

Welsh Regional Furniture

by T. Alun Davies

Wales is a region of Great Britain which contains many different regions of its own, each with its own peculiar styles of furniture. Much is known of these local characteristics within the Principality, but much more research needs to be undertaken before a clear picture emerges of the uniqueness of certain pieces which are commonly ascribed to the regions of Wales. It is not the intention of this article to define what is peculiarly Welsh or Welsh regional furniture, but one hopes that it will serve as a brief introduction to the subject and that it will alert the reader to the need for further detailed research into the many and varied categories of pieces which existed in this small country on the western seaboard of Britain.

Such a small country could not exist independently of its larger, more populous neighbour to the east. Throughout the ages, therefore, the Welsh people have relied on the English for the initial styles and fashions of their furniture. The lives of the majority of the fashion-conscious, English-educated gentry of Wales have been closely connected with the English court and its fashions since the Middle Ages, and during the Tudor period this became increasingly obvious. The existence of a number of prominent, influential Welsh noblemen in the courts of the "Welsh" Tudor monarchs ensured that even the lesser gentry in the remotest areas of rural Wales were, to some extent, aware of the prevailing fashions of the day in the English capital. Many of these gentry before and after the passing of the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1543 had the financial resources and, furthermore, the inclination to ape their English neighbours. To what extent pieces were literally transported overland from English cities to Welsh mansions is unclear, but the geography of Wales would have made this task both costly and prohibitive. Consequently, the Tudor gentry conveyed to rural Wales impressions of what was fashionable in England, ideas which their local estate craftsmen skilfully put into practice in imitating pieces of English furniture. These borrowed styles and fashions were, in turn, adapted to suit the needs and tastes of both the local gentry and their tenants and furniture of a regional character was constructed in the rural areas of Wales. The geographical remoteness of the Welsh communities, both from the major

English urban centres and from each other, ensured that styles and types were often developed independently. The lack of any major conurbations in Wales also gave to Welsh communities a rural flavour which was characterised by the customary conservatism typical of such communities with the retention of both ideas and objects prevalent among them. Fashions and methods of construction and decoration, therefore, survived and persisted in the regions of Wales long after they had been discarded in the lowland English towns.

The close association of the Welsh with the English capital and urban centres did not cease with the demise of the Tudor dynasty. During the 17th century the gentry, professional people and merchants were present in large numbers in the English towns. They often attracted to these towns a number of their humbler kinsmen as craftsmen and apprentices, who, on their return to their native Welsh areas conveyed ideas for making pieces of furniture found far beyond their own "bro" or home locality. This trend continued during the 18th century, when the gentry of Wales became increasingly anglicised and during which the professional Welsh classes in London formed societies, which not only served to instruct and educate expatriate Welshmen in the English capital but also had a profound effect on the culture of their native country. The effect on the material culture of Wales was considerable. Welsh cattle drovers performed the same functions as the materially-wealthier Welsh exiles in keeping the Welsh regions in touch with what was fashionable in England. The native Welsh craftsman could not reproduce or imitate what was fashionable in walnut, mahogany and rosewood. Consequently, he used his native timbers, oak, ash, elm, yew tree, to construct a corpus of furniture that is peculiarly Welsh. In the regions of Wales the diversity of skills and methods of construction, in addition to the availability of raw materials, ensured that regional styles and fashions were fostered within the Principality itself. These adapted foreign styles, frequently borrowed by the English from the Continent, became unmistakably Welsh in the hands of the rural craftsmen of Wales. New creations were fashioned from borrowed ideas creating what one can surely describe as a Welsh fashion in furniture.



Figure 1. Chair from MS. of Welsh Laws.

Within this Welsh style or fashion exists a number of regional or local fashions, many unexplored by researchers. Pieces found on the Marches of Wales obviously bear a striking resemblance to furniture found in Cheshire, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, the often non-existent boundary ensuring that they are neither peculiarly Welsh nor English. Areas served by the small ports of the Welsh coast were often furnished with pieces not met within the hilly or mountainous regions of Wales. The existence of settlements in the mountainous districts and secluded valleys did ensure that peculiar fashions of construction, design and decoration did exist and their remoteness from each other gave them all a distinctive regional flavour.

In the absence of no more than a handful of active researchers in Wales, these regional characteristics have not, as yet, been fully explored. The need to research these areas and avoid the usual pitfalls of labelling an object "Welsh" when it could represent one of a large number of regional Welsh sub-cultures is great. A general examination of three main categories of furniture associated with Wales will assist in drawing the reader's attention to much rewarding research in this area.

Country Chairs

The existence of a drawing (figure 1) in a 12th century manuscript of a judge sitting on a three-legged chair administering the Welsh medieval laws is proof of the existence of this primitive form of furniture in medieval Wales. Indeed, it is one of only three references in the Laws of Hywel Dda to the existence of pieces of furniture during the Age of the Princes.

Significantly, the chairs of the Welsh gentry developed roughly along the lines of those of their English counterparts, from boxseat to armchair. The development of the country chair from the type seen in figure 1 to the other forms shown in this article was confined to the materially poorer classes in Welsh society. This development is a subject



Figure 2. Country chair, Vale of Clwyd.



Figure 3. Country chair, Ceredigion.



Figure 4. Country chair, Gwynedd.



Figure 5. Stick-back chair, Powys.

for further research in a regional context, since chairs of this type, which have some English counterparts, are found in many regions of Wales.

The four examples shown were collected from vastly different areas of the country. The rough, four-legged example from the Vale of Clwyd (figure 2) is typical of that area. The chairs in figures 3 and 4 from the old counties of Cardigan and Caernarfon respectively display the similarity in style and method of construction. These communities, some eighty miles distant from each other, show the evolution of country chairs in Wales on the same lines at roughly the same time. Details of turned stretchers and turned legs, of grooved back supports or the existence or absence of a stretcher might indicate the difference between one regional style and another. At present, their provenance during the 20th century and



Figure 6. Court cupboard, Gwent.

the oral evidence of their donors to the national collection have served as their sole identifying marks.

The stick-back armchair in figure 5 is typical of chairs made in the old county of Radnor during the 18th century. However, it bears a striking resemblance to chairs made during that century and the 19th century in parts of the north of the old county of Pembroke. These communities again are separated by a distance of some fifty to sixty miles and evidence of material intercourse between the two regions is extremely thin. It is possible that the styles evolved separately, but it is more likely that there

were hitherto undiscovered connections between the two areas.

Future research may unearth similar, if not identical, objects in other Welsh or English regions which can only enhance one's knowledge of the interdependent nature of rural communities.

The Cwpwrdd Tridarn

It is generally accepted that this peculiarly Welsh piece has its constructional origins in the skeletal court cupboard of the Elizabethan period. The example illustrated in figure 6 was made for a member of the Morgan family of Gwent c.1600. The one-piece court cup-



Figure 7. One piece court cupboard, Gwent.

board commonly found in England and the Welsh Marches is a development of the style as displayed in the early 18th century example from Gwent (figure 7).

The two-piece Welsh *cwpwrdd deuddarn* is a third stage in the development of the piece, as displayed in this mid-17th century example from Clwyd (figure 8). Indeed, both craftsmen and their customers were so taken by this piece that examples were constructed in rural Wales long after more fashionable furniture had become available. The popularity of the *deuddarn* is often quoted as an example of Welsh conservatism and an illustration of the retention of a shape, but not of the decoration and embellishments, for many centuries, as the late 18th century example from the Vale of Teifi (figure 9) illustrates.

The *deuddarn* was popular in the majority of the Welsh counties, but not so its successor, the *cwpwrdd tridarn*. The *tridarn*, essentially a two-piece cupboard with a gallery or third portion added to display pewter or earthenware, was only found in mid- and north Wales. South Walian *tridarnau* are unknown. The majority of finely decorated *tridarnau*, often presented as wedding gifts, were made in present-day Gwynedd, in the old county of Caernarfon in particular. The two pieces illustrated in figures 10 and 11 were produced some twenty miles apart, the one in the Dinorwig area of Caernarfonshire, the other for the Wynne family of Foelas, near Betws-y-

Coed. Both display the art of decoration in the form of inlay at its best and both were given as wedding gifts to members of the landed gentry.

The retention of the style for the next two centuries ensured that a good number of these cupboards has survived to the present day. Research work has revealed that few examples in mid-Wales were decorated and that examples from Clwyd are only sparsely decorated. The bare details tell us little of the regional distribution of this piece in north and mid-Wales from the late 17th century to c.1900. Closer examination of the constructional details, the embellishments and the initials carved on wedding gifts have afforded a means of ascertaining what *tridarnau* were made in certain regions of north Wales. The piece illustrated in figure 12 is typical of the plain, utilitarian *tridarn* generally favoured by farmers in mid-Wales.

What remains a mystery is the complete absence of *tridarnau* in south Wales. Was it peculiar to the mountainous areas of Wales? That would seem to be so but no answer is forthcoming as to why that state of affairs existed. One could suggest that it is an example of the lack of intercourse between the north and south of the Principality mainly occasioned by the geographical contrasts between the two regions. To accept that theory would be to generalise in the absence of more concrete evidence of intercourse between the rural communities of north and mid-Wales.

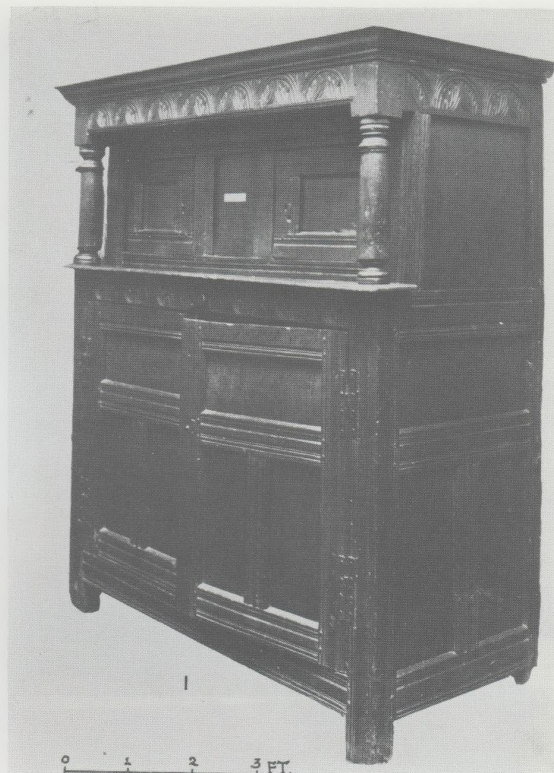


Figure 8. *Cwpwrdd deuddarn*, Clwyd.

A further in-depth study of this important Welsh piece would assist in determining the connections between one rural community and another.

The Dresser

The term "Welsh dresser" is, arguably, the most misused of all in the field of furniture study. The uninformed (or misinformed) would readily believe that the dresser was a piece of furniture peculiar to Wales. Students of the subject know otherwise. But the existence of such a large number of dressers in Wales has lent to the piece a certain special connection with the Principality. Indeed, one can assume that the abundance of examples has led to generalisation among students of the subject and that pieces have been labelled a "Bangor dresser", a "Llanbadarn dresser" or a "Hay-on-Wye dresser" on the evidence of more than one example of a particular type being found in these areas. This, surely, must be a case of attempting to give a dresser a particular provenance without comparing it with examples from another region, thereby ignoring shifts in population and the possible intercourse between regions.

What has been established is that two main types of dressers were found in Wales. The north Wales dresser has a closed superstructure, the lower portion consisting of cupboards, as in the *tridarn*, and, more often than not, surmounted by a row of drawers (see



Figure 9. Cwpwrdd deuddarn, Vale of Teifi.



Figure 10. Cwpwrdd tridarn, Gwynedd.



Figure 11. Cwpwrdd tridarn, Betws-y-Coed, Gwynedd.



Figure 12. Cwpwrdd tridarn, Powys.



Figure 13. Dresser, Gwynedd.

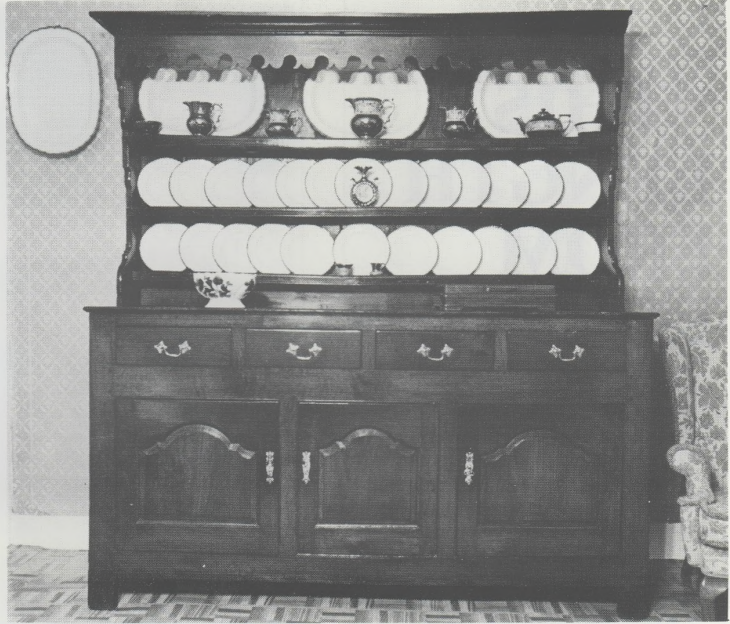


Figure 14. Dresser, Bala, Gwynedd.



Figure 15. Dresser, Swansea Valley.

figures 13 and 14). Regional variations in style and decoration occur as is displayed by these examples from Merioneth and the former Caernarfonshire. The South Wales dresser, generally, has an open superstructure, a row of drawers and a pot board below, as displayed on this example from the Swansea Valley (figure 15). Scores of decorative variations on this main structure occur in a line south of Aberystwyth to the English border. The peculiarity of mid-Wales should also be noted here. Dressers such as the one illustrated in figure 16 are typical of the mid-Wales area and are, in effect, a mixture of the main north and south Wales types. This example from near Welshpool, Powys, also owes much of



Figure 16. Dresser, Powys.

its hybrid appearance to Shropshire influences as well.

In short, it can be dangerous and misleading at this stage to over-specify particular areas where a type of dresser was found and coin a name which pinpoints a specific town or village as its sole place of origin. Further research will surely dispel the dangers of over-generalisation and specification in this context.

The few examples quoted above illustrate the need for further research in the

field of furniture studies in Wales. It is hoped that, with the formation of the Regional Furniture Study Group, members will undertake the task of examining in detail and analysing the contribution of this small nation and its regions to the material culture of the British Isles.

Acknowledgement

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