

WILLIAM CRAIGIE OF KIRKWALL AND THE FURNISHING OF MELSETTER HOUSE, HOY

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People in Orkney who appreciate furniture know that the best available in the early twentieth century came from Craigie & Inkster of Kirkwall. At the local auction mart today this firm's name in the catalogue has a significant effect on the sale price, and those who own furniture by Craigie & Inkster feel some pride in the possession of well-made work in good solid timber. It is also widely believed in Orkney that Craigie & Inkster were responsible for much of the furniture at Melsetter House in Hoy, designed in 1898 by the important Arts and Crafts architect, William Richard Lethaby, for Thomas and Theodosia Middlemore. No clear-cut documentary evidence has yet come to light, but a good case can certainly be made for Craigie's contribution at Melsetter, and more tentatively for Inkster's, and it can also be suggested that the design of work by the firm shows some Arts and Crafts influence.

There are extensive estate records in the Orkney Archives of the building of Melsetter House from 1898 to 1900, but these do not cover the purchase of furniture.¹ As personal property it was excluded from tax returns and was not overseen by the Estate Factor, the local lawyer Duncan J. Robertson, who organised payment for the building works. Only one reference to Craigie & Inkster has been found in these papers, dating from the time of Thomas Middlemore's death in 1923, when the firm was listed among the creditors of the estate.² Middlemore owed them four shillings, an insignificant sum but one which at least proves a connection.³ Family papers may yet turn up to shed more light on the furnishing of Melsetter, but in the meantime other evidence can be pieced together.

The most persuasive is from Mrs Hannah Rendall (born in 1914), who remembers Bill Craigie from her childhood in Kirkwall in the years around 1920 and believes that the Melsetter commission was the major event which set Craigie's business on a firm footing.⁴ Mrs Rendall's parents were good friends of Craigie and they lived nearby, so her memories were built up over many years of frequent contact.

Further information can be found in a variety of record sources, including extensive obituaries of Craigie in the two local papers, the *Orcadian* and the *Orkney Herald*, and the *Record of Inventories* in the Orkney Archives, which gives details of his estate in 1929.⁵ Local census returns and the trade directory, *Peace's Orkney and Shetland Almanac and County Directory*, also provide valuable data.

William Walls Craigie was born in Kirkwall in about 1857 and was apprenticed to a local cabinet maker, Peter Leonard. Afterwards he spent two or three years in Glasgow, presumably consolidating his craft skills, learning about new design in the most fashionable part of Scotland and experiencing city life. By 1880, aged only 23, he had returned to Orkney to establish his own business and the 1881 Census lists him as a 'Master Cabinet Maker employing one boy'.



1. 5 & 7 King St, Kirkwall, the home and workshop of W. W. Craigie, photographed in 2000

The directories provide an outline picture of the cabinet making trade in Orkney when Craigie set up. In 1879 there were five firms in Kirkwall (David Eunson, Robert Fea, Peter Guthrie, Peter Leonard, and John Peace) and two in Stromness (James Sinclair and Peter Sinclair). Craigie first appears in the following year as 'Craigie & Garrioch, Queenst', Kirkwall, and one of Craigie's obituaries mentions that Garrioch ran a branch in Stromness, though this does not appear in the directories.⁶

Robert Garrioch was only a few years older than Craigie and he died young in July 1884. The firm of Craigie & Garrioch continued to appear in the directories until 1886 but Craigie closed the Stromness branch and re-established as W. W. Craigie, as he was listed from 1887 to 1911. He seems to have moved at this time to a workshop and flat at 5 & 7 King Street (Figures 1 and 2). In the *Almanac* of 1888 he advertised (Figure 3) 'Furniture for Cottage or Mansion, Either Modern or Antique Design', and 'Workmen sent out to Execute Repairs', which implies a staff of more than one.⁷ Craigie's elder brother, Robert, is listed in the 1891 Census as a 'Cabinet maker', having been 'Unemployed' in 1881, but it is not known if he was working for his brother. John Walls, cabinet maker, received a legacy in Craigie's Will⁸ in token of his 'appreciation for his long and faithful service', and he perhaps started work in the 1880s.⁹

Craigie may have felt the need to advertise in 1888 because, with the addition of D. Smith, there were now seven cabinet makers listed in Kirkwall.¹⁰ The 1870s and 1880s saw the building of a new Sheriff Court and Police Station, Town Hall and Masonic Hall; the development of the harbour and the Kirkwall Hotel; and the erection of new churches and substantial villas. Although the population of Orkney was generally



2. A newly-made sideboard on the pavement outside Craigie's shop.
Photographed by Tom Kent (fl. 1897-1936), date unknown.
This is the only photograph in the Orkney Archives of work by Craigie.
Orkney Archives

W. W. CRAIGIE,
CABINETMAKER AND UPHOLSTERER,
KING STREET, KIRKWALL.

Furniture ♦ for ♦ Cottage ♦ or ♦ Mansion,
EITHER MODERN OR ANTIQUE DESIGN.

PICTURES FRAMED. Workmen sent out to Execute Repairs.

—SHOW ROOM—KING STREET.—

3. Advertisement from Peace's *Orkney and Shetland Almanac and County Directory*, 1888.
Orkney Archives

declining in number from its recorded maximum in 1861, the 1881 Census showed a slight rise and the parish of Kirkwall was at its Victorian height in this year. This growth in the town must have been encouraging for those involved in the provision of furniture and furnishings.

Well-established cabinet makers included Craigie's master, Peter Leonard, whose workshop in Broad Street, Kirkwall's main thoroughfare, continued until about 1899 and Peace of Albert Street,¹¹ who eventually closed in 1917-18, probably because of the Great War. David Eunson, also listed as a 'spinning wheel maker', was at Junction Road, and later Gallow Hall, until he disappeared from the list after 1902. Robert Fea of Mill Street and Peter Guthrie of Strynd both drop out of view in 1891-2, while D. Smith of Strynd, established in 1888, appears for only eight years.¹²

It is not of course possible to tell from such bare records as trade directories how many of these firms were making their own furniture and how many bought in work from elsewhere. A search of the Census of 1891 for the occupations of Kirkwall residents shows that there were 25 people engaged in the cabinet making trade. Three cabinet makers were also employers, two were self-employed, thirteen employed, and six apprenticed. There was also one girl of fourteen described as an assistant in a cabinet maker's warehouse. This implies that there were three workshops with enough work to need journeymen and apprentices and two men working on their own account, one of whom was the spinning-wheel maker, Eunson, who was aged 72 in 1891.

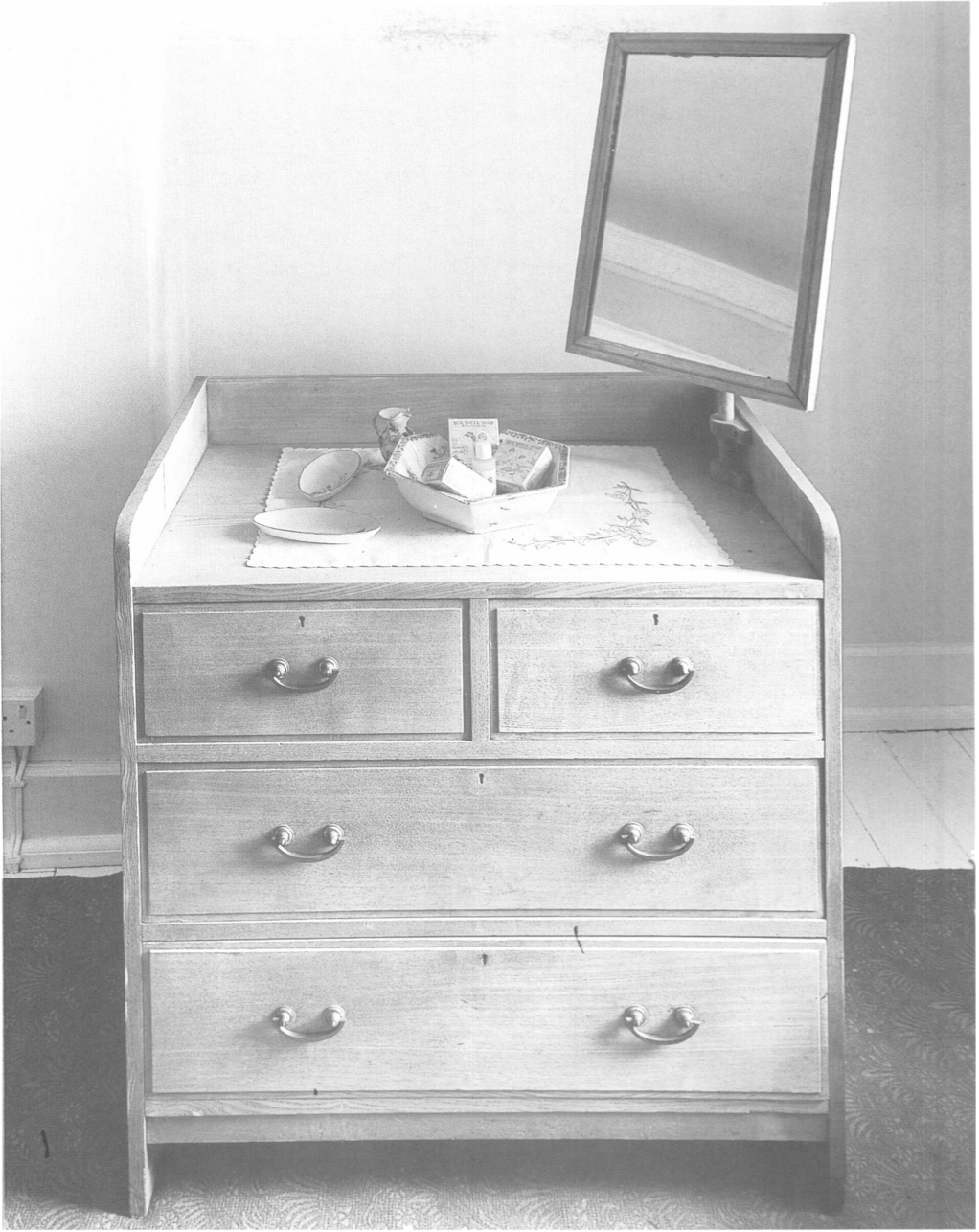
By 1899 when the building of Melsetter was nearing completion, the number of cabinet makers in Kirkwall was four, according to the *Almanac*. These were Craigie, Eunson, Peace, and a new firm, Kennedy & Tait, which was established in 1896. After 1906 these two partners seem to have gone separate ways and Tait in particular gained a very good reputation for quality,¹³ but in 1899 this firm may have been too recently founded to take on a big commission.

Perhaps only Peace and Craigie were in the running. How would the decision be made as to which to choose? It has been suggested that Craigie was helped by a connection with Rousay where the Middlemores had first established themselves at Westness House,¹⁴ since Orcadians from different islands maintained strong links, but it seems likely that he was chosen purely on reputation. We do not really know whether the work was under the control of the architect or of the clients. John Maynard Keynes, visiting in 1908, assumed that Mrs Middlemore was responsible for the furnishing and decoration and praised her as 'apparently, very skilled in the arrangement and decoration of a house.'¹⁵ Thomas Middlemore was certainly much involved in the plans for the house, which was part of his wider scheme for the employment of local labour in Orkney and the improvement of the islands of Hoy and Walls for trade and tourism. It must have been his wish that as much as possible of the cabinet making work be given to a local maker, though in the absence of financial accounts it is impossible to tell whether it would also cost less to buy locally than to import from a London firm such as Morris & Company or Heal's, which could supply a range of items of different quality.

Furniture at Melsetter falls into several distinct categories. A number of very fine pieces came from Morris & Co., including a superb inlaid writing desk¹⁶ and a fine mahogany table designed by George Jack,¹⁷ numerous sets of rush-seated chairs, and



4. Kitchen dresser made of pine, probably by the joiners working at Melsetter House, c1899-1900.
Photographed by Martin Charles.



5. Chest of drawers at Melsetter House, Hoy, made c1899-1900.
Photographed by Martin Charles

many upholstered armchairs covered in a variety of Morris fabrics. Some of this may have been bought when the Middlemores first rented Westness House in 1895, or it could have been transferred from their home in England, as, presumably, were a number of small items of antique furniture still at Melsetter today.

Other new pieces were made to Lethaby's design by the London cabinet maker, Augustus Henry Mason.¹⁸ Lethaby knew of him from at least 1889 when an altar table designed by Edward Prior, made by Mason and decorated by Lethaby was shown at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society exhibition.¹⁹ Mason was also associated with Kenton & Company, set up by Lethaby and others in 1890, which employed professional cabinet makers to execute the partners' designs in a workshop at Brownlow Mews.²⁰ After the demise of this short-lived firm, Mason moved to Kensington until 1894 or 1895, when he disappears from the *Post Office London Directory*. Possibly he was employed, rather than self-employed, in later years, but he continued to make pieces for Lethaby until at least 1906.²¹ A mahogany hall table at Melsetter with brass feet has similar qualities to the table by Lethaby for the hall at Avon Tyrrell, built for Lord Manners in 1890-93,²² and to another shown at an Arts and Crafts exhibition in 1896 and illustrated in the *Studio*.²³ A bookcase in the library at Melsetter, with lozenge-shaped glass panes and faceted feet, also reflects Lethaby's work elsewhere, and like the table is stamped 'FROM AUGUSTUS H. MASON'.

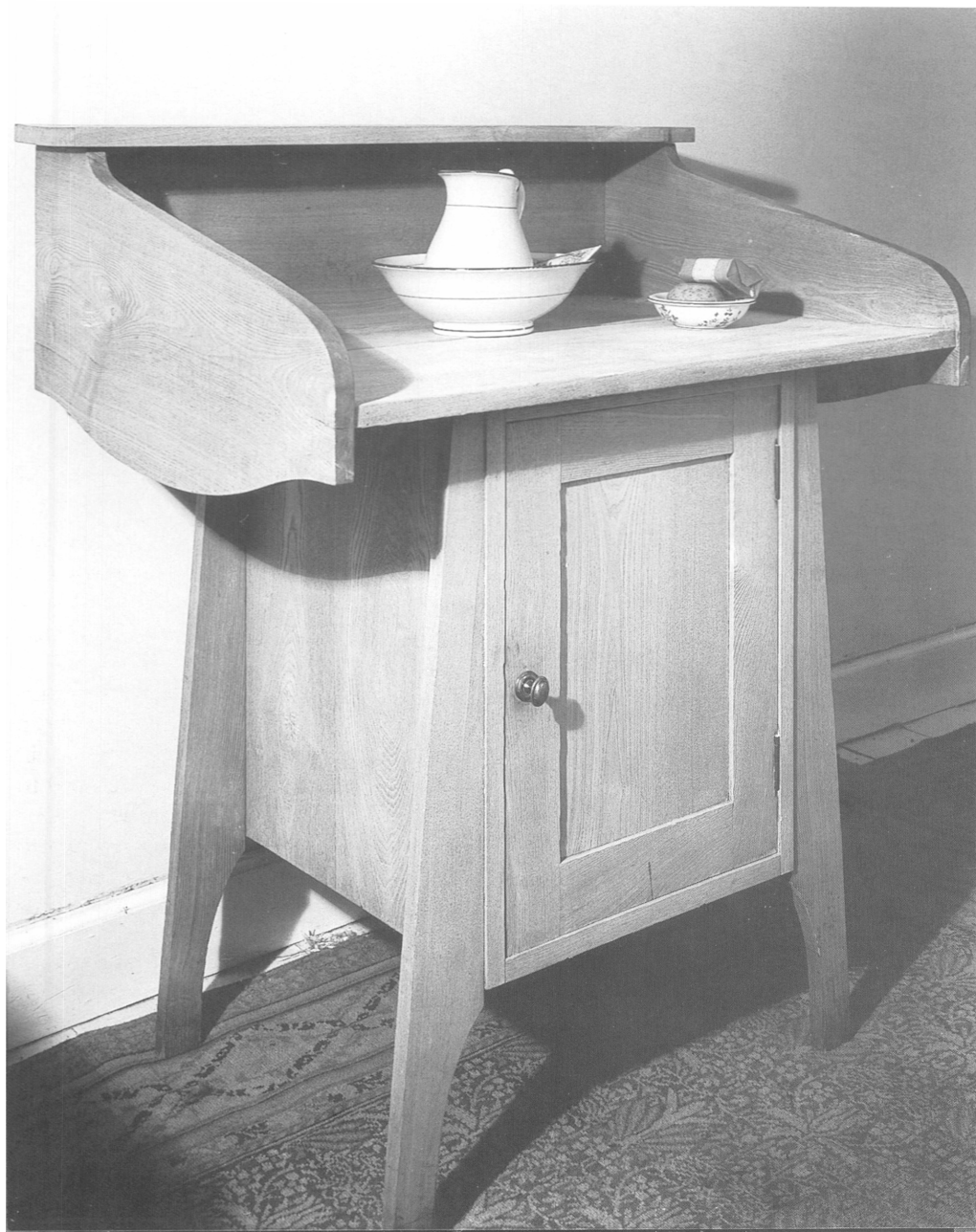
At the opposite end of the spectrum from these luxury items in mahogany, there is much built-in furniture in the house in the form of dressers (Figure 4), kitchen work-tables, and wardrobes. These are all well made in softwoods, of distinctive but simple design, echoing the straightforward qualities of the wall panelling and joinery in the house, and it seems likely that they were made on site by the joiners employed during the building work. A few freestanding items may also come into this category: a chest of drawers, for instance, now in the lodge on the island of Eynhallow, which the Middlemores owned, has part of a scrawled pencil inscription inside the boards of the back, including the words 'Longhope' (the local harbour), 'Melsetter' and 'Middlemore'. This suggests that it was made on Hoy rather than elsewhere.²⁴

In between this joiner work and the fine cabinet furniture are the items which are believed to have been made by Craigie (Figures 5-7). These are predominantly in solid chestnut with minimal decoration. The restrained brass fittings are of good quality and probably came from Elsley & Company in London, who supplied hardware for the house.²⁵ A couple of side tables²⁶ made for the dining room (to match a dresser now in the V&A²⁷ and a serving table in a private collection, which is marked by Mason) may have been part of the group believed to be by Craigie,²⁸ but most of it is bedroom furniture. The house was built for shooting parties and had ten guest bedrooms in addition to the Middlemores' suite of bedroom, dressing room and bathroom. Many of the guest rooms had neat built-in cupboards, but there were also freestanding wardrobes, chests of drawers and toilet mirrors, washstands, and sturdy bedsteads made to a series of standard patterns. It seems most likely that it was Lethaby who organised this work, though no correspondence or designs have been traced and it is possible that some items were designed by W. A. S. Benson.²⁹

W. R. Lethaby had been interested in furniture design from at least 1889. He was a member of the Furniture Committee for the 3rd Arts and Crafts Exhibition in 1890, his



6. Dressing table and toilet mirror.
Photographed by Martin Charles.



7. Washstand and cupboard.
Photographed by Martin Charles.

essay on 'Carpenters' Furniture' was printed in the catalogue, and his chapter on 'Cabinet Making' was published in A. H. Mackmurdo's *Plain Handicrafts* in 1892.³⁰ Although he designed items of luxury furniture in exotic woods with inlay and decorative fittings, he was always concerned with the provision of well-made but cheaper furnishings and encouraged makers to keep the work simple in design and not to be pretentious. In discussing the work of his friend and colleague, Ernest Gimson, Lethaby described it as 'good enough but not too good for ordinary use',³¹ and his own furniture can be seen in relation to his understanding of how it would be used. Visitors to Melsetter were provided with plenty of space to put away their clothes and with practical washstands which would not be easily damaged by splashing of water and soap. The beds are firm and comfortable and the rooms must have been very light and pleasant, with their Morris-patterned curtains and carpets. Guests would not have spent much time in their rooms, however, since there was shooting, golf, sailing and walking to occupy the daylight hours, and dinner, fine wines and conversation, followed by cards or concerts in the Middlemores' own small community hall, for evening entertainment.

The Melsetter bedroom furniture was all made of solid timber, usually with legs formed by the planks or with turned legs (Figures 5 and 6). Stiles and rails are unadorned, but drawer fronts mostly have a simple shallow moulding which emphasises their form. The chests of drawers in particular are neat, measured and compact in character and they bring to mind Lethaby's liking for the idea of 'ship-shape' as a quality in design. Some chests of drawers have an attached swing mirror and some a corner mirror; all are plain in design but have features that are striking in their simplicity. There are also freestanding swing mirrors with turned supports and candle-holders, and rails cut to an elegant curved shape, as seen in figure 6. These are reputed to have been designed by Benson and are certainly close to items illustrated by him in his 1893 book, *Elements of Handicraft and Design*,³² but the framing of the mirror itself is identical to that on other items (Figure 5), so the assumption is that they were by the same maker.

Perhaps the most distinctive form is the washstand design (Figure 7), with its splayed plank legs and embracing sidepieces. This was clearly derived from the washstand by Ford Madox Brown, designed for Morris & Company in about 1860,³³ and a later version illustrated by Benson.³⁴ The curved lower edge of the sides, however, gives an elegance that is not present in the earlier examples and suggests a refinement by Lethaby. Mrs Rendall was told that Craigie had suggested an improvement to the design of a washstand for Melsetter, but this had been firmly rejected.³⁵

Although all the bedroom pieces show a distinct resemblance in style and making, close inspection shows some variation in detail in the methods of construction, for instance in the dovetails and drawer linings. If they were all made by the same firm, it was one where each journeyman was allowed his own method, unlike at Gimson's workshop in Gloucestershire where European-style dovetail joints with relatively thick pins were consistently employed. The dovetails of the bedroom furniture are closer to each other in style than they are to the sidetable made by Mason, however.³⁶

So what other evidence is there for Craigie having supplied these items? Much of it is circumstantial. Details of Lethaby's trips to Orkney in 1897, 1898 and 1900 are tantalisingly scarce,³⁷ but if he visited the workshop, as seems likely, and met Craigie, he

would have found a man of his own age and like himself, of quiet character but firm ideals. Both were from strongly non-conformist religious backgrounds.³⁸ Like Lethaby, who had become Chief Clerk at Norman Shaw's architectural office when only 22 years old, Craigie had taken responsibility at an early age and was clearly a respected member of the local community. Known for his discreet philanthropy and service to public committees, Craigie was also an avid cyclist and sportsman.³⁹ This would have appealed to Lethaby, who prized the efficiency of the bicycle as an exemplar for design and whose notion of 'beauty of efficiency' in the arts, perhaps surprisingly, included 'Simple, well-off housekeeping in the country, with tea in the garden; Boy-scouting, and tennis in flannels.'⁴⁰

Craigie had a reputation for 'sincerity of purpose' and 'transparent honesty'. The *Orkney Herald* described him thus: 'In his business, as in everything else, he gave of his very best. Nothing short of that would satisfy him. What he did he did with all his might, and this was the open secret of the very successful business which he built up. His patrons knew that they could rely implicitly on his word, and few there were of them who did not become friends as well as customers'.⁴¹ This could equally well describe Lethaby, whose architectural projects were few but carefully planned and conscientiously executed.

Above all, Craigie was known for quality. The *Orcadian* praised as 'The outstanding feature of the firm's work, . . . the excellence of its products'.⁴² Furniture which has been identified as by Craigie or by Craigie & Inkster is always of solid timber and is very well made with neatly fitting drawers and doors. None has been seen with veneer, which would have been uneconomic to use well, though some of the later items have plywood drawer bottoms. The range of timbers used includes oak, mahogany, and walnut, but there appears to be no furniture of chestnut apart from the Melsetter pieces. Neither is there anything as simple as the Melsetter work in style, but this is not surprising since such pieces, if made at all, would not be identified easily by later owners. Furniture known to have come from Craigie & Inkster tends to have been inherited from the original client, purchased at auction, or identified later by an enthusiast such as a local woodworker.

In style, Craigie's furniture followed fashion. The earliest piece I have seen, from the 1880s, is in Aesthetic style, with angular incised patterns, turned and reeded elements, and multiple mirrors and drawers. Probably of about the same date are two very large bookcases with sliding doors and chamfered detailing, and a fine mahogany sideboard. Slightly later are pieces of more simplified shapes, with curving top-rails and baseboards like the curve on the mirror in figure 6, with cut-out or carved heart shapes, clearly related to the Arts and Crafts Movement, perhaps most closely to the work of C. F. A. Voysey. There is also some carving of highly stylised plant forms, and the metal fittings were more fashionable and elaborate than the restrained, eighteenth-century-style handles at Melsetter. Of indeterminate date are traditional chests and dressing tables, of straightforward construction and with only a few identifying features, such as the curving cut-out baseboards. 1920s and 1930s furniture by the firm tends to be smaller in scale and it may be that the chairs were bought in.

The aims of this study were to find documentary proof of Craigie's involvement at

Melsetter and to see if his work for Orkney clients was influenced by contact with Lethaby. Documents have proved elusive but the evidence does seem to be very strong. None of the furniture is marked, except with pencil inscriptions such as 'Right' or 'Left' in a very curving hand, but comparison of these and of the techniques of making suggests that it is possible to identify a group of items which could all be from one workshop. Few can be closely dated at present, however. One exception is a bureau known to have been made as a wedding gift in 1898, which shows that Craigie was aware of current fashion before the start of the Melsetter project.⁴³ Other items similarly display knowledge of recent styles but no obvious debt to Lethaby in particular.

W. W. Craigie is listed in *Peace's Almanac* almost every year until 1912. Then the firm appears as Craigie & Inkster, when Craigie's nephew, James William Inkster, came into partnership. Technically, therefore, if the firm was responsible for the Melsetter furniture it was under the name of W. W. Craigie, though since Inkster was apprenticed to his uncle and would have been 20 or 21 years old in 1900, it is likely that he was involved in the making.⁴⁴ Others known to have worked in the firm were John Walls, Edgar Gibson, Tommy Tulloch, Jimmy Scott and Bill Groundwater. It offered a good-quality training to apprentices but did not pay very well once they had qualified. In this it sounds very similar to the workshop of Edward Barnsley at the other end of the United Kingdom in Hampshire, struggling to stay in business in a period when few were prepared to pay for quality and competition from factory-made pieces was growing.

Inkster inherited his uncle's share of the business in 1929 and continued the firm under the same name until 1939, when it closed, presumably partly because of the war and restrictions on materials but also because his wife died around this time. Mr William Groundwater, an apprentice in the firm from 1928 to 1932, ascribes its demise to a failure to modernise. It still had no machinery and no electricity, while the lighting was provided by paraffin lamps and the furniture was delivered by horse-drawn van. He adds, however, that: 'It is with much pride and satisfaction I look back to my period with Craigie & Inkster. It was a splendid introduction to woodwork'.⁴⁵ James Inkster, like many others in his position, including another former apprentice, Edgar Gibson, became a teacher and did not return to the difficult task of running a craft-based commercial firm after the war.

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REFERENCES

1. Orkney Archives, D34, Macrae & Robertson Papers.
2. Orkney Archives, D34/A/11/4.
3. It is possible that this was for golfing requisites - see n.39.
4. Interview with Mrs Rendall, 29.6.2001.
5. Orkney Archives, SC11/38/30, p. 583.
6. *Orcadian*, 14.3.1929, p. 5.
7. *Peace's Orkney and Shetland Almanac and County Directory*, Kirkwall 1888, p. 225.
8. see n. 5.
9. John F. Walls is listed in the 1891 Census as an employed cabinet maker, aged 36, living in Mill St.
10. D. Smith was in the *Almanac* among cabinet makers but in the 1881 Census as a 'House carpenter'. His business address at Strynd, Kirkwall, appears in directories from 1888 to 1896, but he himself is not there in the 1891 Census.
11. John Peace in 1879, D. B. Peace by about 1880.
12. P. Guthrie is listed in the 1891 Census as 'Joiner', aged 68; see n. 10 for Smith.
13. Interview with Gary Gibson, 5.4.2001.
14. Hannah Rendall, see n. 4.
15. King's College, Cambridge, JMK/PP45/168/13/46-7, JMK to his mother, 20.9.1908.
16. Now in the V&A, Circ.40-1953.
17. Private collection.
18. The *Post Office London Directory* shows Mason to have been at Greek Street, Soho in 1889, p. 1572; Denmark Place, Charing Cross Road in 1890, pp. 292, 1590; and Holland Place, Church Street, Kensington in 1894, p. 1630.
19. V&A Archive of Art and Design (V&A AAD), 1/74-1980, Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society Catalogue of the 2nd exhibition, 1889, cat. 108.
20. Mary Comino (now Greensted) discusses the complications of the Arts and Crafts Society exhibits and the beginnings of Kenton & Company in *Gimson and the Barnsleys; 'Wonderful furniture of a commonplace kind'*, London 1980, pp. 52-4.
21. V&A AAD, 1/107-1980, Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society Catalogue of the 8th exhibition, 1906, cat. 291. It is possible that Mason disappears from the directories because he was employed as a journeyman in a larger firm or even to teach in a college.
22. Now at Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, 1987.544.
23. Vol. 9, p. 199.
24. It is possible that it is from a later date than the building of Melsetter.
25. Orkney Archives, D34/A11/5.
26. Both in a private collection.
27. Circ.41-1953.
28. They have similar dovetails to the bedroom furniture, very different from the construction of the table marked with Mason's name.
29. I am grateful to Helen Brandon-Jones for this suggestion.
30. V&A AAD, 1/75-1980, Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society Catalogue of the 3rd exhibition, pp. 46-52; A. H. Mackmurdo (ed), published in London.
31. W. R. Lethaby, A. H. Powell, & F. L. Griggs, *Ernest Gimson His Life and Work*, Stratford-upon-Avon 1924, p. 6.
32. Macmillan & Co., London, see pp. 102, 115.
33. For an example see L. Parry (ed.), *William Morris*, London 1996, p. 168, cat. J8.
34. *Elements of Handicraft & Design*, London 1893, p. 120.
35. See n. 4.
36. The dovetails on most of the Melsetter furniture have relatively thick pins and wide tails. The Mason table has closely spaced English-style, thin, narrow pins.
37. S. C. Cockerell's Diary and correspondence in the British Library gives brief information about Lethaby's visits to Orkney: Add. MS 52634, 52637, 52730/58.
38. Lethaby's parents were Bible Christians; Craigie was an active member of the Paterson U. F. Church.
39. In the 1908 *Almanac* Craigie advertised himself as an agent for golf clubs and balls from R. Forgan & Son of St. Andrews, an interesting sideline for the cabinet maker's business.
40. W. R. Lethaby, 'Town Tidying', in *Form in Civilization: Collected Papers on Art & Labour*, London 1922, p. 21.
41. *Orkney Herald*, 20.3.1929.
42. *Orcadian*, 14.3.1929, p. 5.
43. Private collection: it is a small bureau with glazed upper section and commercially made metal handles in Arts and Crafts style.
44. J. Price Sinclair, in a letter of 14.3.2001, states that Inkster spent a few years working in Edinburgh after his training, so it is possible he was not in Orkney in 1899-1901.
45. Letter to author, 18.4.2001.