

OAK CHAIRS FROM ULSTER

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Furniture historians are familiar with the premise that extant examples of early Irish furniture are noticeable by their absence rather than by their presence in either museum or in private collections. And in this context 'early' furniture signifies pieces of furniture which may be dated to within the broad period spanning the middle to late seventeenth century and into the early eighteenth century.¹ In general terms this furniture can be separated into two generic groups; items of recognisable church furniture (invariably with an Established Church provenance) and the infrequent, substantial pieces of farmhouse furniture consisting mostly of fireside armchairs, chests and cupboards.² The lack of furniture accessible for examination and the uncertain background attached to many of the surviving pieces has perhaps, unintentionally helped to discourage detailed research into this subject. However, the recent donation of two early oak chairs to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in April 1994 renewed my interest in this subject and while many questions remain unanswered a fuller picture is also discernible.³

The two chairs comprise one plain, unremarkable joined armchair and a single 'backstool' styled chair. Both chairs have mortise and tenon construction secured with wooden pegs and the boarded seat on the single chair is clearly secured by a tongue and groove joint. The back of the armchair has two panels and a simple cresting rail and it is comparable to similar Ulster and Scottish examples.⁴ Decoration on both chairs is limited to sparse shallow reeding along the seat rails and back panels of each chair and to some simple turnery. The front legs and armposts of the armchair are turned and the single chair has turned front legs and a front stretcher but the central bobbin turning across its lower back serves to give it individual character. There are two small initials carved onto the back of armchair's cresting rail which can be distinguished as 'LG' or 'LC' and can be interpreted as a later mark of ownership. Both chairs can be dated to the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century (Figs 1-4).

These chairs were collected from a modern farmhouse near the village of Saintfield in Co. Down and family tradition stated that they had been in the family for several generations. Seemingly the chairs had been inherited from father to son and it was only within recent years that they had ceased to be regularly used in the home. Furthermore, the chairs had been brought from the earlier original home of the family which was a farm situated close to the (former linen and) market town of Ballymoney in north west Co. Antrim. The family is of Scottish descent and their surname is Getty. Finally, the chairs are believed to have been made from wood recovered from a well-known and extensive bog in the locality called the Garry bog. Given the distance in time, it is not possible to confirm this association except to state it remains very probable and its relating does serve to emphasise a lingering recognition of the past importance of bogwood in the local rural economy.⁵ Certainly the Garry bog deserves further mention as until recent drainage and reclamation schemes it was among the largest bogs in Ireland. An account of the Parish of Ballymoney written in 1832 for the Government's



1. Oak chair, Ballymoney, Co. Antrim

UFTM collection 514, 1994



2. Detail of cresting rail



3. Oak armchair, Ballymoney, Co. Antrim
UFTM collection 513, 1994



4. Detail of arm



5. 'John Wilson's Chest', 1707. Photographed by Wm. McKinney, 1902

UFTM photograph archive

Ordnance survey gives a description of the bogs within the locality: 'The bogs are numerous and extensive, particularly the Garry bog and the Garrydoo. Cultivation is fast encroaching upon these, by reclaiming, and the most productive crops raised upon the bog soil so prepared' and: 'The Garry bog lies North east of the town of Ballymoney and extends about one-and-a-half miles in length and 2 miles in breadth within this parish . . . A great quantity of timber is found in this the bog. It is principally of fir and of oak is frequently met with and the bog is very deep: in many places where drains have been made they have opened to a depth of 14 or 15 feet without reaching the substratum.' An account for the neighbouring parish of Dunluce also refers to the Garry Bog: 'In the deepest level of the bog three layers of stumps are found. Oak is generally found in the lower layer resting on the sub soil. It is also mostly found at the edges of this and the other bogs in this county. The upper layers mostly consist of fir.' Although these accounts reflect a contemporary preoccupation with drainage they do also imply an well established exploitation of local bogs for wood. Similar accounts from other parishes in North Co. Antrim specifically state that local bog wood was principally used for fuel and the 'better quality of bog timber is used for building and the inferior for fuel.'⁶

But in one further tantalising reference the existence of early oak furniture, (not necessarily made from bog oak), in the Northern Parishes of Co. Antrim is recorded from the parish of Kilraghts, about five miles east from Ballymoney: 'Though there are but few of the houses in which there is much taste or neatness, there is an immensity of real comfort and substance in almost of them. They are old and some of them built by the first Scots settlers are still in excellent order. They are nearly all one-storey, thatched and consist of three rooms and generally a sort of loft. They are built of stone and well



6. 'John Wilson's Chair', 1625. Photographed by Wm. McKinney, 1902

UFTM photograph archive

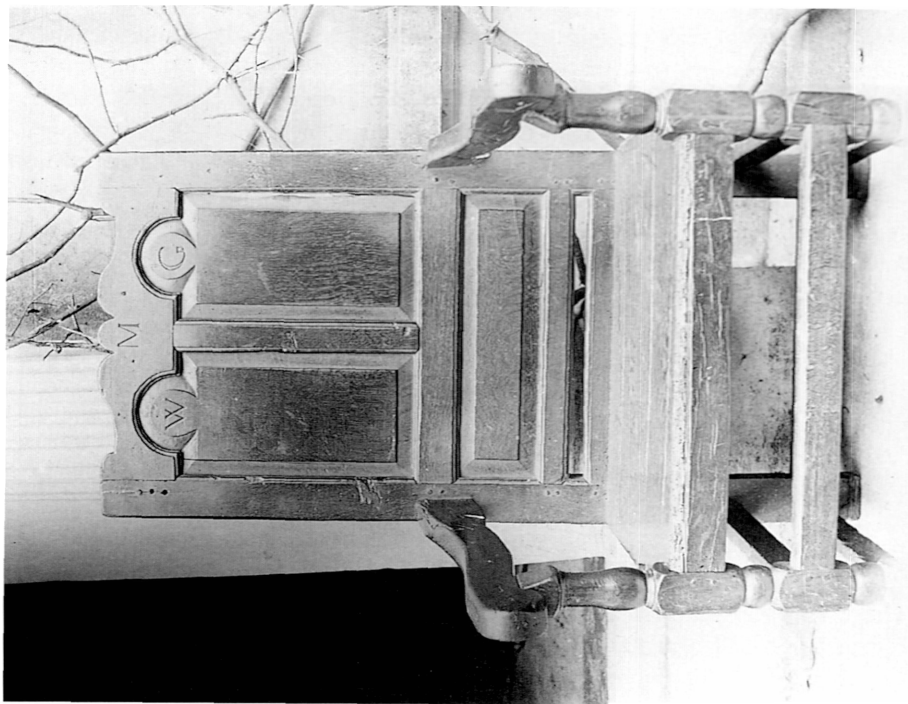
lit, and are cleanly. Their furniture is good and much of it very massy, and made of oak.⁷ The above account raises the question of the possible extent of original transfer of items of furniture by settlers from Scotland into the North of Ireland throughout the seventeenth century. Again this is a question which will probably never be answered satisfactorily, as it is equally reasonable to assume that some furniture was definitely brought to Ireland and some furniture later made in Ireland closely resembled furniture made in Scotland. Existing Irish and English influences on local lifestyles also deserve due consideration.⁸

Very occasionally, associative information on the type of 'antiquitarian' furniture passed down within families is available. A miscellaneous note and photograph in the JRSAL for 1894 records an early oak armchair dating to 1616, in the possession of the Cunningham family of Glencairn, which was brought to Ulster from Ayrshire in the middle of the seventeenth century. The chair has a double panel back and low carved top rail which is carved with the initials of the original owner and a rare example of a motto . . .', J. D. Fear God, 1616'.⁹

In the Folk Museum's photographic archives there are a number of photographs of early pieces of furniture belonging to families from the Co. Antrim parish of Carnmoney on the outskirts of Belfast. These photographs were taken by a well-known local historian, Mr Wm F. McKinney (1832-1917) at the turn of the century; a Mr John Wilson's chest of 1707 and old chair which is dated to 1625 and Mrs Boyd's old initialled but undated oak armchair have been clearly recorded (Figs. 5-8). The family history to go with these pieces confirm a Scottish provenance for the Wilson family furniture, as the family came to Ireland from the Nith valley near Dumfries in Scotland during the 1680s, but although ownership is specifically recorded history remains silent as to who made these pieces. The background to the Boyd chair remains uncertain.¹⁰

The few Irish inventories of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which have been examined in detail do record the presence of oak furniture in the homes of the wealthy and to a lesser extent in the homes of the poor. But the later dearth of oak furniture is also noted. Obviously, in later as in earlier centuries there was a high rate of destruction and replacement of furnishings. Furthermore, among the mass of the population widespread poverty combined with a serious lack of indigenous timber resources were to contribute to the later nineteenth century development of a vernacular furniture tradition which was largely based on imported softwoods.

By the early nineteenth century the odd surviving (domestic) examples of earlier furniture had become respected but not always cherished items of family property. However, it seems 'dated' examples could especially prove to be a draw for curious: 'There is a ancient cupboard in the house of St John Glover of Ballynamullan (a townland in the parish of Duneane, on the North Western shores of Lough Neagh, Co. Antrim) of oak, six and a half feet high and five and a half feet broad, on which is the following inscription: 'Andrew Hum John Hum 1679'. The carving on the front is very curiously executed. Several antiquarians is said to have called to see it. From the owner, St John Glover.'



7 & 8. Oak armchair, seventeenth century. Boyd family, Carrmonee, Co. Antrim. Photographs by Wm McKinney
UFTM photograph archive

REFERENCES

1. The fundamental reason given for the lack of furniture surviving from the late medieval and early modern eras in Ireland is the Island's turbulent history. To flourish, the visual and material crafts such as furniture-making require relative social and political stability and a degree of modest wealth throughout the general population.

1. Although it has not been studied on a systematic basis, several examples of early Irish Church Furniture have been recorded. Invariably these early pieces are held to be imports or the products of British craftsmen. Well known examples include: the late fifteenth century oak carvings of beasts and figures on the misericords in St. Mary's Cathedral in Limerick city, the Jacobean oak communion table which is dated to 1610 in the Kilbrogan Church, Bandon, Co. Cork, and the highly fashionable, elaborate, oak carved table by the Frenchman James Tarbary now in the Chapel of the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, Dublin. This table is dated to 1686. The old 'middle' church at Ballinderry, Co. Antrim was built c. 1664 and some of its furnishings date to c. 1666 — namely some box pews and a communion table. These pieces are believed to have been made from old oak timbers from a nearby Pre-Reformation ruined church. Civic furniture is rarely recorded but a '1688' inscribed oak chest belonging to the 'Corporation of Hosieries and Knitters . . .' near St Georges' Field, Dublin, has recently been published. Teehan, John, *Irish Furniture and Woodcraft*. National Museum of Ireland and Country House, Dublin, 1994, p. 19. (A plain panelled oak cradle c. 1700 is also illustrated in this booklet.)

The UFTM has a small miscellaneous collection of 'early' oak furniture which largely consists of armchairs. Satisfactory background information on these pieces is scant to non-existent but most were collected during the late 1960s to early 1970s and a few have a known Co. Antrim or Co. Down provenance. Most of these items have been subsequently repaired and restored.

(There is also a handful of alleged Spanish Armada furniture in Ireland — a distracting but delightful story in its own right.)

3. UFTM Accession numbers 313 and 314. 1994.

4. Cotton, B. D., *Manx traditional furniture, a catalogue of the Furniture Collections of Manx National Heritage*, Manx Museum and National Trust, 1993, pp. 2-4. Joined chairs of Scottish origin or influence have been identified in both Ulster and the Isle of Man by Dr Cotton. Common features includes plainness, turned legs and two panels composing the backs.

5. In the sixteenth century (and probably earlier) bog oak, fir and yew were laboriously recovered from bogs and used for a variety of domestic purposes. Bog oak was valued more for construction work than for furniture making as it was difficult to work once it had dried. In the early nineteenth century bog yew was favoured by cabinetmakers as a quality wood for furniture making and inlay.

Lucas, A. T., 'Bogwood, a study in rural economy.' *Béalóideas*, Vol. 23, 1954, pp. 71-135.

6. Angelique Day and Patrick McWilliams, Editors. Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland. Parishes of County Antrim. Vol. V, 1830-5 and 1837-8. Giant's Causeway and Ballymoney. Vol. 16. Institute of Irish Studies. Q.U.B. Belfast, 1992, pp. 5-6, p. 107.

(The Survey of the townlands of Ireland was undertaken in the early nineteenth century on orders of the Government. Its findings were to be used for the purposes of valuation and taxation. In fact, the survey of the whole island was never completed.)

7. Ibid, p. 129.

8. It is probable that early English furniture forms influenced later known examples of Irish furniture, e.g. the settle bed. Irish influences are more elusive but, for example, simple stools and kitchen stickback chairs were common from well before 1800. In the Quaker inventories from Ballyhagan, Co. Armagh, 1716/1740, distinctive Irish utensils are mentioned for drinking vessels: methers/Madders and a lossad/losset — a kneading trough.

Gailey, A. 'The Ballyhagan Inventories, 1716-1740'. *Folklife*, Vol. 15, 1977, pp. 36-63.

9. Milligan, S. F. 'Old Chair', *Miscellanea. Journal of the Royal Society Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 24, 1894. Part 1, p. 83.

10. The Wilson family history is referred to by the granddaughter of Mr W. F. McKinney in her book *McKinney of Sentry Hill*. Coleraine 1985, p. 127.

The Boyd family of Carntall, Co. Antrim, may be tentatively identified with Nathaniel Boyd, Carnmoney. Walker, B. M. *Sentry Hill. An Ulster Farm and Family*. Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1987, p. 91.