

Dressers Redressed

"... set up some Pieces of Boards, like a dresser, to order my victuals upon." This quotation, from Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (published 1719 and largely fictional) may seem an odd source for furniture history, but it has lead my curious mind to some interesting thoughts. Compare, for example, Loudon's statement (1832); "The dresser may be called the cottagers' sideboard, and in the dining-rooms of the first nobleman's houses in Britain, the splendid mahogany sideboards, set with gold and silver plate, differ only in the materials employed from the cottage dresser." I am aware, of course, that Alexander Selkirk, the original of Crusoe, is unlikely to have bothered with form or style in furnishing his desert island - and indeed his dresser, like Man Friday, may be only a product of Defoe's imagination - but what I am certain of is that Defoe, who has been described as the first great modern journalist, knew precisely what the word dresser would imply to his readers. Clearly in 1719 a dresser, like the older word dressoir, meant a piece of furniture on which to dress meat, whereas by 1832 it had become something to be "dressed up" for display.

Now, I have not found the term dresser in any farmhouse inventories before the 1740's. Before that date the principal item of furniture in the average farmhouse hall or living room, apart from a table and seating, was either a cupboard or a sideboard, or sometimes both. The cupboard, whatever may have been its form, seems always to have been a display piece, often associated with dishes, cups, candlesticks and a cupboard cloth. The sideboard at this period is usually, and very reasonably, interpreted in glossaries as a side table. But this does not preclude the possibility that it may have been fitted with drawers in the frieze. I strongly suspect, therefore, that most of the surviving late Seventeenth Century dressers (so called) would at the time have been described as sideboards - these of course bearing no relation to the sideboards referred to by Loudon.

My suspicions are confirmed, I think, by the fact that although numerous racks and shelves occur in Seventeenth and early Eighteenth Century farmhouse inventories, surviving examples of dressers/sideboards (whichever you call them) made before 1740 with any form of superstructure are extremely rare, and mostly doubtful. The two illustrated in the Dictionary of English Furniture (1st Edition 1924) have been edited out of the shorter Dictionary, and rightly in my opinion. I think anyone with any experience of the country craftsman's anachronistic tendencies can see, even from the photographs, that they have been mis-dated.

One big question remains. The dresser in the medieval Great Hall was a display piece, but by the Seventeenth Century had become a purely practical article of furniture. As the Dictionary puts it,

"Dressers were now made for homely use, and in great houses they had long been relegated to the kitchen. There were no later developments of the type." So how and why did it happen that in the mid-Eighteenth Century the agricultural community, largely isolated from each other, should have decided one and all that they needed this virtually new piece of furnishing? Any answers to the question how or why must be looked for in the sphere of economic or social history. Perhaps greater wealth among farmers created a desire for display, or it may be that the introduction of china tableware required a new form of storage. As for there being no further developments of the type - well, I can think of several: the pot-board for one, spice drawers, slots in the shelves for spoons and the retaining bars described by Loudon to lean plates forward and keep the dust off. And what about the totally enclosed cupboard dressers from Devon? No, the history of the dresser starts where the Dictionary leaves off, as far as we, the RFS, are concerned. This is our raison d'être, to redress the balance against such misconceptions.

There is just one snag, you will say, to all this. Setting up some pieces of boards sounds suspiciously like some kind of shelving. Could Defoe, then, have been suggesting his hero built a dresser - with rack above - in 1719? In which case, I ask myself, who was it designed to impress? Man Friday? I don't believe a word of it. For my part, I am convinced Defoe was merely searching for a colourful expression to describe a castaway finding second-hand materials for his kitchen work-top. Of course I may be wrong, and if I am proved so I suppose I had better retire to a desert isle - and look for some Pieces of Board wherewith to fashion an article to make a thesis for some future historian.

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