

IS THE HISTORY OF RATTAN USED IN CANED FURNITURE AS SIMPLE AS IT SEEMS?

During research into the history of caned furniture and the materials used, I have come across information which cannot be immediately understood. Any insight or guidance from RFS Members would be appreciated.

Current research is centred on the Customs Records held at the Public Record Office in Kew and the records identified so far, commence in 1697 through to the late 19th century. Rattan was being imported into England before this date and further research is required to verify the available records.

Interestingly, the importation of rattan and similar materials appear in large quantities in virtually every year of the records being examined, despite furniture history books telling us that caned furniture went out of fashion at various times.

The sources of rattan are initially recorded in the Customs Records under the heading 'East Indies' then at a later date

are detailed for specific countries. The entry headed 'Cane' for each year is split into 'Rattan, Bamboo and Walking' which form the major quantities, with an occasional small amount of 'Reeds'. In respect of imports from Spain and Portugal, there is a large amount virtually every year of 'Canes or Reeds'.

If these Canes or Reeds were actually rattan and simply came from the East Indies to Spain and Portugal (who were both very active traders at the time) and then shipped to England, why is the material referred to as Canes or Reeds and not Rattan? Also, why are there no recorded imports from Holland who were also very active traders in the same areas at the same time and who it is claimed, introduced caned furniture to England? Do members have any information or comments on the possible shipping of rattan to Spain, Portugal and Holland and then to England?

If the Canes or Reeds imported from Spain and Portugal are not the same material as rattan and therefore not used in caned furniture, what could they have been used for? One identified use is for incorporation in plaster. Do members have any information or ideas on the uses for these Canes and Reeds from Spain and Portugal – possibly roof thatching? My interpretation is that the Canes and Reeds actually grew in Spain and Portugal and were not used for caned furniture.

The next query is in respect of the unit of measurement. The records for Rattan, Walking, Bamboo and Reeds from the East Indies are all quantified by 'Number'. It would be normal today, to also expect a physical classification by length, diameter or weight but no indication is given in the Customs Records for the period. Canes or Reeds from Spain and Portugal are also quantified by 'number' and occasionally by 'handful'. Over the period, the basic price per thousand for each category of Cane is virtually constant although taxes varied. It is assumed that rattan was imported in its natural condition and not converted in the country of origin into the specific widths we use today. This assumption is based on references elsewhere to rattan being converted in London and France. Do members have any information on the physical characteristics of the rattan imported, ie length, weight, diameter etc?

A final query is the plant from which rattan was obtained. In 1812, the records include entries for 'Cane Rattan' and for the first time 'Cane Rattan Ground'. In 1816 the entries are 'Cane Rattan (ground)' and 'Cane Rattan (not ground)' then from 1820 the only entry is 'Cane Rattan (not ground)'. It is suspected that around this time the source of rattan changed from one plant to the member of the palm tree family which is used today. Botanical definitions of rattan in dictionaries of 1658 and 1699 (which indicate a reed type plant with 8 foot long shoots) and subsequent definitions are at variance and seem to indicate this change, but this will be checked further with a botanist. Do any members have any knowledge of the plant used for rattan?

It is hoped that all members will find the above interesting and that some may be able to help with my research.

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