

A COMMEMORATIVE SHRINE TO ROBERT BURNS

A remarkable example of vernacular furniture has been discovered on the South Coast of England: a Robert Burns mausoleum or shrine. Nothing is known about its provenance. The structure has been in the domestic setting of a house in Hampshire for some 40 years. The furniture (fig. 6) comprises a lower unit (height appr. 36"/920mm, depth appr. 14"/360mm, width appr. 48"/1220mm) and an upper structure (height appr. 62"/1570mm, depth appr. 7"/180mm, width appr. 48"/1220mm).

The construction is in oak. It is devoid of utilitarian features (shelves or storage space) and can only be described as a commemorative shrine. The excessive carved decoration is principally on panels mounted in a structural framework. In the centre is a brass nameplate, carrying the following text:

Robert Burns
Born Jan'y 25 1759
Died 21 July 1796
W. Barrett. Sculp

It can only therefore reasonably be assumed the craftsman producing this furniture is known and the furniture was probably commissioned by or for a Burns Society. The carved decoration can be deemed to be in the Romantic Revival style of the late 19th century.

The object is at present in storage in Romsey, Hampshire at the Romsey Auction rooms of Mr. Michael G. Baker.

There are a number of well carved works in bas relief in Scotland, depicting Robert Burns and scenes from his poetic works, notably a fireplace in this manner, in the Royal Zoological Society in Edinburgh. Also at the entrance way of Belleisle House, Ayr, the former seat of the Glentanner family, the latter work commissioned from German craftsmen. The manner of the carving of this shrine could suggest a possible association with Robinson (Newcastle), the Warwick School of Carving or the Hospitalfield School of Woodcarving (1860) run by Patrick Allan Fraser. It is obviously a regional manufacture. The iconography of this shrine is probably entirely associated with Scotland's Premier Poet:

- The Burns image surround by a laurel wreath at the summit appears to be after the Alexander Naysmith portrait bust of Robert Burns, as almost all portrayals are and is one of the few authentic portraits with a provenance.
- The chain-mail figure in the small left hand panel may relate to the Scots patriot, William Wallace, Robert Burns' hero.
- The small panel on the right, wearing a 'tammy' or Kilmarnock bonnet has a facial similarity to the central panel relief and is possibly Tam himself, or Graham of Shanters farm as he was known.
- The long top panel would depict Tam on his horse being pursued across the bridge by evil spirits.
- The seated figure in the main central panel could well be Tam O'Shanter being scolded by his Guid wife Kate on account of his excuse (or tale) he told her on his rather late return home as depicted in the epic by Robert Burns; or John Anderson My Jo, an old couple's love story.
- The small panel to the right of the brass plate appears to have a rose motif suggesting the subject of Robert Burns' poem 'My love is like a red red rose' or a daisy from 'To a mountain daisy'.
- The two dogs on the base section possibly refer to the Burns poem 'TWA DOGS', the dogs being a Newfoundland and a Collie, Luath and Caesar by name; in a conversation between an upper class dog and a lower class dog.
- The centre of the base is a curtained alcove, again containing a stylised wreath.

Tenuous it may be, but it has been alluded that Patrick Allan Fraser of Hospitalfield School of Carving has a middle name connection with Burns. Relations of Burns' were called Allan, originating in Ayrshire of the Allan Shipping line. Whilst the link between Robert Burns and the above furniture is evident and even the name of the carver is known, I would be grateful for information pertaining to the carver/sculptor W. Barrett in order to identify the workshop of origin of this shrine.

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References: David Jones. 'Furniture Associated with Robert Burns' Regional Furniture, volume XI, 1997. James Mackay, 'Burnsiana', Urwick Publishers. The Burns Federation, c/o The Dick Institute, Elmbank Ave, Kilmarnock, KA1 3BU

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Fig. 6 Commemorative shrine to Robert Burns
Photograph courtesy of Michael G. Baker