

SURVIVAL OR REVIVAL? THE PROBLEMS OF THE CONTINUATION OF TRADITIONAL FURNITURE MAKING INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Nicholas Moore

An auction conducted by Wright Manley of the Beeston Castle Smithfield in October 1989 included a typical late Cheshire housekeeper's cupboard (Fig. 1).¹ The auctioneer, Mr Gerald Tilston, must be congratulated on discovering that this piece was signed and dated, in pencil, inside the carcass above the right-hand drawer. The inscription was 'George Ashton, Cabinetmaker, Tattenhall, 1932'. This comes as a considerable surprise as the cupboard appears on initial inspection to have been made in the period 1860 to 1880.² Was this cupboard a genuine survival of a tradition that can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, or was it a 1930s reproduction piece?

The housekeeper's cupboard had come from a farm that had recently been sold up at Wrenbury, on the border between Cheshire and Shropshire. The family tradition was that in 1932 three cupboards had been purchased from Mr Ashton at Tattenhall, and that the other two cupboards had also gone to members of the family. Mr Ashton was recorded as a cabinet maker working in Tattenhall between 1892 and 1939³ and his workshop was adjacent to Lion House, to the north-east of Tattenhall Church. Tattenhall is a large Cheshire village eight miles to the south-east of Chester and fourteen miles from Crewe. It has never achieved the status of being a town, but was well provided with shops and trades which supplied the surrounding farming community. Additional interest in a possible tradition of cabinet making in the village is provided by another housekeeper's cupboard, with an inset clock, which is now in the Grosvenor Museum in Chester. Traditionally this cupboard was made in Tattenhall, and has the name 'Jos. Butler' and the date '1814' in a marquetry inlay on a small door in the writing portion of the cupboard.⁴ Directories suggest that there may have been a continuous tradition of cabinet making in the village, and between 1850 and 1878 a James Bunce was working in the village.⁵

Returning to George Ashton's housekeeper's cupboard, it is really a conflation of earlier features which are seen on housekeepers' cupboards. The cupboard is mainly of oak, with tongue and groove deal backing. The oak has been inlaid with mahogany, with some ebony stringing. The mahogany has been crossbanded round the drawers and used on the fluted corners to the base portion and the cornice, central stile of the upper cupboard portion, and on the sill to the base. There are also mahogany inlaid columns or pilasters at the corners of the cupboard, which start as being rilled and then halfway up change into a spiral. The bracket feet are a direct copy from cupboards and lift-top dressers, lobby or mule chests of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The squared rilled columns with ebony stringing on the corners of the chest portion is frequently seen on local clocks and chests of drawers of the period 1815 to 1840, and is well exemplified on the housekeeper's cupboard



1. Housekeeper's cupboard inscribed 'George Ashton, Cabinetmaker, Tattenhall, 1932'

in the Grosvenor Museum.⁶ The fielded cupboard doors are typical of those seen on later housekeeper's cupboards and often there is a series of these doors with numerous smaller rectilinear fielded panels. The use of deep reddish mahogany contrasting against a palish oak was popular in the 1860s and in many ways the craftsmanship of this cupboard is strongly reminiscent of the final phase of longcase clock/cabinet making, where mahogany is being used in a similar way. Hopefully this description of the cupboard will have provided the reader with the information to form some judgement on whether this cupboard is purely a revival piece or actually represents the continuation of a tradition within a Cheshire village.

It appears that there was a cabinet maker's workshop in Tattenhall producing typical local furniture over a considerable period of time, perhaps starting with Joseph Butler in the early years of the nineteenth century, later passing to James Bunce and finally from the 1890s until the Second World War in the ownership of George Ashton. The immediate challenge will be to see if more products of this workshop can be identified and if it can be more fully documented. In conclusion it must be recognised that George Ashton's house-

keeper's cupboard in the Wright Manley sale is not a reproduction of an earlier piece, but a genuine survival of an older tradition, and probably represents the type of furniture that this cabinet maker would have learnt to make in his youth. It also reflects the very conservative taste in furniture of the Cheshire farming community in the 1930s, who were still furnishing their houses in a pattern that was established in the early nineteenth century.

REFERENCES

1. The housekeeper's cupboard was lot 475 in Wright Manley's Furniture and Fine Art Sale on 26 October 1989.
2. The writer would like to thank Mr Gerald Tilston for the photograph of the housekeeper's cupboard and for information about it. The writer published a short survey of traditional Cheshire furniture in the *Antique Dealer and Collectors Guide*, June 1987.
3. *Kelly's Directory* (1892) and *Kelly's Directory of Cheshire* (1939), p. 437. The information about the Ashton workshop is included in *Tattenhall*, a booklet produced by the Tattenhall Local History Group. It may be significant that a Peter Ashton, cabinet maker, was admitted as a freeman of Chester in 1818, and was working at the Gorst Stacks, Chester in 1819. (G. Beard and C. Gilbert, *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660–1840* (1986), p. 21).
4. I have recently discovered that the will of Joseph Butler, 'carpenter' of Tilston, was proved and probate granted at the Chester Consistory Court on the 20 November 1820 (Chester Diocesan Record Office, Duke Street, Chester). Tilston is fairly close to Tattenhall, so it seems likely that this was the Joseph Butler who made the housekeeper's cupboard in the Grosvenor Museum.
5. James Bunce is recorded in Samuel Bagshaw's *History, Gazeeter and Directory . . . of Chester* (1850), p. 159 as a cabinet maker, again in *White's Cheshire Directory* (1860), p. 212, and in the *Post Office Directory of Cheshire* (1878), p. 354, as 'cabinetmaker and upholsterer'. He may have been related to William Bunce, cabinet maker, who was admitted to the freedom of Chester in 1831 (Beard and Gilbert, *ibid.*, p. 128).
6. The best published account to date of this cupboard is in the *National Art-Collections Fund Annual Report 1981*, p. 34. These distinctive housekeepers' cupboards are rare and were only made in the present-day counties of Cheshire, Shropshire and Powys. Housekeepers' cupboards without clocks are very common and turn up frequently in auction sales in the Chester area. It is possible that many of these cupboards are early twentieth century in date. The writer has seen another (much larger) housekeeper's cupboard at Hafod y Bwlch on the outskirts of Wrexham which he was told by the owner was made by a cabinet maker working in the Broxton area. As Broxton is an adjacent parish to Tattenhall it is possible that this cupboard could also be the work of George Ashton.