

CARLUKE DRESSERS

David Jones

Scottish dressers are still a bit of a mystery. R Ross Noble of *Am Fasgadh*, The Highland Folk Museum, has done the most to investigate the possible origins and has laid down some important markers for the identification of a highland archetype,¹ but the great regional diversity of the dresser in Scotland has prevented any easy recognition. This article aims to make a microstudy of one specific type, in this case from the lowlands, showing how it can be related to a broader generic tradition.

The widespread introduction of the dresser in Scotland seems to have coincided with the increased production of domestic earthenware and stoneware pottery in both the east and west of the country, and it appears to have been a nineteenth century phenomenon. By 1850, the potteries had flourishing outlets, including fancy goods shops and independent travelling dealers who penetrated even the most outlying districts.² Although dressers in the highlands and lowlands differed in their essential design,³ the purpose of both types was to show off the owner's gleaming array of china. John Claudius Loudon, who was born in Cambuslang, N W Lanarkshire, described the dresser, in 1839, as 'the poor man's sideboard';⁴ an appropriate analogy made across the social classes because, in the dining room of a large town or country house the primary function of the sideboard was to display silver articles or 'plate', whereas in the much smaller living kitchen of a miner or farm worker's house, the dresser was used to make an equivalent show of items that were decorative, but which were available and affordable to his family.⁵

In the western islands, this might have been a few rows of plates leaning forwards against a guard rail to protect their faces from the dust and drips; in the fishing communities of the north east coast, large decorated ashets, used for serving herring and potatoes, were sometimes prominent, and in the industrialised areas of the lowlands, collections of transfer-printed jugs from the big potteries such as Bells of Glasgow or Buchans of Portobello, to the south of Edinburgh, might have dominated the display.

In the highlands and islands, the contents of the dresser tended to provide the visual interest of the whole ensemble, whereas, in the lowlands, the dresser itself was more likely to be decorated. There is little evidence, however, of lowland dressers being made by householders. Like beds, they were definite status items and although a cottager might turn his hand to making some furniture items such as stools, if he could afford a dresser, he would go to the local wright to have it made, or buy it from a large furniture manufacturer. In the lowlands, the wright would supply dressers for the kitchens of country houses and cottages across his working territory, in the same way as he would have made closed or box beds for both the local laird's live-in servants and the families of farm labourers. They were relatively expensive items depending on how 'fancy' they were. Because wrights made numbers of dressers, it is possible to recognise distinctly localised patterns, where variation of decorative detail is the determining factor.

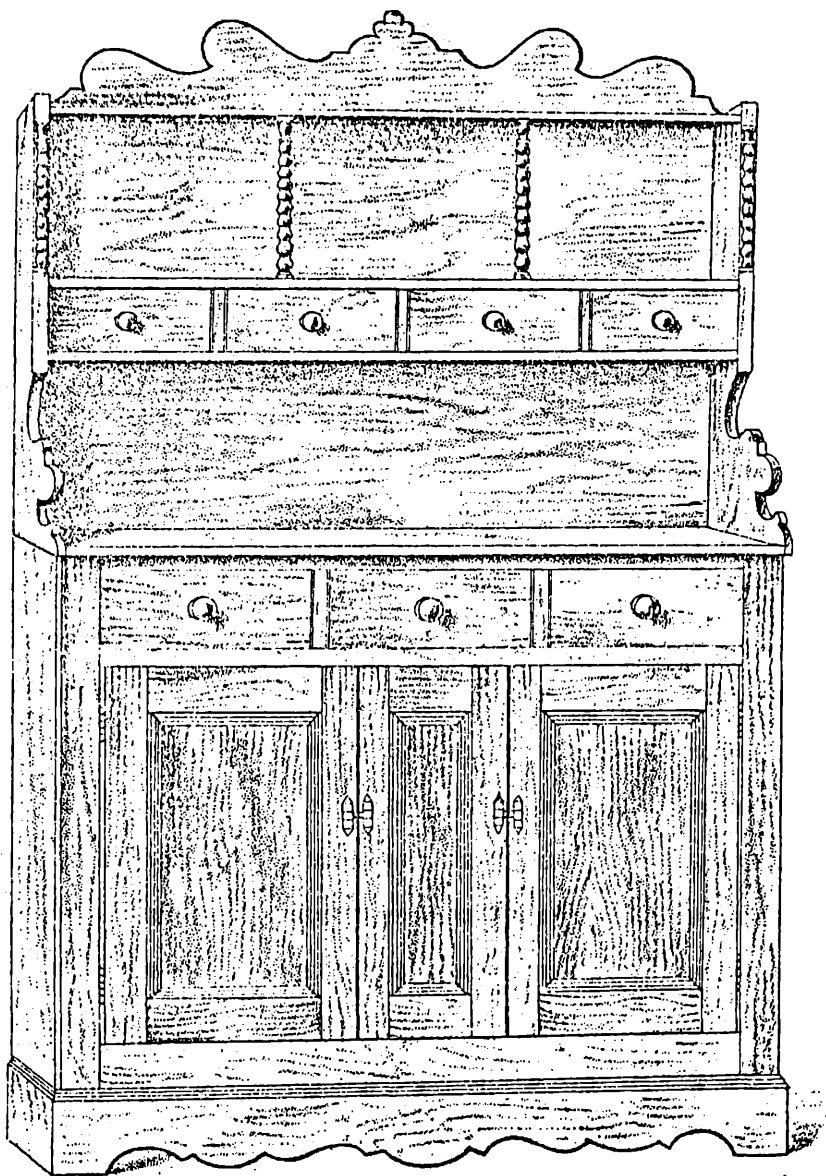
Carluke, in South Lanarkshire, is a good area for detailed case study of a lowland dresser tradition because a reasonable number of examples survive, some in the houses



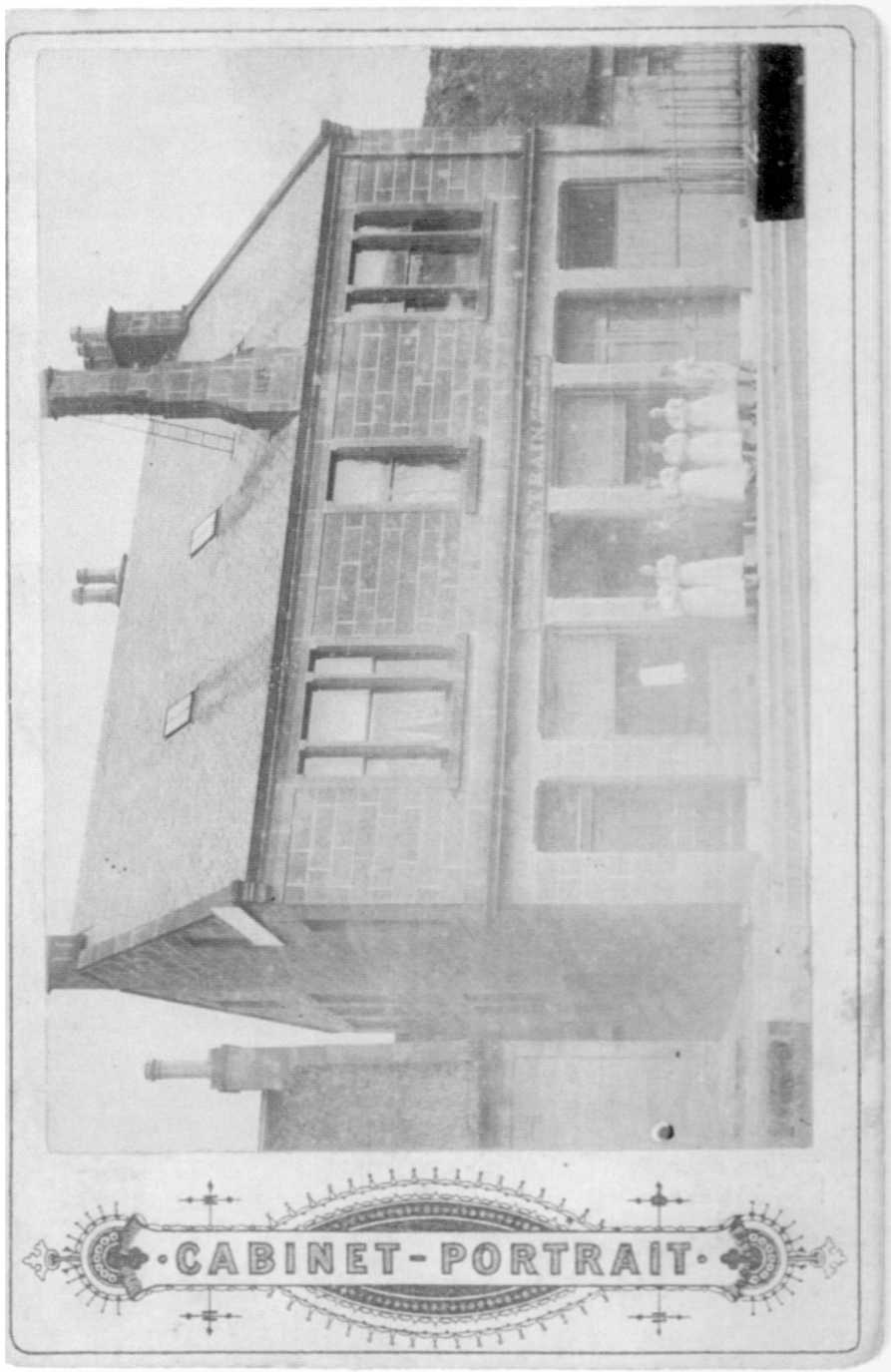
1. Carluke dresser by John Graham, Carluke, c1890
Mr & Mrs Hepburn, East Henshilwood Farm, Forth



2. Carluke dresser by George Train, Carluke, c1900, (drawers missing).
The cupboard doors have been painted to imitate oak and burr walnut.
Collection of Carluke Parish Historical Society



3. Design for lowland dresser of Stirlingshire type.
From an illustrated catalogue issued by Christie and Miller, cabinet makers, Falkirk, c1880

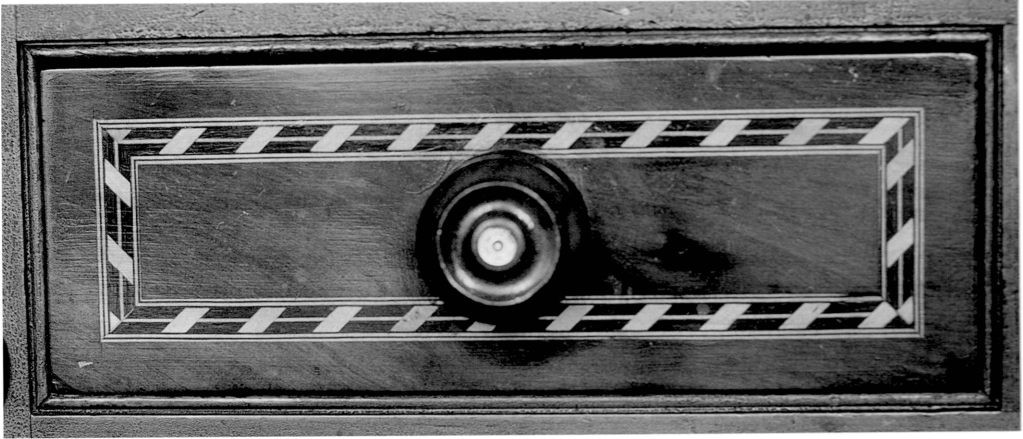


4. 'Cabinet portrait' of George Train's Furniture Works and Shop,
built 1893, High Street, Carlisle

for which they were first made, and, what is more, they can be traced to named makers. Carluke dressers stand out because they have fancier decoration than most other variants of the lowland traditional type. Typically, a Carluke dresser will have an upper shelved section comprising a row of small drawers, a rack for the display of jugs or bowls and a shaped, profiled top. The small, suspended drawers, which may, or may not be used for the storage of dry baking sundries, divide the upper structure into separate areas of display and utility. Above, a row of ornamental china may be placed, while below, a 'baking' top is enclosed by a raised lip at either end. The cupboard base is characterised by three drawers over two tall cupboard doors and, frequently, a central, fixed framed panel. Sometimes, this narrow central space between the cupboard doors may be occupied by a stack of small drawers, but this is more common to dressers made in the counties of Dunbartonshire and Stirling, to the north of Lanarkshire. (see figure 3) Drawers and cupboard fronts of the Clyde Valley or Carluke dresser are flanked by spiral or bobbin turned split balusters which rise from the high, turned feet of the base to the baking board top. The drawer fronts are characteristically decorated with bands of parquetry inlaid fruitwoods, usually arranged in herring-bone fashion.

There were at least five makers of this pattern in Carluke itself; Robert Cringan, Thomas Gray, James Shirlaw and Thomas Wood were significant outfits, but the two major firms were George Train and John Graham, who both operated from the town's High Street. George Paton Train is remembered as having the most prominent premises (see figure 4) and, in a surviving bill of 1879, he described himself as a cabinet maker and shaft maker – the latter a reference to the coal mining that provided one important branch of employment in the district. But the founder of established cabinet making in Carluke was James Graham, born in Edinburgh in 1787. He moved to Carluke as a young man, one of the great wave of trained cabinet makers who migrated from the capital to the country's regional centres during the early nineteenth century.⁶ In 1840, his son John (born in 1815) founded the firm that was to become known as John Graham and Sons, an enterprise that was to specialise in providing furniture for the local working population. John's three sons, James, William and John eventually entered the firm as partners.⁷

The census for Carluke in April 1871 described John Graham, High Street, as 'cabinet maker employing seven persons'. Figure 1 shows a Carluke dresser at East Henshilwood Farm, by the village of Forth. It was bought from John Graham by the Hepburn family, for their farmhouse kitchen, where it remains today.⁸ Graham's use of fruitwoods can be seen in the decorative banding to the drawer fronts of the cupboard base. This distinctive inlay work is a signature feature of the Carluke dresser and an example of expressly local symbiosis, for the Clyde Valley, in which the town is situated, was the chief commercial orchard fruit growing area in Scotland until the mid-twentieth century.⁹ Like other woodworkers in the valley, Graham bought up prunings and unwanted timber, from the fruit growers, with which he then decorated his furniture. Coloured fruitwood veneers were used, not just for dressers, but for a wide variety of items from clock cases to decorated boxes. (Figures 7 and 8) The link between the woodworking trade and the orchard proprietors of the area is illustrated by local newspaper advertisements such as that placed in the *Hamilton Advertiser*, December 1867, by the Caledonian Fancy Woodwork Manufactory, based in nearby Lanark.¹⁰ (Figure 6)



5. Detail of fruitwood parquetry on frieze drawer front of dresser by John Graham
Mr & Mrs Hepburn, East Henshilwood Farm, Forth

CALEDONIAN FANCY WOODWORK, MANUFACTORY, LANARK.

PARTIES having Fancy Woods to dispose of, such as Apple, Cherry, Plum, &c., &c., may have a ready market and good price for such.
ARCHD. BROWN & CO.

6. Advertisement from *The Hamilton Advertiser*, December 1867, requesting fruitwood supplies

The use of gaudy parquetry ornaments using fruitwoods, the most elaborate resembling kaleidoscope patterns, peaked in the 1890s, but the practice does have roots that can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. For example, the use of herringbone banding, or stringing, in contrasting woods, is noticeable in chests of drawers made in the south west of Scotland from around 1780. It can be seen, for instance, in the work of such late eighteenth and early nineteenth century makers as Newall, Hannah and Reid of Dumfries.¹¹ (Figure 9)

To return to the form of the Carluke dresser itself, it can be seen to have experienced a progression from functional type to fancy display piece during the nineteenth century. Earlier examples had deep, baking board tops that could be used for a practical purpose;¹² the later sort are designed almost exclusively for showing ornaments and do not have a



7. Caledonian Fancy Woodwork Manufactory, Lanark, decorated box.
Private collection



8. Detail of long case clock, Carluke, showing use of mahogany and fruitwood veneers.
A Mackay



9. Chest of drawers by Newall, Hannah and Reid, Dumfries, c1800,
showing use of herringbone stringing
Bonhams, Edinburgh

Carluke, 27 April 1874

Mr James Cunningham Crofthead,
Bought of **R. CRINGAN,**
CABINET MAKER AND FUNERAL UNDERTAKER,
Watch Dealer, Jeweller and General Merchant.
Feathers, Wool & Cotton for Beds. China, Crystal & Stone Wares.
GOODS OF ANY DESCRIPTION SUPPLIED TO ORDER.

20 Fancy Dresser	3	5	-
20 5 Chairs polished	1	15	10
20 1 Easy Chair	1	15	-
20 1 Table polished	-	18	6
20 1 Small Do	-	5	-
20 1 Baking board &c	-	5	-
20 1 Oak Baffer	-	1	8
20 1 Wappa stool	-	1	8
20 1 Fender Brass Centre	-	3	10
20 1 Fire Irons	-	3	-
20 1 Sirdel	-	2	6
20 1 Frything pan	-	1	1
20 1 Hair pitchers (20)	-	5	6
<i>Letlist</i>	9	3	7
<i>Robert</i>	9	3	7

INLAND REVENUE

10. Robert Cringan, Carluke, furniture bill specifying a 'Fancy Dresser', 1874



11. Miniature fancy dresser by Thomas Gray, Carlisle, c1900
A Mackay

top surface intended for food preparation. They are described as 'Fancy Dressers', as demonstrated in Robert Cringan's bill for one, priced at £3.5.0d in 1874. (Figure 10) The same bill includes a separate baking board, priced at five shillings, indicating that the dresser top, in this case, was not to be used for home baking. The dressers of makers such as Thomas Gray, Clyde Street, Carluke, were much more ornamental than those of John Graham and had a much closer resemblance to the French *chiffonier*. They were more likely to be used in the 'best room' than in the kitchen. Gray's pieces are singular because they are characterised not by fruitwood inlay, but by carved rosettes applied to drawer fronts.¹³ (Figure 11)

Whatever their detailed appearance, either with or without a baking top or a mirrored and shelved upper stage, these dressers conform to a generic lowland type that is recognisable by its harmony of proportion. Scottish lowland dressers are different because they are much less wide than say English or Welsh counterparts. The lower section is rarely lower than three feet (0.91m) and relatively deep from front to back.¹⁴ They seem to derive this proportion from a much older form, the kitchen press, or cupboard, with its comparatively 'high' and narrow lower section comprising two or three drawers over paired cupboard doors.

The fruitwood inlaid kitchen dressers of the Clyde Valley, in their various forms, were once showpieces of the South Lanarkshire working household. Their particular characteristics seems to have come about due to a combination of specialised circumstances that gave the Carluke area its personality. The town was dependent on fruit growing and coal mining, and it was this unique partnership of agriculture and industry that provided both the materials and the ready market for a special kind of dresser.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. R. Ross Noble, 'Highland Dressers and the Process of Innovation', *Regional Furniture* vol.VI, 1992, pp36-46
2. See G Cruickshank, *Scottish Pottery*, Princes Risborough, 1987 and J A Fleming, *Scottish Pottery*, Wakefield, 1973
3. The Scottish dresser tradition can be broadly divided into two types: highland and lowland forms. The highland type had a multi-tiered plate rack, sometimes with a cowed top, and a lower stage with pot board, but these components were usually made separately. The lowland dresser, on the other hand, was distinctive in that it usually comprised a short upper stage including a row of four suspended small drawers and perhaps one shelf for china, above a closed, cupboard base. The two sections were made as one piece, with a continuous back board. The simplest lowland dressers were made without an upper stage.
4. John Claudius Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Farm, Cottage and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, 1839 edition
5. For an explanation of the display of silver on a stage top sideboard, see David Jones, *The Edinburgh Cabinet and Chair Makers' Books of Prices, 1805-25*, Cupar, 2000, pp7-8 and 39-40
6. After 1800, urban population growth in Scotland was the highest in Europe, Ian Whyte, 'Urbanisation in Eighteenth Century Scotland', in *Eighteenth Century Scotland, New Perspectives*, edited by T M Devine and

J R Young, Tuckwell Press, 1999, p193. To exploit the need for consumer goods in the rapidly expanding regional centres, Edinburgh-trained wrights migrated. James Graham was one of these migrants

7. I am indebted to T Moffat Graham of Carluke Parish Historical Society for biographical information relating to the Graham family

8. I am grateful to Mr and Mrs Hepburn of East Henshilwood for their permission to inspect this dresser

9. See Francis H Groome, *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland: A Survey of Scottish Topography*, London, 1900

10. *Hamilton Advertiser*, 7th December 1867, p3. Advertisement requesting 'Fancy Woods'

11. See Stephen Jackson and Marion Stewart, 'Walter Newall of Dumfries', *Regional Furniture*, vol XVI, 2002 pp69-85

12. The baking board top in a dresser followed the same form as the plain baking board, that is; a deep board with a three sided gallery that prevented spillage of flour or pastry when rolling out. The ends were sometimes shaped in a quarter circle or perhaps a half ogee

13. The fancy dresser by Thomas Gray illustrated in figure 11 is a miniature sample piece.

14. An exception to this general rule is the Banffshire dresser which; although corresponding to the lowland type in having a short, shaped upper section, baking board top and closed base; has a lower section that is usually under three feet in height, making it look very different in proportion