

The Wakefield Cabinet Makers' Society Box, 1790

ADAM BOWETT

The box illustrated in Figure 1 is in the collection of Wakefield Museum, West Yorkshire, where it has been in store since being donated in 1971.¹ It is made of wainscot-quality oak, dovetailed at the sides, with a nailed-up bottom and hinged lid. Inside is a small till with a false bottom; when this is lifted out it reveals a small drawer hidden in the base of the till (Figure 2). The box has a brass carrying handle to each side, and was originally fitted with three locks, one to the front and one to each side. The right hand lock has been removed and replaced with another on the front, to the right of the original lock. The hinges are original.

The three locks, each presumably having a different key, suggest a box intended for money or documents in common ownership, in the same manner as some church chests. The box is otherwise unremarkable, except for a note written by its maker, recording in illuminating detail the circumstances of its manufacture (Figures 3 & 4).



1 The Wakefield Cabinet Makers' Society Box, 1790.
Wakefield Museum. Photo Ian Townend

¹ WAKGM:1971.6/1



2 The Wakefield Cabinet Makers' Society Box (open).
Wakefield Museum. Photo Ian Townend

The note describes the genesis of the Cabinet-Makers' Society of Wakefield. As with similar societies in London and other urban centres, the Society's object was to regulate the prices of cabinet-work and to fix the agreed prices in a printed book. The need for regulation arose because in the late 1780s the cost of living, and in particular the price of food, had risen sharply, due to a combination of poor harvests, growing population and inflation. George Musgrove, the maker of this box, even felt it worthwhile to record

the price of grain and beef because 'Living was then very dear'. In common with other tradesmen, cabinet-makers needed to increase their earnings to survive, but this brought them into conflict with their masters. By combining in a society, cabinet-makers strengthened their bargaining power and eventually, by agreement with the masters, they established fixed rates of pay for their work.

It may be no accident that William Scott, the owner of the workshop where the box was made, and who was also the employer of the man who made it, was a staunch Methodist. His father, Francis Scott, has been described as the founder of Methodism in Wakefield. In August 1748 he had invited John Wesley to preach in Wakefield for the first time, and initially the meeting was to be held in Scott's yard but 'his landlord would not suffer it, saying the mob would do more hurt to his hoyes [house] than ever we should do him good.' Wesley preached instead in the city's main street, where 'none interrupted or made the least disturbance from beginning to end.'² Francis Scott went to be instrumental in founding and building the first Methodist meeting house in Wakefield, which opened in 1774.

One wonders whether the link between religious non-conformism and radical or progressive politics among furniture makers, manifested in the founding of the Wakefield Cabinet Makers' Society, was replicated in other towns and cities, and whether this was a factor in the rapid spread of price books at this time. In London, cabinet-makers issued their first price book in 1788. Makers in provincial towns soon followed suit, and the men of Wakefield appear to have been among the first; cabinet-makers in nearby Leeds issued their book in 1791, and those in Preston in 1802. Copies of the latter two price books survive and have been reproduced in *Regional Furniture IX* (1995). While no copies of Wakefield's price book have so far been found, the fact of its existence points to a time when Wakefield, the principal town of the West Riding of Yorkshire, had a civic status comparable to York. It was the administrative and commercial capital of the West Riding just as York was for the North Riding. The twenty four founding members of the Society represented perhaps half a dozen or more workshops supplying furniture to the local gentry, merchants and professional classes.³ The best known of these workshops, at least among furniture historians, was that of Wright and Elwick and their successors.⁴ It would be interesting to know whether this firm's workmen were among the founding members of the Cabinet Makers' Society.

By 1822, when the first Baines *Directory of Yorkshire* was published, none of those named in George Musgrove's note were still working, and the economic focus of the West Riding had shifted to Leeds. 39 journeymen and 12 masters had signed the Leeds price book in 1791, compared to 24 in Wakefield. Within a few decades the difference between the two cities was even more marked; in 1822 only 10 cabinet-makers' and upholsterers' shops were recorded in Wakefield and 66 in Leeds.⁵

² Quoted in Walker (1939).

³ Unfortunately, no late 18th century directories for Wakefield survive, so it is not possible to know how many furniture-maker's shops there were in 1790.

⁴ For more on this firm, see the relevant entry in Beard and Gilbert (1986).

⁵ Baines (1822).

3 Note written by George Musgrove,
14 September 1790.
Wakefield Museum. Photo Ian Townend

This Box was made for the
Cabinet makers Society
held at the old Crown
in northgate kept by John
Harrison theare was 24
members when it was begun
the stuards was Geo musgrove
Wim Leek & Tomas Saxton
Clark this Box was made
by Geo musgrove at Mr Wim
Scott shop foreman to Mr
Wim Scott son of Francis Scott
September 14 1790 it was
on Wakefield Rase Wedenddy
when this Note was ritten
by Geo Musgrove son of Geo [Musgrove]

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Cabinet makers Society
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September 14 1790 it was
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4 Reverse of Figure 3.
Wakefield Museum. Photo Ian Townend

this Society was made on purpose
to regulate Cabenet prizes
so a Book was printed at Time
Living was then very dear
Corn was 23 shillins a Load
and Beef at 7 pens a pound

I have put this halpene
in for a memorandam
being nuley ~~Coynt~~
Coind

May this Society be
preserve in pease and the
Blessing of God be amonge
them for ever Amen

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Pam Judkins, Ian Townend and John Whitaker of the Wakefield Museum for bringing this box to my attention and helping to research its origins.

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