



Cover illustration: Inlaid 18th century low dresser from Cheshire

Inlaid regional oak furniture dating from the 18th and early 19th centuries forms an important part of our vernacular furniture traditions, particularly that found as part of Welsh furniture, where the tradition continued well into the 19th century, and included many different decorative motifs and symbols.

A few years ago a new example of inlaid oak furniture emerged in England with the discovery of a large and imposing oak dresser with shelves above, dating from the second half of the eighteenth century, which has an array of different inlays depicting, for example, snakes chasing butterflies, hares, trout, daggers with hands reaching towards them, classical urns and yellow and black trompe-l'oeil stars which are associated with Shropshire made furniture. Above all, however, this dresser is arresting in having a huntsman and complete pack of foxhounds chasing a stag inlaid into the shelf frieze. These inlays, in plum and sycamore, are combined with mahogany crossbanding, and stringing of box and horn, and with roman numerals inlaid on the front of each of the nine drawers in the base. This exciting piece of furniture remains in the same farming family for which it was made, in a Cheshire dairy farm, with, alas, all memory of its original symbolic meaning now lost.

This piece remained as a 'one-off' very remarkable item of vernacular furniture, unique in its complexity of startling symbolic inlays and narrative forms. However, a further dresser dating from the eighteenth century has now come to the fore, and is shown as the cover picture to this Newsletter. Again, it resides in a Cheshire home where it has been in the same farming family's ownership for at least three generations.

This dresser is of low form, without shelves, and with nine drawers, each one of which is inlaid with different devices. The top three drawers have flowers and leaves, including tulips inlaid into their fronts. The middle three have floral devices inlaid onto them too, but the left hand drawer has an inlaid yellow parrot perching on what is possibly a date palm frond. The lower three drawers have hunting scenes inlaid into

their fronts. The left hand one shows two dogs scaring up birds, possibly as quarry for their owners to shoot at. The central drawer depicts a man on horseback, a man with a gun, and a dog in front finding game, (see illustration below). The right hand drawer shows three dogs, all with inlaid collars, chasing a stag to the left of the scene. In other design terms, this dresser, in a similar way to the first dresser described above, exhibits the regional features associated with Cheshire and Lancashire furniture of the 18th century, including ogee-shaped feet and mahogany crossbanding.

Although the inlays in this dresser are different in specific ways from the first dresser, the depiction of hunting and shooting scenes, combined with their common regional origins in the North West and the complete absence of any known pieces of this genre from other regions, are sufficient to suggest that perhaps a tradition of making inlaid dressers depicting hunting scenes was part of the North West oak furniture tradition, and that these exciting finds might be part of a larger group of such pieces yet to be discovered. More work has yet to be done in relation to these dressers and the social meanings which they might convey. In the meantime, one hopes for the serendipity which makes furniture research so exciting, and might lead to further pieces of this particular jigsaw being found.

I would like to thank Victor and Jan Chinnery for their help in finding the first dresser mentioned above, and for their recent comments and illustrations of a stag hunt included in a late sixteenth century overmantel at Old House, Sandwich, illustrated by Margaret Jourdain, (1924) which helps to set these two dressers in an extended historical context. I would also like to thank Anthony Bennett – always a good friend to new research, for his help in finding the second dresser.

Dr. B.D. Cotton



One of the inlaid drawer fronts of the dresser, showing a vigorous interpretation of 18th century Cheshire life