

“THIS LENGTH FROM LONDON”

by Gabriel Olive

“It cannot pass my observation here, that when we are come this length from London, the dialect of the English tongue, or the country way of expressing themselves, is not easily understood, it is so strangely altered.” So wrote Daniel Defoe, visiting the West Country in 1727. This country way of expressing themselves could be seen in their whole pattern of life. The evidence can still be seen in the shape of the fields and the farms as well as in memories of folklore and dialect. They are a part of history, a product of it and of local opportunities and needs, their regional differences accidental only in the sense that all history is a series of events.

Although, as Defoe records, the West Country was at that time the scene of a lively and profitable woollen manufacture, this was to a large extent a cottage industry. The style of living remained predominantly rural and the working population was unaffected by influences from outside. But while industry, houses and farming patterns can still be studied within their environment, the furnishings of the houses have now largely been dispersed and their study tends to be limited to what can be inferred from their appearance. We can, indeed, examine and record minutely the construction and materials of country furniture and from this we may deduce its special regional characteristics. But to understand the reasons for these differences, its solidity and apparent lack of comfort, we need to see it in its context and imagine the people for whom it was made.

The use to which a piece of furniture is put, its place in the homes and lives of those who lived with it, is or ought to be one of its most important characteristics, an aspect often ignored by writers on antiques. The fact is that the design of regional furniture owes more to con-



Figures 1 and 2. Two views of settles used to make a room at the George and Dragon, Potterne, Wilts. (door removed). By courtesy of the landlord, R. Smith, and Wadworths Brewery. (Photographs copyright R.J. Pearce.)

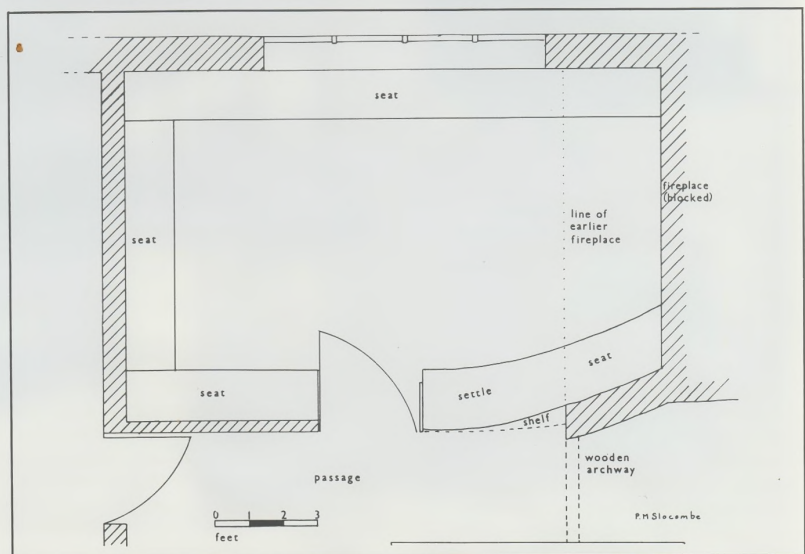


Figure 3. Plan of part of the George and Dragon at Potterne, Wilts.

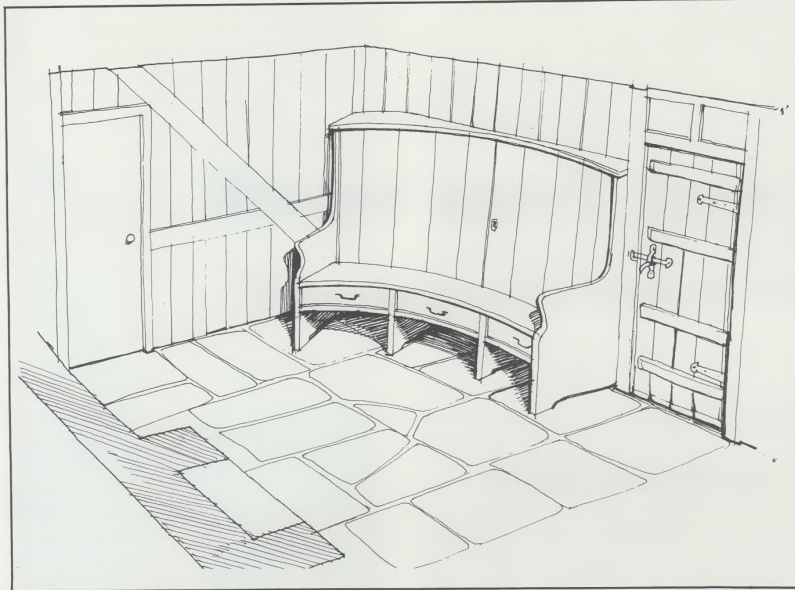


Figure 4. Artist's impression, from measured drawings, of the settle built in at Dancing Cross, Wincanton, Somerset.

siderations of cost, practical usage and the traditions of the craftsmen than to any dictates of fashion. Alas, the march of time and the activities of the antiques trade have by now removed almost all these pieces from their first homes and we can only guess at their exact place in the home.

I was particularly interested, therefore, to discover two examples of settles in the West Country which quite clearly were still standing in the position for which they were intended. In both cases these were curved settles made as separate pieces of furniture and subsequently built in to the structure of the house. In each case it would have been easier to move the settle to carry out the alterations and yet in each case it was preferred to build round it, however awkward the result. To move the settle from its original place was, apparently, unthinkable.

My first example can still be seen at the George and Dragon in Potterne, Wilts. (see figures 1, 2 and 3). The building dates from the 15th century but has been altered many times since. It is known to have been an inn since 1645. The settle illustrated is of the late 18th century, standing beside a fireplace which documentary evidence indicates was rebuilt in 1739. At some time in the early 19th century it would appear that the whole of this area was made into a separate room. To create this room the space above the settle was filled in, mainly by the use of an old window frame, and a second settle was built in line to complete the wall. Although the seating of both settles is modern and each has lost one of its ends, it is clear from the photographs, even under the paintwork, that both are of considerable

age. What fascinates me is the way in which the curved settle has been used, as it stood, as part of a larger scheme. First the settle was a room divider, and then it became a part of the division into a separate room. The photographs and plan show just how precisely it was originally located by the fireplace to keep off draughts from the doorway.

My second example (figures 4 and 5) is perhaps even more remarkable. It stood formerly in a "one up, one down" cottage at Dancing Cross, near Wincanton in Somerset. Sadly within a few days of discovery vandals broke in and wrecked the place and the whole building has since been altered beyond recognition. Fortunately, though no adequate photographs are available, measured drawings indicate clearly the pattern of development, which was almost the same as at the George and Dragon.

The cottage was the middle part of an earlier building divided into three dwellings about 1800. The front door led straight from the road into a living room measuring 10ft. 8ins. x 9ft. 8ins. Opposite was a door leading to an outshut scullery and kitchen and to the left of this door a box staircase to the bedroom. Beside the staircase and opposite the fireplace stood the settle, a simple curved pine seat with drawers below and curved doors behind the seat giving access to a space for hanging bacon. Here it would have kept at bay the draughts from the back door, more used than the front. At some time about 1900 the cottage was amalgamated with that next door and a doorway was made beside the fireplace into the other part. At the same time a partition was built to create a passage between the front and back doors. The

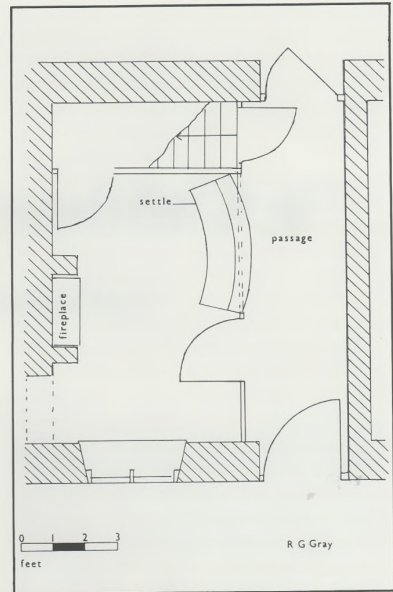


Figure 5. Plan of cottage at Dancing Cross, Wincanton, Somerset.

living room was of course thereby reduced in size. The partition, of thin matchboarding, ran from beside the front door to a doorway to the living room and was then carried over the top of the settle and down the other side to the bottom of the stairs — leaving the back of the settle bulging into the passage. The construction can be understood from the measured plan and drawing. There seems little reason for the arrangement, apart from the saving of about 4ins. of space and a small amount of matchboarding, the cost of which in those days was minimal. Perhaps the most important factor was that it was beyond the imagination of the owners to move the settle from its traditional place.

Whatever we may guess to have been in the minds of those who made these adaptations, one thing is clear: these settles have remained in their precise positions for a good reason. We can never see old furniture with the eyes of its contemporaries. This need not spoil our appreciation of its aesthetic merits, but to understand country furniture we need also to remind ourselves constantly of its social background, used by people for whom heavy manual labour was the only way of life in an age before central heating was invented.

Information and plans of the George and Dragon were kindly supplied to me by Mrs. Pam Slocombe of the Wiltshire Buildings Record, a Society which has already recorded evidence of a number of other pieces of built-in furniture. This area of study, the relationship of the furniture to the house, is I believe both important and valuable. We should cast our net wide in our researches and look beyond the minutiae of design and construction.