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Editorial

Regional Furniture 2013 is concerned with inventories. Furniture historians have always used domestic inventories as a source of information about historic furniture, but rarely in a systematic way. With the rise of 'material culture' studies in this country and in North America, inventories have come to be seen as a key resource in understanding the relationship between material goods (including furniture), houses and their occupants. Inventories tell us not only what kinds of furniture can be found in houses at a given time or place, but also what the furniture conveys about socio-economic status, social conventions, cultural attitudes, the design and function of the house itself and its occupants' relation to the wider world. Inventories therefore are crucial in providing the contexts without which historic furniture loses much of its meaning and significance.

In some cases we can use inventory evidence to delve into the meaning of a single object or word. This is what Michael Pearce has done in the case of Scottish 'Chapel' beds, and in doing so he has not only illuminated what form these beds took, but also has given us food for thought more generally on the form and meaning of the 'sparver' bed in both Scotland and England.

In those rare cases where a sequence of inventories survives, the furnishing history of a single house can be recreated. Jon Stobart's analysis of the Canons Ashby inventories in the eighteenthth century gives us a detailed picture of how its interiors evolved, and raises interesting questions about the balance between stability and change. There are many points of similarity between developments at Canons Ashby and those in the Gloucestershire houses researched by Stephen Hague. We find the same combination of incremental change, careful husbanding of resources and selective expenditure. Money was spent where it would have most effect for the least outlay, and the desire to be up to date was balanced not only by financial constraints but by factors which included a conscious appreciation of heirlooms and a desire not to be thought showy or vulgar.

Two contributors, Lesley Hoskins and Julie Banham, explore territory which is probably unfamiliar to most of our members. Both are concerned with inventories as a source of raw data from which to compile statistical information about their respective subjects. They are concerned not with furniture *per se*, but with what furniture reveals about the socio-economic and cultural make up of their subjects. Lesley Hoskins looks at the furnishing choices made by middle class English householders in the mid-nineteenth century and considers what they reveal about class and status. Although the data is not precise enough to suggest much in the way of regional preferences, she does uncover a clear difference between London and the rest of the country. She also finds that well-known Victorian manuals for household furnishing, such as Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, did not reflect how most Victorians actually furnished their homes.

Julie Banham's work concentrates on the area in and around Sheffield known as Hallamshire. She finds significant differences between urban and rural households, between manufacturing and farming households, and between the houses of

'gentlemen', 'misters' and others. The significance of both these articles is that they provide theoretical frameworks derived from empirical evidence against which individual inventories, and indeed individual pieces of furniture, can be measured. Most regional furniture enthusiasts, and for that matter furniture historians, are interested in tangible objects rather than abstract concepts, but it is important to recognise that there is a well-founded and increasingly important academic discipline whose conceptual approach offers new ways of understanding regional furniture.

Eleanor John's article on London drawing rooms illustrates this point perfectly. Although it is based on a statistical survey of inventory evidence, it concludes with a neat example of how that evidence can be brought to bear on individual cases, confounding expectations and received wisdom in the process.