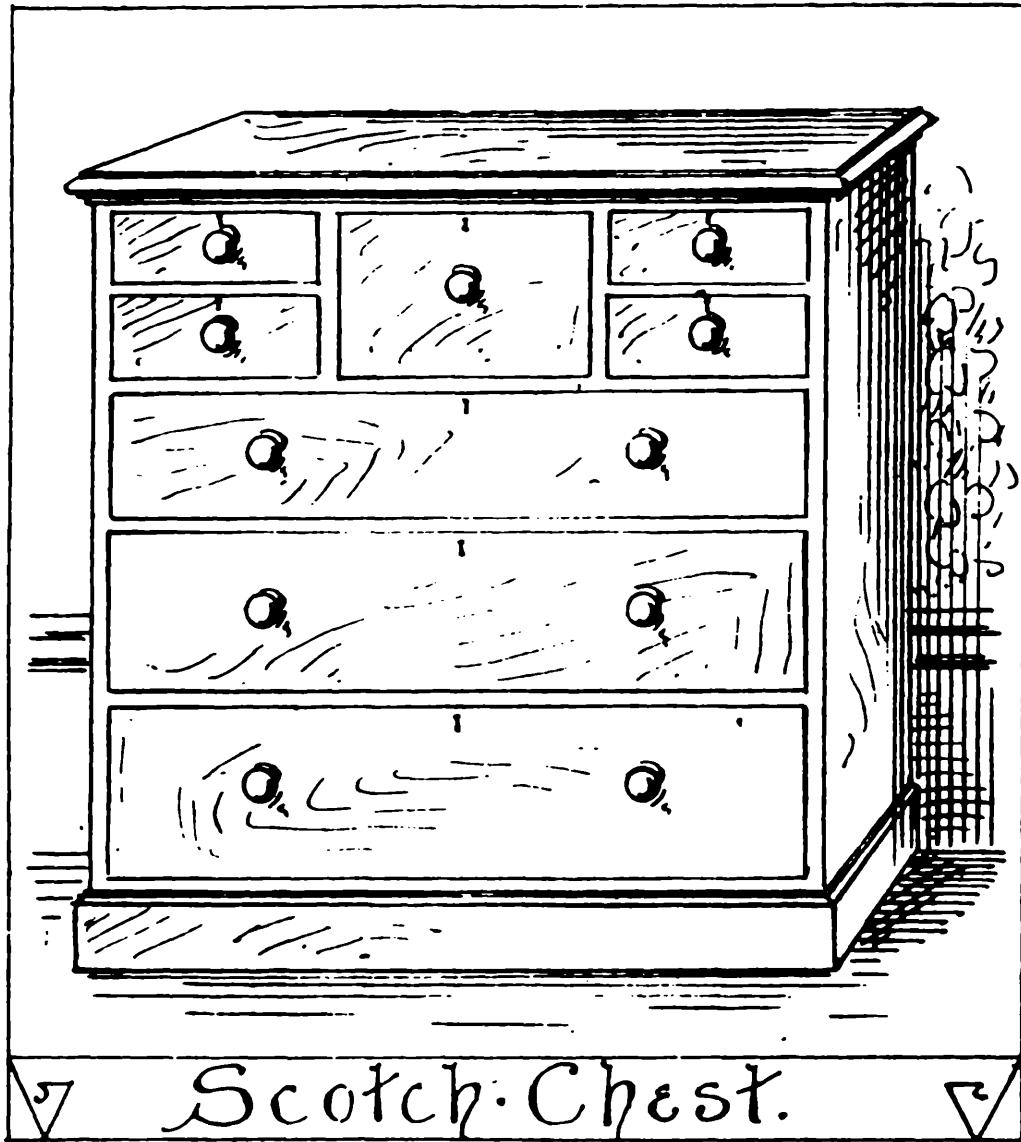
David Jones

The distinctive features of regional furniture types are sometimes most readily noticed by interested parties from outside an area and it is particularly useful for the furniture historian when these aspects of appearance, which may seem unfamiliar or even unconventional to the foreign observer, are remarked upon or recorded. Such is the case with a particular type of Scottish chest of drawers which is characterised by a deep, square top drawer used for the purpose of stowing hats.

This pattern was sufficiently idiosyncratic, and occurred with such frequency in Scotland, for it to be cited as a 'Scotch Chest' when appearing in an English trade catalogue now in the Pratt Collection, Temple Newsam House, Leeds (Fig. 1).¹ Here, the pattern is seen in its most basic form, raised on a simple plinth base, with plain drawer fronts and wooden knob handles, the distinctive central drawer situated between paired small drawers and above three graduated long drawers. Figure 2 shows an executed example acquired in Fife, Scotland and representative of the type at its most plain.² Although, in surviving examples, the central square drawer is now often redundant for the purpose of keeping hats, this usage is still commonly acknowledged by many of the generation brought up in Scotland before the Second World War and it is almost certainly the root of the term 'Lum chest' by which name the type is occasionally known in Scotland.³

The historical practice of storing hats in chests of drawers is most usefully noted by that invaluable recorder of domestic furniture and its uses, John Claudius Loudon, in his *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm & Villa Architecture and Furniture*, 1833.⁴ He notes that chests of drawers 'create a great deal of useless labour in pulling out and pushing in drawers and perhaps in locking and unlocking them' but he precedes this with the more important observation that 'chests of drawers are the common substitute for wardrobes'. Certainly the small rural cottage or two-roomed urban tenement dwelling of the nineteenth century offered little space for a wardrobe and in Scotland, priority of space would, in many cases, have been given to other, more immediately functional types of furniture such as the clothespress bed.⁵ Indeed, instances have been recorded wherein the occupants of small tenement flats who did own a wardrobe would move it out to the communal stair at night in order to make space for beds.⁶ The 'Scotch Chest', with its flexible arrangement of drawers, would certainly seem to have offered an ideal wardrobe-substitute, despite the inherent inconveniences highlighted by Loudon, but its priority in the small household, and the exact origins of its usage are both subjects which await further systematic study.

What can be investigated here, in some detail, are the characteristics of the type, the evolution of the design during the nineteenth century, the distribution of the 'Scotch Chest' in northern Britain and its manufacture according to different social requirements in both urban and rural centres. There can be no doubt that chests of drawers of this pattern were widely available in Scotland throughout the nineteenth century and up until the Second World War. William Bow of Glasgow, for instance, was one prominent commercial supplier who sold these chests to an urban clientele from his three storey Emporium at 91 High Street⁷ and to customers in the rural Highlands and Islands via an extensive



1. Design from an anonymous English trade catalogue, c.1905

Pratt Collection, Temple Newsam House, Leeds

mail-order catalogue. Bow's *Illustrated Catalogue* of 1908⁸ shows a variant of the pattern (Fig. 5) with magogany-veneered fronts, fancy spiral-turned colonnettes flanking the drawers and a shallow frieze drawer beneath the top. This is described as the 'Kilmarnock' Chest of Drawers, but the regional significance of the name, if indeed any exists, is difficult to determine, as chests of a directly comparable pattern seem to have been manufactured in urban centres throughout central and lowland Scotland during the second half of the

nineteenth century. The Falkirk firm of Christie & Miller, for instance, featured an identical design in their *Illustrated Catalogue*, printed in Falkirk c.1880 (Fig. 3).⁹ This has the conventional arrangement of drawers conforming to the Scottish pattern; they are contained beneath a long frieze drawer, between turned corner posts and raised from the ground on high, turned feet. Although these examples from Bow's Emporium and Christie & Miller represent chests of considerable size, at least five feet high and four feet wide — and from general observation these dimensions are fairly typical — they comprise very little wasted space. The size and adaptability of storage space provided by these chests of drawers, coupled with a surprisingly minimal depth when measured from front to back, further emphasises the suggestion that these chests could happily perform the function of much larger articles of furniture, such as hanging-wardrobes and storage cupboards, and that they can be seen as a space-saving type.

The central 'lum' drawer is clearly the most patent feature of the Scotch Chest pattern and this is the characteristic common to all the examples discussed in this article, but the term 'Scotch Chest' has, historically, been applied loosely and in a general way that encompasses several different and subsidiary names referring to other distinctive and variable attributes of the basic pattern. 'OG Chest', for instance, is a commonly used name which makes reference to the serpentine or ogee-shaped profile of the frieze drawer or even the complete top row of drawers on some Scotch chests (Fig. 4). Variants of this type are featured in William Bow's *Illustrated Catalogue*¹⁰ where they are described as 'OG Chests'. These range from the simple to the quite exaggerated, varying in price, according to size and decoration, from £3 19s. 6d. to £6 10s. Similarly, spiral-turned or columnar corner posts, which seem to be a distinguishing characteristic of so many other nineteenth-century Scottish furniture types,¹¹ are a common feature of many Scotch Chests, causing these sub-types to be known by the various names of 'Pole chest' or 'Column chest'.

It is the combination of a square central top drawer and turned corner posts, and not the occurrence of ogee shaping or other decorative features, that can be traced back to the earliest examples of the Scotch Chest. The earliest dated Scottish example that has come to light is a most unusually well-labelled chest of drawers (Fig. 8) in a principal bedroom at Mellerstain, Berwickshire. The central drawer-front of this chest takes the form of a panel within a cross-banded and mitred frame. The paired drawers on either side and the graduated drawers below are cock-beaded and fronted with mahogany veneers and ebony stringing. All the drawers are fitted with locks and turned wooden knob handles, that on the deep square drawer being centred.¹² The conformation of drawers on the chest façade is flanked by bobbin-turned corner posts set *in antis*; the shallow frieze beneath the chest top, which does not disguise a drawer, echoes the quarter-circle profile of the posts, which terminate in turned stump feet. Inside the central top drawer is pasted an elegant 'Grecian' label (Fig. 7), printed with the maker's name; 'James Mein, Cabinet Maker, Kelso'.¹³ Apart from indicating that Mein dealt in carpets and rugs, executed gilding and provided the service of undertaker (written in bold and prominent letters), the label also bears the handwritten legend; 'N^o 14.459 Lindⁿ'. This information is further expanded by a pencil inscription appearing on the divider immediately beneath the central drawer, which reads: 'James Lindsay, Kelso, 1825'. In accordance with Mein's repeated practice of including a number and an abbreviated surname written in ink at the base of his labels¹⁴ Lindsay would appear to be the name of the journeyman cabinet maker who made the chest. Further

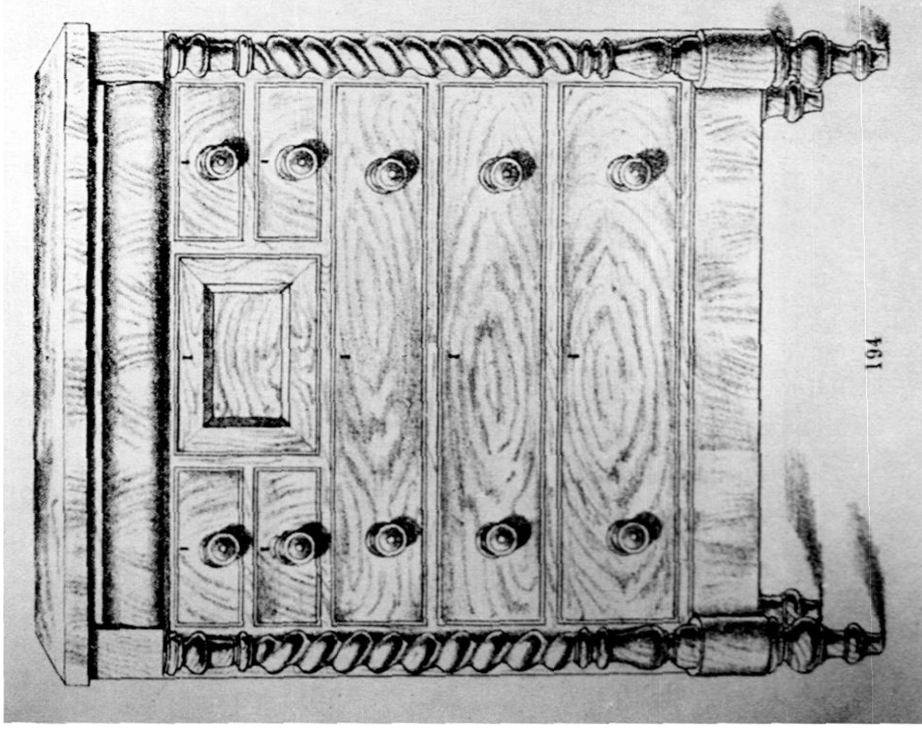


2. Scotch chest, oak and pine

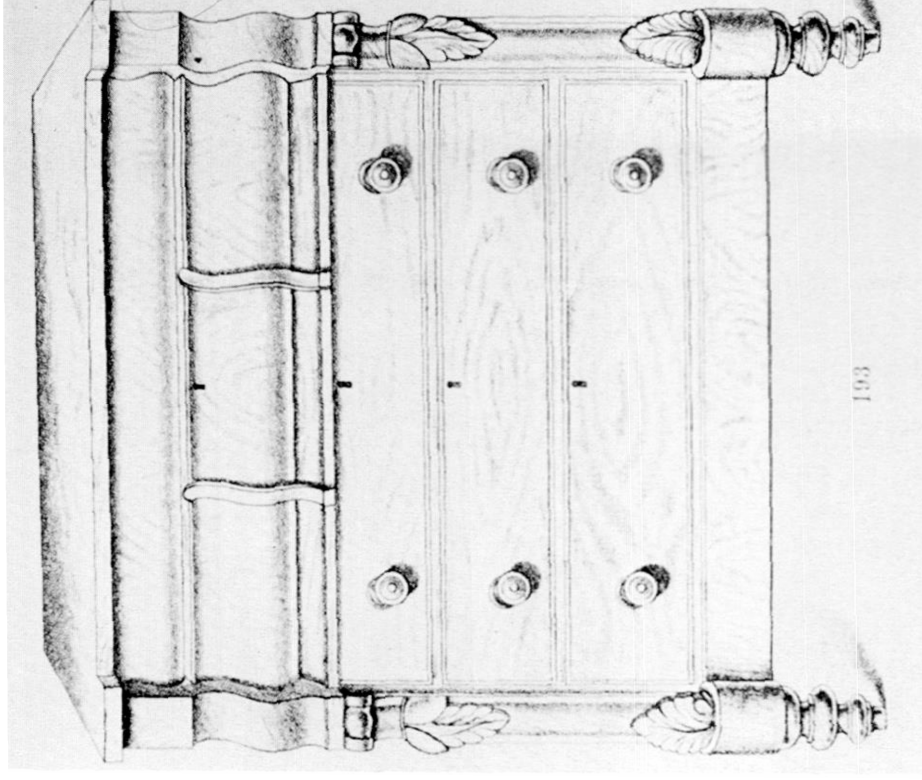
Private collection

supporting documentation, such as a surviving bill, has not been traced, but the chest does seem to belong to a small group of furniture at Mellerstain, of a contemporary date, which includes an adjustable music chair and a low wardrobe or cupboard in the estate office. These other items are labelled in the same fashion and are of similar high quality workmanship and sober design. Firmly dated at 1825, this chest is certainly rare in being such a fully identified and early, executed example of the 'Scotch Chest' pattern. Other early nineteenth-century examples of high quality manufacture have been recorded, but have no firm provenance nor identified maker.¹⁵

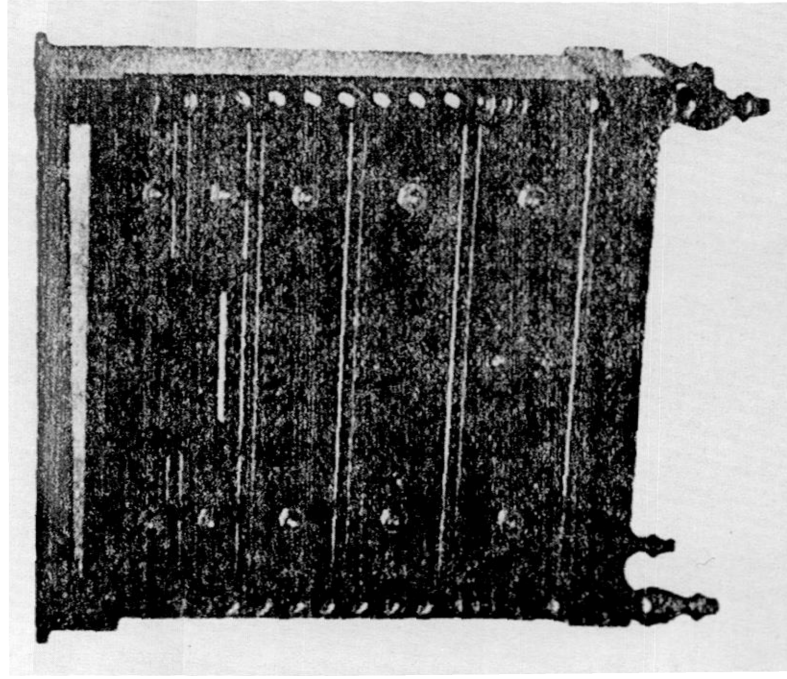
Outside Scotland, there is evidence that the pattern may have been transmitted to English counties immediately south of the border, particularly Cumberland. It can be observed that



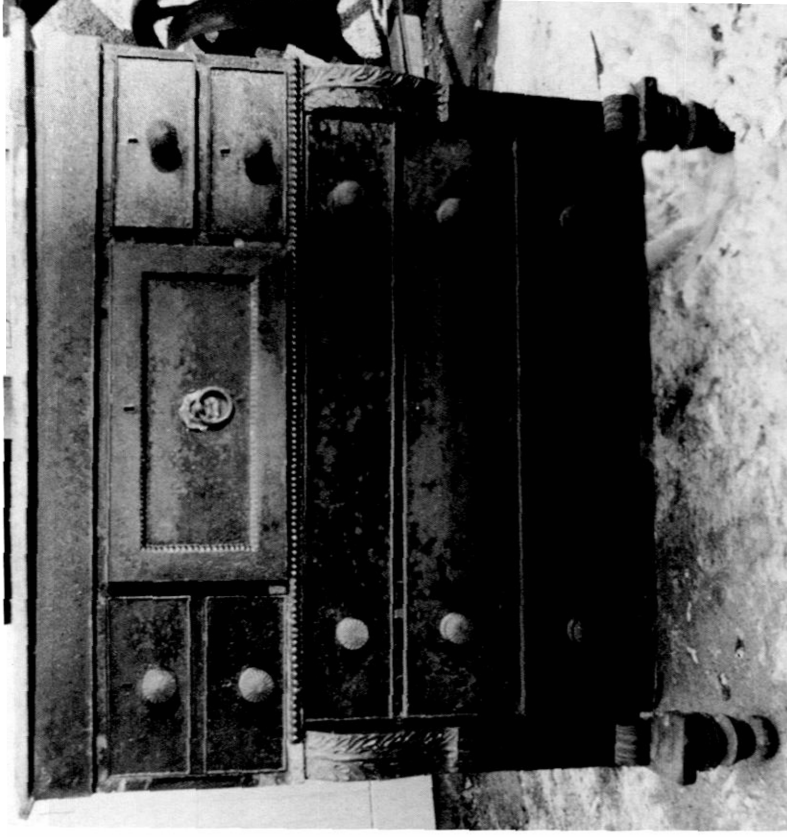
3. Design from Christie & Miller, Falkirk, *Illustrated Catalogue of Furniture*, c. 1880
Falkirk Museums



4. Design for 'O.G.' chest of drawers, from Christie & Miller, Falkirk, *Illustrated Catalogue of Furniture*, c. 1880
Falkirk Museums



5. The 'Kilmarnock' chest of drawers from Bow's Emporium Ltd.
Illustrated Catalogue, 1908
 Highland Folk Museum, Kingussie



6. Chest of drawers, probably made in the Kingussie area by a joiner
 or wright, nineteenth century
 Highland Folk Museum, Kingussie



7. Label of James Mein, Kelso, pasted inside the drawer of chest in Fig. 8.

The Earl of Haddington, Mellerstain



8. Chest of drawers, made by James Lindsay in 1825, for James Mein of Kelso

The Earl of Haddington, Mellerstain



9. Chest of drawers by Henry Walker, Lancaster probably between 1813 and 1831. Judges' Lodgings, Lancaster

Lancashire County Museums Service

chests of the 'Scotch' pattern appear regularly at auction in Carlisle for instance, but unfortunately no marked or documented examples have yet been noticed.¹⁶ What seems to be the most southerly instance of the pattern by an identified English maker exists at the Judges' Lodgings, Lancaster (Fig. 9). It was made by Henry Walker of Lancaster and is stamped with his name on the fore-edge of the top drawer.¹⁷ Outwardly, the arrangement of drawers seems to be directly related to the Scottish pattern, with three deep drawers over three graduated long drawers, but the three top drawer fronts, the central front with a large veneered oval, are in fact sham, disguising a deep top drawer that runs the complete length

of the chest. Here, the emphasis on the central 'drawer' is purely decorative; it does not combine both decorative emphasis and separate function, as in Scottish examples.

Moving from examples of a relatively high quality, or 'genteel' standard of manufacture, to the work of the country wright, it can be seen that the 'Scotch Chest' pattern certainly filtered down the social scale in the late nineteenth century, probably influenced by urban or lowland Scottish examples. An example, probably made by a Highland wright, exists at the Highland Folk Museum, Kingussie (Fig. 6).¹⁸ Its ungainly proportions and the variety of woods used in its construction suggest that it was not simply made up from parts of different Scotch chests, but that it was made from randomly available materials in imitation of an urban or lowland pattern. R. Ross Noble has observed that the late nineteenth-century boom in Highland tourism and the subsequent building of substantial holiday houses for rent caused a great increase in demand for ready-made furniture imported from lowland manufacturers. Some Highland cabinet making firms, such as Beale & Pyper and George Anderson of Grantown-on-Spey, emerged to satisfy this demand, but the bulk of new furniture was obtained from Glasgow manufacturers and suppliers such as James M'Geachy & Son, or Bow's Emporium, both firms that advertised widely.¹⁹ It is possible that the maker of the chest of drawers illustrated in Figure 6 was inspired by the example of one of these urban suppliers.

The exact origin of the 'Scotch Chest' pattern remains unclear; perhaps it emerged at some time in the late eighteenth century, but so far no evidence has been uncovered to confirm this. The first Scottish cabinet makers' price books published in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1805 and 1809²⁰ are perhaps the obvious sources to consult in this research, but surprisingly, they do not contain detailed specifications for chests of drawers which conform to the pattern discussed here. It does seem possible that the 'Scotch Chest' was developed as a space-saving article of furniture suited to the flatted dwellings characteristically found in Scotland's small, but densely-populated cities, or perhaps equally suited to the rural cottage which could be of similarly restricted size, but this theory, also, awaits confirmation.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the 'Scotch Chest' pattern is the continuity of manufacture and design which it has enjoyed throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, being superseded by new forms only after the radical effects of the first mass housing schemes in Scotland of 1919–23²¹ and the standardising influence of the Utility Furniture Programme from 1943. It can be seen that the 'Scotch Chest' was part of the basic repertoire²² of both the volume mass production furniture manufacturer and the bespoke cabinet maker in the cities and rural districts of Scotland and, in a few cases, in certain adjacent English counties during the nineteenth century. It is a commonly-seen type all over Scotland where examples were made for domestic use in places as different as the two-roomed tenement flat and the country house.²³ The Scotch chest is however frequently wrongly identified as that closely-similar type, the secretaire chest of drawers, with its fitted central section; an erroneous attribution that may have been responsible for disguising the regional derivation of this furniture type in the past.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to David Devereux, Gerard Hearne, R. Ross Noble, Stephen Sartin, and Flora Turnbull for their assistance in compiling this article.

REFERENCES

1. Furniture Trade Catalogue, anonymous, c.1900. Pratt Collection of Furniture Trade Catalogues and Ephemera, Temple Newsam House, Leeds, No. 326.
2. Private collection.
3. lum & c; lumb.n.; 1. A chimney; 5. A tall silk hat, a top hat (*The Concise Scots Dictionary*, Ed. M. Robinson, Aberdeen, 1985). Chests of this pattern illustrated in this article were known as 'lum chests' because of the practice of storing hats in the central top drawer. Inf. Mr Alexander Mair, cabinet maker, Arncroach 6 August 86. Alexander Mair was apprenticed to Wheeler of Arncroach, Fife, Cabinet Makers and Wheelwrights, in 1919.
4. J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm & Villa Architecture and Furniture*, 1833, Furniture for Cottage Dwellings, pp. 303–05. Loudon illustrates bonnet-holders which were sometimes fixed to the bottom of deep drawers as stands for hats.
5. This is discussed in: Scottish Society for Art History Yearbook 1988, Proceedings of the Winter Conference 1987, D. B. Jones, *The Press-Bed in Scotland* (forthcoming).
6. Inf. Mr William Paterson, Glasgow 14 November 87. Frank Worsdall, in *The Tenement, A Way of Life, A Social Historical and Architectural Study of Housing in Glasgow* (1979) quotes from an inventory of a tenement house in Steven Street, St George's Cross, Glasgow, which appeared in an advertisement in *The Glasgow Herald*, 1865. An excerpt from this, which lists the furnishings of the bedroom, is reproduced here. It is interesting to note that the bedroom of this middle-class house contains a chest of drawers, but no wardrobe: 'Mahogany Posted Bedstead and Damask Curtains, 3 Feather Beds, Mattresses and Bedding, Chest Mahogany Drawers, Mahogany Toilet Table, Dressing Glass, Chairs, Carpet, Grates.'
7. Bow's Emporium (prop. William Bow) 91 High Street, Glasgow. Est. 1888. For a detailed description see: *Glasgow & its Environs: A Literary, Commercial & Social Review Past & Present; with a Description of its Leading Mercantile Houses and Commercial Enterprises* (Stratten & Stratten, 146 New Bond St, London, 1891).
8. *Bow's Emporium Limited, Illustrated Catalogue* (1908), Highland Folk Museum Collection, Kingussie.
9. Christie & Miller became a firm of large output when David Miller of D. R. Miller, Cabinet Makers, Stirling, merged his company with that of Archibald Christie, Falkirk. Their *Illustrated Catalogue* was issued shortly after a notice of co-partnership appeared in *The Falkland Herald*, 26 February 1875. A copy of this catalogue is in the collection of Falkirk Museums.
10. Ibid.
11. Spiral, or bobbin-turned columns or posts appear in Scottish furniture such as chairs, wardrobes, and kitchen dressers during both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See nos. 13, 20, 22, 30, 43 in D. B. Jones, *Looking at Scottish Furniture, A Documented Anthology, 1570–1900* (St Andrews & Glasgow, 1987), Exh. cat.
12. It is interesting to note that on later Victorian versions of the pattern which have locks on the square drawer, the central handle is commonly dispensed with.
13. James Mein of Kelso (1759–1830), Roxburgh St and Butcher Market, Kelso. Mein's nephew, also called James, succeeded him in business until his bankruptcy in 1854. Inf. *The Southern Counties' Register & Directory*, Hawick Library.
14. This practice appears on Mein's labels on the following identified pieces: Wine slide, National Museums of Scotland collection; Chamber writing table, Tynninghame Sotheby's Sale, Tynninghame, 28–29 September 1987, cat. 748.
15. An anonymous 'Scotch Chest' of high quality manufacture is illustrated in F. Bamford, *Dictionary of Edinburgh Furniture Makers 1660–1840* (Furniture History Society, 1983), plates 86a and b.
16. Inf. Mr J. Finlay, Phillips Auctioneers (Carlisle) and Mr T. King, Tiffin, King & Nicholson, Auctioneers (Carlisle).
17. This is most probably the Henry Walker recorded in the *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660–1840* (1986), as being active in Lancaster 1791–1831 at Church St 1805–13 and Chapel St (Cable St) 1813–31. He is possibly the same Henry Walker whose name appears in the Gillow records 1791–97, 1799, 1803, and 1806.
18. This chest of drawers is kept in store at the Highland Folk Museum Collection, Kingussie.
19. See *Glasgow & Lanarkshire Illustrated* (1904), published by The Hamilton Herald.
20. *The Edinburgh Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Work* (Edinburgh 1805), National Library of Scotland. *The Glasgow Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Work* (Glasgow 1809, (Preface dated 1806), Mitchell Library, Glasgow).
21. See Frew, J., *Housing the Heroes* (Kirkcaldy Museums, 1987) Exh. cat.
22. Miniature versions appear with relative frequency. See *Sotheby's Sale of Georgian & Victorian Furniture & Decorations*, 18 December 1987, Lot 225. These may have been made as apprentice pieces, or simply manufacturer's samples.
23. The appearance of Scotch Chests as bedroom furniture in country houses, such as that by James Mein at Mellerstain (Fig. 8), where they may complement wardrobes, can be cited as an instance of the pattern being transmitted up the social scale of domestic use.