

The Salisbury Joiners' Company in the 17th Century

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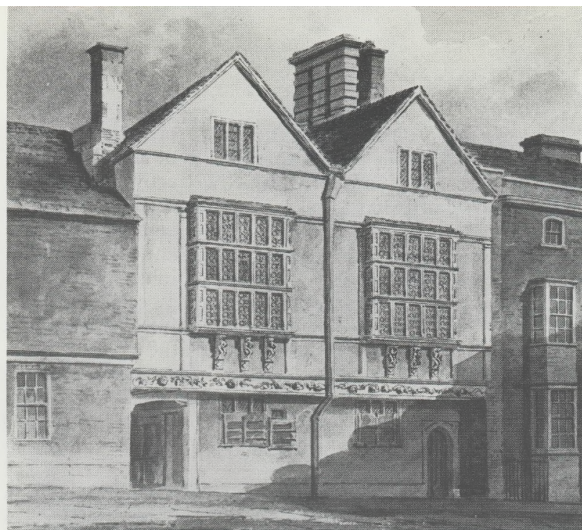


Figure 1. The Joiners' Hall, Salisbury. Seen here in an early 19th century water-colour by Buckler. The exterior of the Hall still survives virtually intact to the present day.

One of the many fundamental changes brought about by the Reformation of the Church in England under Henry VIII was that of the enforced secularisation of many public institutions. Not the least among those affected were the medieval craft guilds, which by the 1530s had grown into powerful status under Church patronage. They had been established as fraternities of craftsmen in order to promote the well-being and good conduct of the manufacturing crafts, for the benefit of client and craftsman alike. Many were organised around chantry chapels (indeed, the individual cells of printing unions are still referred to as "chapels" for this very reason), and they owed allegiance to their own patron saints.

With the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries, this support disappeared virtually overnight, and a new system had to be found. Under Elizabeth I, the new City Corporations began to receive their charters, and the guilds were re-organised as Trade Companies under licence from their city

administration. In London the new Joiners' Company received its charter in 1571, but in the provinces the wheels of bureaucracy ground exceeding slow. Salisbury did not receive the Corporation charter until 1612, empowering them to license and control the merchants and tradesmen of the city. The orders of the Joiners' Company were ratified in 1613, though there were disputes and revisions which were not settled until 1617, when the constitution and ordinances were finally granted to the new "Companye of the Joyners, Whellers, Worsteed Makers, Bookbinders, Carpenters, Millwrightes, Coopers, Free Masons, Rough Masons, Paynters, Instrumente Makers, Ropers, Turners, Saweyers, and Billowe-makers of Newe Sarum".

As may be expected, this rag-bag of trades found it somewhat difficult to live in harmony, but the ordinances were a long list of rules which sought to govern the conduct and responsibilities of these trades. Fortunately, the original manuscript still survives in the Corporation archive, together with further amended

versions dated 1675 and 1713. There were many quarrels between the trades, and frequent threats from the Corporation to "put the Trades asunder", yet somehow they survived intact for many years.

The major furniture-making trades are all included in the list of members, except for the upholsterers, who mysteriously joined the Grocers' Company. The joiners were by far the most influential of the trades, and they occupied the Joiners' Hall in St. Ann Street, Salisbury, from c.1615 until 1828 (see figure 1). In that year the remaining two members of the Company sold the Hall and shared the proceeds. They made their last official public appearance in 1842, when they led the civic procession to celebrate the christening of the babe later to become Edward VII. On this occasion the

Figure 2. Oak panel-back armchair. This chair belongs to a church some five miles from Salisbury. Possibly from the Beckham family workshop. Early 17th century.



Figure 3. Much of the decorative treatment of this folding table is very close to the previous chair, including the angular silhouette, the turnings, the chip-carved arcades and the cabled bands of carving. Early 17th century.



Master of the Company bore their banner of 1727, and the beadle wore the Company livery, a suit of clothes which first saw service in 1630.

These few facts serve to delineate the bare bones of the history of furniture production in a typical large English provincial city, but they can be given flesh by the process of modern research and interpretation. This exercise will involve the analysis of two equally important groups of information: firstly, the collective documentation which still exists in the city and county archives; and secondly a comprehensive photographic survey of all the relevant existing furniture and architectural woodwork with local provenance which may still be found within the city and surrounding district.

I have gone some way toward accumulating this material, having started over ten years ago. In 1976 I held a preliminary exhibition of furniture in Salisbury, concentrating primarily on the early 17th century¹, which brought together about twenty-five pieces of furniture. Viewed as a group, these pieces made a cohesive and seminal statement, and the stylistic identity which they helped establish has led to the recognition of over two hundred items of movable furniture and architectural woodwork. A hard core of these have firm provenances in the geographical area which focuses on Salisbury, while the rest have positive stylistic features which tie them into the group.

The correlations are close enough to suggest that the entire group is the

1. See article in *Antique Collecting*, September 1976.

product of a single large workshop, or of a series of small closely-related shops, active within the city of Salisbury broadly within the period 1580-1630, and perhaps even later. Documentary and stylistic evidence show Salisbury joiners working many miles from home, especially in Dorset, though the legal jurisdiction of the Company ended at the city boundary.

There is not space here to amplify in detail the precise characteristics of the furniture. A preliminary survey was offered in my book in 1979 (pages 448-454 *et al.*), but this now allows further extension. Individually, the pieces employ a wide variety of panel-forms and decorative motifs, but the most telling aspect is the manner in which the joinery and constructional forms are remarkably limited.

All the evidence points toward the domination by a single family of the furniture market in Salisbury at this date. The accounts of the Company Chamberlain are intact for the period 1615-22, and these provide us with the names of over one hundred members. So far only a dozen have been positively identified as joiners. Of these there are three families with three or more joiners among them: Batten, Bayley and Beckham; and in my reading of other corporation and church accounts it is the Beckhams which are most often thrown up in commissions and payments, and always for the most prestigious of settings. In fact, from various sources, I have recorded six Beckham joiners, headed by John and Humphrey who both served as Chamberlains of their Company.

But it was Humphrey who was most celebrated locally as a fine craftsman,

most particularly as a carver. His working life must have started in c.1605, and he died in 1671 at the end of a very creative and active working life. His probate inventory shows that at the age of eighty-three he was still in possession of a set of tools, of timber in his yard and of new-made wares in his chambers². Such was his reputation in Salisbury that an account of his career was published in 1771, and a partial transcription of this is given in Appendix III of my book. Among his many commissions was the fine panelling and overmantel which once graced the assembly room at the Joiners' Hall, but sadly this disappeared without trace a few years after the sale of the Hall in 1828. It was there when Hatcher, the local historian, described it in 1843, but it had gone by the time the National Trust acquired the Hall in 1894. I am pleased to note that I have recently located the overmantel in a Dorset manor house, but the rest of the room is still not accounted for.

In the last four or five years I have only rather casually added to my store of documentary and photographic information on Salisbury furniture, owing to the pressures of other work, but I would now like to push this study further towards a full conclusion. Quite apart from the parochial exercise of producing a stylistic typology for Salisbury, this would be a valuable sample study towards understanding the workings of all the English provincial Joiners' Companies. If we are ever going to make any progress towards a fuller picture of regional styles in England, then the *modus operandi* of the Companies is a vital piece in the jigsaw.

2. *Oak Furniture — The British Tradition*, page 556.



Figure 4. (far left) Purchased in Salisbury, from a local family, this chair bears many similarities to the others illustrated here. The *cacqueteuse* form is seen clearly, and is a recognised Salisbury preference, with about forty-five recorded examples. Three other chairs bear the same panel. Early 17th century.

Figure 5. (left) Another table of identical form to figure 3, but the decoration here is closer to the chair in figure 4, with identical turning profiles and scrolled shaping beneath the rails. All these pieces are probably from the Beckham family workshop. Early 17th century.