

# THE VIGANI SPECIMEN CABINET

## BY JOHN AUSTIN, A CAMBRIDGE JOINER

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The work of the Austin family of joiners in Cambridge is relatively well recorded.<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Austin (fl. c. 1660–1704) produced fixed joinery work of high quality, and much of it is still extant in Trinity, King's and Emmanuel Colleges. It is known also that he made moveable furniture, including a set of joined stools which is still in use in Emmanuel library. Cornelius junior worked for his father before succeeding to the business in 1704. He made both fixed and moveable furniture for St John's and (probably) other Colleges until his death in 1729. The work of a third member of the family, John Austin, is less well known. To begin with, the precise relationship between John and the Cornelius Austins is unclear. He was a contemporary of Cornelius junior, and may have been either a brother or a cousin. Like them, he was a joiner, and the Vigani cabinet belonging to Queens' College, Cambridge, is the only extant piece of moveable furniture known to be his work.

The Vigani cabinet is so named because it was made for John Francis Vigani, first Professor of Chemistry at the University of Cambridge.<sup>2</sup> Its historic significance derives principally from its contents. Over 600 different substances are lodged in twenty-six upper and three lower drawers, each in its labelled compartment or jar with glass stopper. Seeds, gums, minerals, plants, pigments, animal substances, fossils and many other categories are each ordered and housed according to type and nature. The contents correspond largely with those substances which the early eighteenth century London College of Physicians requested apothecaries to keep in their stock, and constitute a scientific record of the first importance.

Vigani was appointed professor in 1703. His laboratory was at Queens' College until 1707, when he moved to Trinity. A number of bills and invoices survive relating to Vigani's time at Queens'. Most of these are for drugs and chemicals, bought on Vigani's instructions and paid for by Poley Clopton, fellow of Queens'. One, however, is a note from John Austin, and reads as follows:

'Augt. 8th. 1704. Recd yn of Mr Clopton  
Tenn pounds for a cabinet for ye use  
of Queen's (sic) College in Cambridge,  
by me, John Austin.'

The connection between this invoice and the cabinet now extant is based on the long association of the cabinet with the college (it is known to have been examined by Richard Bradley, the Professor of Botany, in the 1720s), and the fact that the handwriting on many of the labelled compartments has been identified as Vigani's. It is likely that the cabinet remained the property of Queens' when Vigani moved to Trinity in 1707.

The form and style of the cabinet are outwardly conventional, and consistent with a



**1. The Vigani Cabinet**

*By courtesy of The President and Fellows of Queens' College.*



**2. The Vigani Cabinet, upper section open**  
*By courtesy of The President and Fellows of Queens' College.*



**3. Base, showing bun feet dowelled into underframe**  
*By courtesy of The President and Fellows of Queens' College.*

date a few years either side of 1700. Its overall dimensions are 66" high, 33" wide and 17" deep. Aside from its contents, the cabinet is remarkable for two things. Firstly, the quality of its joinery, which is neat and accurate, and secondly, its condition, which is virtually untouched. It is in two parts, constructed throughout in quarter-cut oak. The timber is clean, straight grained and almost certainly imported—the Austins are known to have bought deals and wainscots at both King's Lynn and London. The upper carcass is dovetailed together, with boarded back and two doors, each with two fielded panels. The framing of the doors is joined with blind mortice and tenons. The lower carcass is framed and panelled (including the back) and contains three full width drawers, and all joints are pegged. The feet are turned from oak and dowelled into a length of deal which forms the backing to the base moulding. The whole external carcass has darkened to a rich brown, with very little evidence of subsequent polishing over the original oil or wax finish.

The interior is accurately made. In the top section are twenty-six drawers in two equally graduated tiers separated by half-round mouldings to the front of the rails. The drawer fronts are labelled alphabetically right to left, omitting I and V, and the last pair are numbered 1 and 2. Each drawer is of oak, subdivided into numerous compartments, each lined with paper and labelled by hand according to its contents. Some of the papers are gilt edged, and most of the extant watermarks are for 1698. The drawer knobs appear to be turned from plumwood. The drawers of the lower section are also of oak, dovetailed front and back with bottom boards nailed up into rebates all round. Small half-inch strips of oak act as runners. The uppermost drawer is subdivided to hold stoppered glass bottles, and the second has later subdivisions of deal. The interior sides of the lower carcass have been lined with panels of oak. These perform the dual function of supporting the dustboards and preventing sideways play in the drawers resulting from the framed carcass construction. The overall finish is very clean, even the back panels having been lightly sanded to smooth out saw marks.

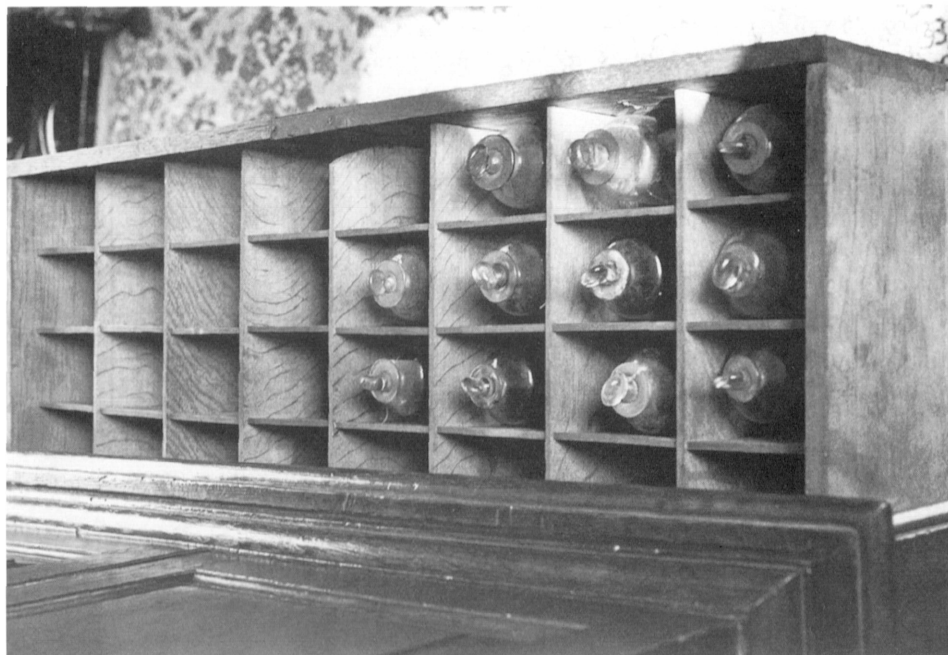
All fittings, hinges, handles and locks are original. The lock of the upper doors is of brass with steel wards and a chamfered edge, still with its original key. The bolts at the top and bottom of the left hand doors are of steel, and handles and escutcheons are cast brass with most of the gilding still in place.

The Vigani cabinet stands as a remarkable object in its own right. However, it is also a tantalising introduction to a much larger body of work, which would repay a detailed and extensive programme of research. Other furniture by John Austin is extant—some fitted bookcases in Emmanuel College are known to be his work—and more probably remains to be discovered. Woodwork by Cornelius senior is linked with some of the most famous names in English arts and architecture, Grinling Gibbons and Sir Christopher Wren among them. Cambridge is fortunate in having an extensive and well documented collection of high quality provincial joiners' work which remains in situ and in use after three hundred years. Further research would undoubtedly reveal detailed and important information about this productive family of joiners.

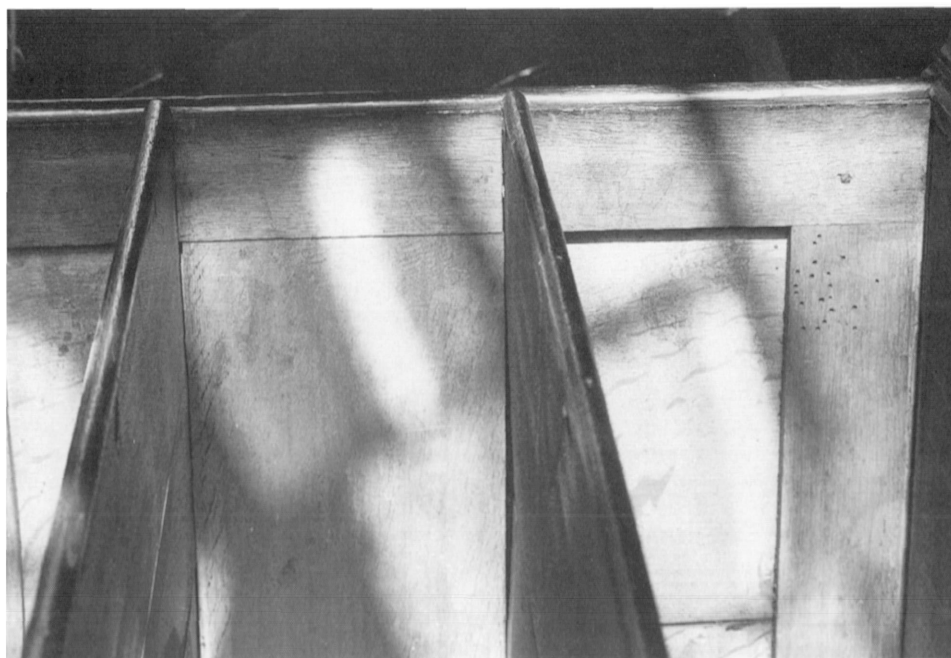
#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the President and Fellows of Queens' College, Cambridge, for permission to examine the Vigani cabinet, and to Robert Williams, for information on the Austins and their work.





4. Drawer containing stoppered bottles with original contents  
*By courtesy of The President and Fellows of Queens' College.*



5. Interior of base, showing thickening board (centre) to  
prevent side-play in drawers  
*By courtesy of The President and Fellows of Queens' College.*

REFERENCES

1. *The Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, Leeds, 1986, has a brief resumé of their careers. Robert Williams has subsequently unearthed further evidence of their work in Cambridge.
2. Vigani's career has been the subject of several monographs from 1730 onwards. Biographical information in this short article has been culled from a paper written by E. Saville Peck, M.A., Ph.C., and published at Cambridge in 1933.