

# IRISH SIDEBOARDS

David Jones and Fergus Purdy

## JOHN GETTY,

CABINET-MAKER, a few Doors above the Brown  
Linen-Hall, Donegall-street, Belfast,

**R**ETURNS his sincere thanks for the very flattering  
encouragement he has received since his com-  
mencement in Business; and hopes by his reasonable  
Charges, neat Workmanship, and good Materials, to  
merit a continuance of public favour.

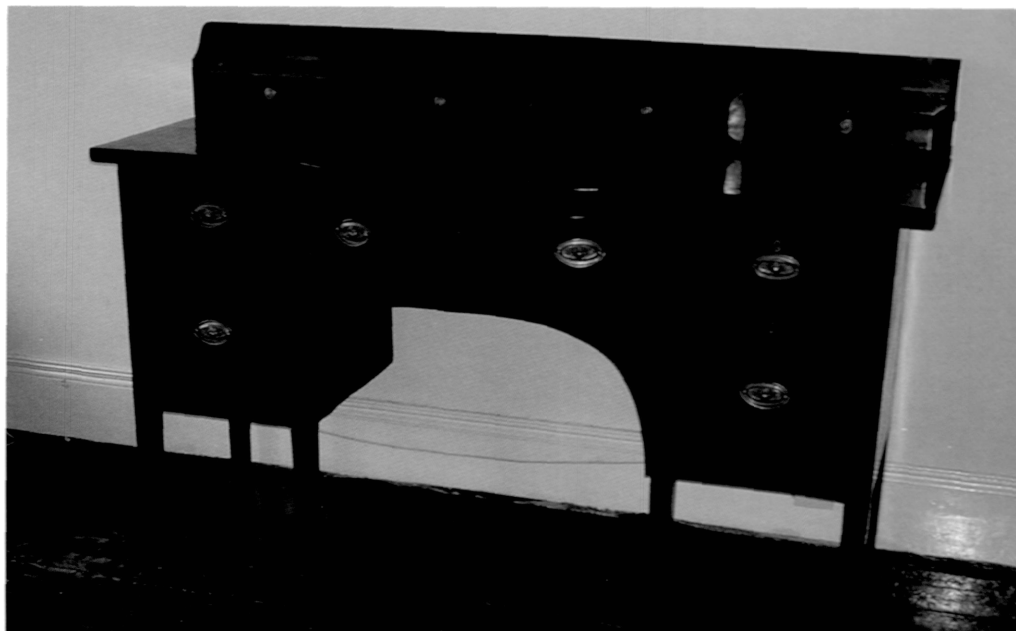
He has MANOGANY for Sale in all Scantlings from  
whole Logs down to Quarter Inch Board; also OAK of  
a very good quality. ————ORDERS from the Coun-  
try executed with Care, Punctuality and Dispatch.

GETTY has lately received for the inspection of his  
Customers, a Pattern-Book of the most Fashionable  
Furniture used at present in London.

January 1st, 1789.

1. Advertisement by John Getty, Belfast cabinet maker,  
*The Belfast Newsletter*, Dec 30th-Jan 2nd, 1789.

Fashionable Irish furniture has received much attention in the past twenty years but little attempt has yet been made to map out the field in detail.<sup>1</sup> Exposure of the furniture itself, usually the most sumptuous, mid eighteenth century carved pieces, has made it possible to recognise a general Irish/Dublin character, but more precise bearings need to be taken. As a start to this process, an article in *Regional Furniture* Volume IV, 1990, observed that Belfast cabinet makers produced goods of an urbane nature and design that were quite different from those manufactured in other major centres of production in Ireland. For example, the *Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices*, 1822, prepared by the local Cabinet Club established in 1788, gave specifications for sideboards of a 'tray top' or a 'step on top' type that were made to suit local preference.<sup>2</sup> These were similar to Scottish stage top sideboards in that an upper platform was provided for the display of silver plate, but they were certainly not identical to their Scots counterparts. The 'steps' were different because they were raised only two and a half inches and the trays raised on turned spindles appear to have been unique. No examples by known makers have been identified, but anonymous examples indicate the vestiges of a distinct regional personality in Belfast and district. That London fashion was fancied in the city is evident from advertisements placed in *The Belfast Newsletter*. John Getty<sup>3</sup> was prominent in doing so:



2. Belfast sideboard with 'step on top'.  
*Private Collection*



3. Belfast sideboard with 'tray top'.  
*Courtesy of Mrs Wright, Greencastle. Photograph by Richard Gordon*

*GETTY has lately received for the inspection of his Customers, a Pattern Book of the most Fashionable Furniture used at present in London*<sup>4</sup>

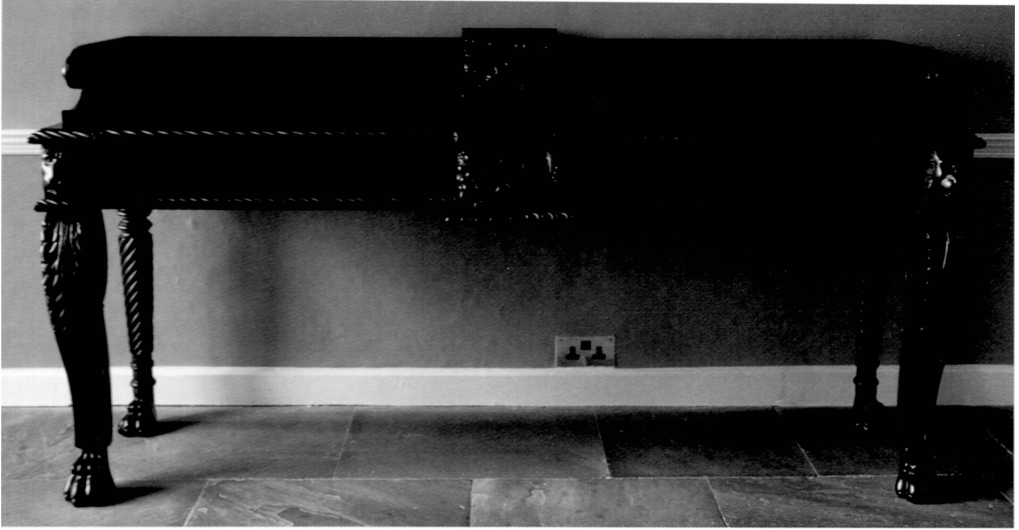
He was, no doubt, familiar with the relatively new design of integrated sideboard, illustrated in Hepplewhite's *The Cabinet-maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 1788, in which the separate functions of cellaret, lead lined sink, cutlery and napery storage were all contained usefully in one carcass. However, we know that London fashion was not followed slavishly, but adjusted according to local requirements. Figure 2 shows a sideboard that is a hybrid of Hepplewhite's cellaret design with the addition of a Belfast 'step', raised two and a half inches from the top. Belfast sideboards of this type usually had a deep drawer divided for gardevines<sup>5</sup> and decanters at one end and a cupboard or plain drawer at the other, with a plain drawer in the middle for linen napery.

The exact purpose of the second, 'tray top', variant is not clear, but the trays could be between six and ten inches from front to back in a straight run across the top or continued along all three sides. If the tray was made with a raised gallery edge, this could be shaped at the ends in a quarter circle or ogee, giving the finished article a marked resemblance to a *chiffonier* or dresser with shelved back. It is possible that this multiple display space was designed for tureens and other large china pieces as well as the usual plate. The combination of tray top with extra secure storage, below the central arch, where these items could be locked up when not on display (see figure 3) would seem to support the idea. *The Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices* indicates that the straightforward 'stage top', similar to the Scottish model which had a high stage fronted with drawers or sliders, was a third option favoured in the city.<sup>6</sup> The stage was not used for the keeping of plate, but for storing glasses.

Outside Belfast, but still in the northern counties, another distinct type of sideboard appears which will provide the chief subject of this article. Its origin, and area of usage cannot be precisely mapped, but it has consistent diagnostic features and appears to represent a fusion of southern Irish decorative style with later northern design preferences. The decorative vocabulary of these sideboards, all but two of which are of recessed breakfront form, includes shaped galleries, applied trusses, turned paterae, rope moulding, idiosyncratic ring turnings on both front and rear legs, and distinctively knuckled paw feet. All have a narrow, grooved plate across the back to enable the upright display of dishes and chargers. A chronology is presented here in which initial experiment in this 'mid-northern counties type' can be seen to give way to an established design formula that is centred upon a fixed layout of gallery, drawers and cupboards.

The first representative example is a sideboard table owned by Armagh County Museum and displayed to the public in the entrance lobby of Ardress House, County Armagh. It is of recessed breakfront form, but without any drawers. The appearance of carved motif in the central apron, and exuberantly realised paw feet connect this piece with the Dublin School<sup>7</sup> and particularly the three dimensional decorative treatment of eighteenth century side tables from the capital. But the plan of the sideboard, the existence of frontal trusses and a profiled gallery around the top links it with later examples that have more northern features.

The second subject of study, also in Ardress House, has drawers across the frieze, which indicates a later date. It is raised on six legs, which effectively divide the front into

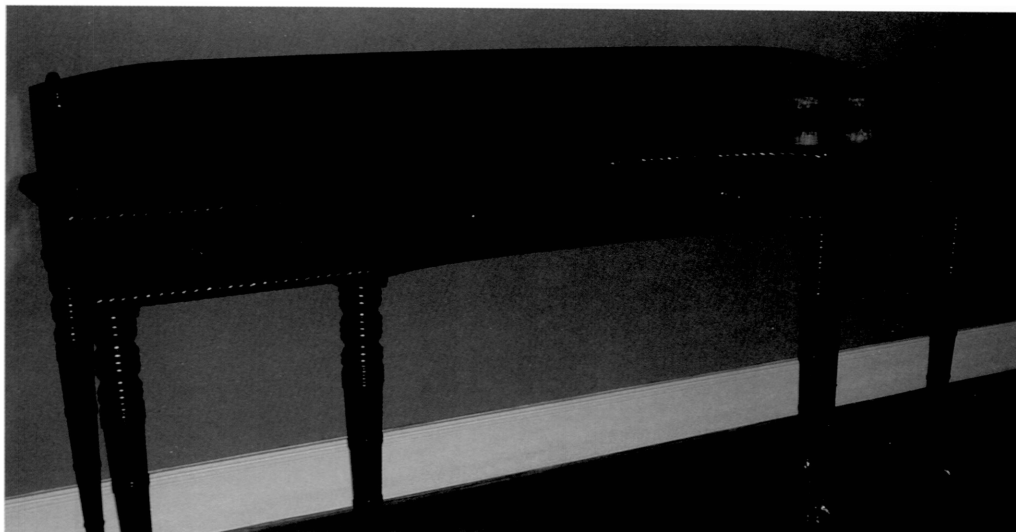


4. Sideboard table with carved central tablet, c1800, Address House, Co. Armagh.  
*Courtesy of Armagh County Museum*



5. End view of sideboard table with carved central tablet, c1800, Address House, Co. Armagh.  
*Courtesy of Armagh County Museum*





6. Sideboard table with recessed breakfront, c1805, Ardress House, Co. Armagh.  
*Courtesy of The National Trust, Northern Ireland*



7. Sideboard table with recessed breakfront, c1810, Florence Court, Co. Fermanagh.  
*Courtesy of The National Trust, Northern Ireland*



8. Sideboard table with recessed breakfront, c1835, from Ballyjamesduff, Co. Cavan.  
*Private Collection*



9. Sideboard table with recessed breakfront, c1835, The Argory, Co. Armagh.  
*Courtesy of The National Trust, Northern Ireland*

three sections, as seen on all the following examples. The middle section is recessed. The three-sided gallery, whilst similar to that on the sideboard shown in figure 4, has more of a swing. It is clearly designed to be a backdrop to plates and dishes displayed on their edges, as it has a grooved plate that runs along the back for this purpose. The whole thing is raised on ring turned legs terminating in spreading paw feet, with slender ankles that are set slightly higher than on the previous sideboard. The most prominent decorative feature of the front is the rope moulding on the top fore-edge. Rope moulding is a characteristic found on Belfast furniture, and in the city's other decorative arts and architecture. It can be said to be connected to Belfast's maritime tradition, but has more specific links to the massive ropeworks that became such a major industry in the nineteenth century. In furniture making, rope moulding was an expensive ornament as it was carved and not turned. *The Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices* states that the cost was more than twice that of reeding.<sup>8</sup>

An example (Figure 7) at Florence Court, County Fermanagh, shares diagnostic features and demonstrates a progression in design. It is of recessed breakfront form, but with a double display groove at the rear; the top, with rope-moulded fore-edge, is raised above three drawers and three cupboards below, all crossbanded, the central cupboard with double doors. Four applied trusses with reeded fronts flank the cupboard bays and continue as ring turned legs terminating in pad feet. There is evidence on the unfinished ends of the sideboard top that a three-sided gallery once existed. The Florence Court sideboard's roped top edging has four mitred corners, which must be regarded as a particularly luxurious embellishment. Paired elegantly with the rope-moulded top are trusses that extend to the full length of the upper carcass. The scrolled truss was a widely used motif in early nineteenth century architecture and decorative arts; it was derived from Roman stone sarcophagi and used principally as a supporting component in case furniture.<sup>9</sup> But for inventive, almost mannerist, use of the component we must turn to Edinburgh furniture, where the unusually applied truss is a signature feature. The truss was used by most Edinburgh cabinet makers between 1805 and 1830, but William Trotter, (1772-1833), employed it with most panache. He enlarged, inverted and grouped this classical scroll in imaginative ways.<sup>10</sup> Although the appearance and positioning of the motif in figure 3 is close to that in traditional sarcophagus form, the Florence Court sideboard maker has given great prominence to the truss and its multiple application to the front of a recessed breakfront is unusual. The feature has been used in the spirit of Edinburgh design but the exact formula is not one that is found in Scottish furniture.

The fourth sideboard in the group is from Ballyjamesduff in County Cavan (Figure 8). Made c1835, this table has a tall, elaborately profiled gallery with applied turned paterae, short, acanthus-carved trusses applied between the cupboard bays, turned wooden drawer handles and cornered moulding applied to the doors. Of particular interest are the narrow, high-ankled paw feet with a marked frontal emphasis and distinctive double knuckle form. Like the trusses, these are a very Scottish-influenced feature that can be traced back to *The Edinburgh Cabinet Makers' Books of Prices* of 1805 and 1811.<sup>11</sup> They can be contrasted with the much larger, spreading style of paw foot seen on the earlier sideboard at Ardress (Figure 4) and the frequently exuberant forms seen on earlier Irish side tables.

A much later sideboard (Figure 9) from The Argory, County Armagh, demonstrates a

continuation of the features discussed, but is developed to meet new demands. It retains the recessed breakfront, three drawer, formula but has four reeded column legs at the front, continuing up to a gadrooned moulding along the top edge and an enlarged, elaborately profiled gallery along three sides. The applied trusses are diminished in the Ballyjamesduff sideboard, but in the Argory example, they have disappeared altogether, to be replaced by column legs. Similarly, elegant gadrooning has been considered more effective than the rope moulding seen on earlier examples. In response to the increasingly formalised dining arrangements that were adopted in the nineteenth century, the display function of this sideboard has been amplified. It can be seen how the swinging curves of the heightened gallery provide a more dramatic backdrop for upright dishes and trays, but also that increased storage space has been provided for plate. The need for more commodious cupboards is accommodated by the use of false drawer fronts, thus retaining the established and familiar appearance of this sideboard pattern. Original turned wooden knob handles corroborate a date of manufacture in the second half of the 1830s.<sup>12</sup>

The last example in the group illustrates the survival of the mid-northern counties decorative dialect into a sideboard of pedestal form. On this example (Figure 10) the gallery has multiple scrolled curves and is handsomely ornamented with eight turned paterae. Although of pedestal design, there are vestigial paw feet, in the established flat sided, double knuckle form of seen on the earlier versions of the north midland pattern. This piece has one long and two short drawers across the front, as on the other examples, but the cut brass handles are later additions. As well as successfully adapting the pedestal form to the gallery, drawers and cupboards format, this sideboard demonstrates the cabinet maker's response to the introduction of French polish as the fashionable finishing technique of the period. In his *Modern Style of Cabinet Work Exemplified* (1835 edition), Thomas King called for surfaces to be left plain in order to 'show the beauty of the French polish'. It seems that this was the maker's intention here, as the pedestal panels were left uninterrupted and the upper drawers designed to be key dependent. The cabinet maker of this sideboard has produced a piece of furniture that strikingly emphasises the high shine surface that was achievable at this time, whilst retaining the familiar 'look' of an Irish sideboard designed for particular local preference.

Sideboards enjoy an excellent survival rate in Ireland and are therefore a good medium for continuation of the regional mapping process. The problem for furniture historians is that they are almost universally anonymous. Northern Ireland would benefit from a much more comprehensive survey of its fashionable furniture, but, for the moment, diagnostic study of a sample of sideboards such as this reveals several significant pointers. Firstly, it is clear that Belfast had sideboards of a characteristic type, notably the 'step on top' and the 'tray top' variants. This is verified by the survival of examples that correspond with the city's furniture price book specifications. Secondly, fieldwork in surrounding counties has suggested that another, different style of sideboard existed outside Belfast. This is the type illustrated in figures 4,5,6,7,8 and 9. Although manufacture in Belfast cannot be discounted, it must be noted that *The Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices* does not include specifications for this pattern.

Initial bearings would seem to suggest that it originated in a more southerly centre of fashion such as the city of Armagh. This group certainly shared features with the Belfast

models but it seems to have had a much stronger connection with cabinet style from the south of Ireland. Early exemplars such as the sideboard table shown in figure 4 show carved decoration that was influenced by Dublin work. As later examples are observed, it becomes clear that there was a move away from Dublin towards a more marked Scots influence after 1820. Features such as the scrolled truss and the high-ankled, flat-sided paw foot were certainly derived from Edinburgh furniture of the early nineteenth century. But it would be wrong to claim all the prominent features as Scottish; applied, turned paterae, frontal trusses and oversized rope moulding are all part of a particularly Irish vocabulary, as is the general form of the recessed breakfront sideboard.

It is pleasant to be able to record a few good examples of Northern Irish work for those interested in fashionable craftsmanship of the past, but also useful to be able to make a little further exploration of the personality of Irish furniture. It is to be hoped that the study of the subject, in all its diversity, continues to gain momentum in the twenty first century.



10. Pedestal sideboard table, c1845 .

*Private Collection*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

1. Desmond Fitzgerald, Knight of Glin, is about to do this in a comprehensive book length study of Irish furniture, not yet published as this article goes to press.
2. David Jones, 'An Early Cabinet Makers' Club in Belfast and their Book of Prices, 1822', *Regional Furniture*, Volume IV 1990, pp100-12. Copies of The Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices, are deposited in The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, refs: D1050/15/1, D1050/15/5 and D1050/15/12
3. John Getty was cited as the principal cabinet employer in Belfast in the preface of The Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices, 1822. His premises were in Donegall Street.
4. The Belfast Newsletter, Dec 30th -Jan 2nd, 1789
5. *Garduvine* is the Ulster term for large wine or spirits bottle. It can also refer to a liquor case, as distinct from a cellaret. See *The Belfast Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices*, 1822, p31. A similar word, *gardevine* was used in the west of Scotland
6. Ibid, *Belfast Book of Prices*, p22
7. Such paw feet can be seen on a side table illustrated at the far left in the Dining Room of Castletown Cox, Co. Kildare, illustrated in Desmond Guinness and William Ryan, *Irish Houses and Castles*, Thames & Hudson, 1971, p282.
8. Ibid, *Belfast Book of Prices*, Table 28
9. Stone scrolled trusses are a commonly seen feature of surviving Roman sarcophagi but could be seen also in Italian Renaissance paintings and prints of these. Robert Adam first popularised its architectural use in the United Kingdom during the eighteenth century
10. See David Jones, *The Edinburgh Cabinet Makers' Books of Prices*, 1805-25, Kirk Wynd Press, Cupar, 2000. The best examples on public view of William Trotter's imaginative use of the scrolled truss are at Paxton House, Berwickshire. They date from 1814
11. Ibid. *The Edinburgh Cabinet Makers' Books of Prices*, 1811, plate 3
12. Both the house and its repertoire of furniture were extended after 1834. See *The Argory, Co. Armagh*, National Trust Guidebook, 1992. A similar sideboard, at Castletown Cox, Co. Kildare, is illustrated in Desmond Guinness and William Ryan, *Irish Houses and Castles*, Thames & Hudson, 1971, p282.