

Unusual Words from Post-medieval Inventories

During the course of examining inventories as part of a doctoral thesis on *Gloucestershire Furniture and Furniture Makers of the Seventeenth Century* (for which I have an RFS bursary), I have come across two terms, neither of which seems to have been discussed in the literature and only one of which appears in an inventory from another county.

The first is the term 'dais' which occurs in a number of spelt forms, in nine inventories in Gloucestershire; eight times in association with the word 'board'.

- 'one Dayse bord' (North Nibley, 1587)
- 'a dice boorde' (Stoke Bishop, 1609/10)
- 'a dayse bord' (Stoke Gifford, 1611)
- 'a daice boord' (Winterbourne, 1618)
- 'a dayce' (Westerleigh, 1622/23)
- 'a dashboard' (Redland, 1627)
- 'one daise boarde' (Cote, 1629)
- 'a daisboard' (Frampton Cotterell, 1667)
- '1 daice board' (Winterbourne, 1676)

At first glance the term would appear to refer to a table (or 'board') on a raised dais, but this certainly does not seem to be the case. Apart from any other consideration, one would be extremely unlikely to find a dais among the sort of house contents listed in the inventories, and owned by a person of the middling classes; such a feature was to be found in the medieval open hall of the wealthy, with its central fireplace and its high table.

Linguistically 'dais' is Middle English *deis* from Old French *deis* meaning 'table', but in Middle English northern dialects, and in more modern Scottish and North Country dialects it could be an old-fashioned wooden settle or sofa, which could be turned into a table, bed or seat; a stone bench or seat, or a pew.¹

It is to these dialectal meanings that we probably have to turn to determine the meaning of 'dais board'. They indicate that it was an item of seating furniture rather than a table. In this context the use of 'board' with 'dais' might seem surprising in the light of the former's common meaning of table but, as is shown above, an inventory from Westerleigh records merely 'a dayce', so clearly the compound term was not obligatory. Further, although apparently not in Gloucestershire, there are many instances of the word 'bench' being used in conjunction with 'board'. For example, '3 bench boordes' (Writtle, Essex, 1638); 'a bench board' (Roxwell, Essex, 1659); 'one bench board'

(Clee, South Humberside, 1621). Here the meaning of 'board' is clearly 'plank' and not 'table'.

What is surprising, linguistically, is the use of the dialectal meaning so far south in the country and apparently limited there only to Gloucestershire, although there are instances of other dialectal words 'missing out' counties and appearing in two quite separate areas of the country. One example is the word 'jessop' meaning 'a donkey', which is recorded only in Lincolnshire and Gloucestershire.²

If we consider the positioning of dais boards within the inventories in which they occur, then it becomes even more evident that they were items of seating furniture. For example, 'one table bord, one cobbard, three gine [joined] formes, a dayse bord and a gine bench' (Stoke Gifford, 1611); 'one table boord with a pair of tresselles, one forme and a daise boord and three benches' (Winterbourne, 1618); 'one tableboard with his frame, Fyve Joynt stooles, two Low stools, on forme, 2 benches, a dashboard and one tourne Chayre' (Redland, 1627). These examples show, as do others, that the daisboard is habitually listed with other seating furniture, and is clearly distinguished from them by the inventory assessors, although no indication of its construction is given.

It might be suggested that the use of the term 'dais' is indicative of a seat higher than others, but the universal term used in inventories for this is simply 'high': for example, 'thre high joynd stooles', (Clifton, 1637/8); '8 high joyne stooles' (Cheltenham, 1663); '6 high joynd stooles' (Winterbourne, 1639/40); and benches and forms are never referred to in terms of height, only in terms of length or general size. For instance, 'a large forme' (Cheltenham, 1724); 'thre smal benchis' (Clifton, 1690); 'seven formes, long and short' (Winterbourne, 1618); 'long bench' (Iron Acton, 1719).

At those places within the Frampton Cotterell area of Gloucestershire (Stoke Gifford, Winterbourne, Westerleigh and Frampton Cotterell) dais boards are owned by people whose inventory assessments range from £28.15s.0d to £63.15s.0d, so here they are clearly not the possessions of wealthy people. On the other hand, the three inventories which record dais boards from the Clifton & Westbury area (Stoke Bishop, Redland and Cote), are assessed at £134.13s.8d, £132.1s.5d and £267.17s.8d respectively. No total is given for the inventory from North Nibley. These admittedly extremely limited sets of figures give different pictures of the financial worth of the owners of dais boards, but far more examples, should they exist, are needed before any valid conclusions can be drawn. In addition, as no dais board is individually assessed, we are unable to determine exactly how highly it was prized.

However, when a dais board is assessed as part of a group of furniture, we can see that it was not an expensive item. For example, the list of furniture containing a dais board from Stoke Gifford, above, is valued at one pound; that from Redland at eighteen shillings; while the Frampton Cotterell inventory has 'one table board and frame, and formes, one Cupboard, one Chaire and a daisboard', together valued at three pounds. The latter is a higher figure than most, but not high enough to suggest that the daisboard was an item of quality.

Of the eight dais boards that were given room provenances in inventories, seven are found in halls and one in the parlour, as is to be expected in the light of their association with, presumably, dining tables and hence eating. I have noted only one example of the word 'dais' from another county. This was in an inventory from Stratford-upon-Avon dated 1565. Here it is written as 'deys' and, like the majority of the Gloucestershire examples, it is located in the hall. It is not, however, listed with seating furniture but as 'a deys, vii peynted clothes, a cobbard' - a combination which tells us nothing of the nature of the 'deys', although it is another example of the use of the word in isolation rather than in conjunction with 'board'. The editor of the published Stratford-upon-Avon inventories, however, glosses 'deys' as 'the principal table in the hall' in spite of the fact that three 'tabule burdes' have already been listed in the hall.³ It would seem that this definition is based upon the medieval meaning of dais, which would certainly not be applicable in the case of the innkeeper whose inventory this was and whose house contents were assessed at £47.5s.0d.

The problem of the exact meaning of 'dais' board is not helped by the single example of a 'dais cupboard' in a 1667 inventory from Cheltenham, interestingly an area in which the dais board is not recorded. This cupboard is located in the kitchen, a room not associated with dais boards, and this provenance is certainly indicative of the fact that the 'dais' has nothing to do with the raised platform in the medieval hall. Sale, in his glossary of words used in Cheltenham wills and inventories, sees the 'dais cupboard' as a 'raised cupboard, possibly on trestles or on a stand'.⁴ This association of 'dais' with 'raised' is understandable, but if it really means this its use must surely be idiolectal as it never seems to have been used in this sense with a cupboard in any other inventory.

The second term I have come across is 'jimmold' in conjunction with, first, 'table'. This combination appears in only one inventory from the hundreds examined from Gloucestershire, that of a joiner from Tewkesbury, dated 1678, where two such tables are recorded, one in the kitchen and the other in a lodging chamber. The term is

almost certainly dialectal, being a form of 'gimmel' (pronounced as though beginning with a 'j') which is recorded for Gloucestershire with the meaning of 'hinge'⁵ and 'jemma' with the same meaning.⁶ So 'jimmold table' probably refers to a table with hinged flaps or leaves. It is tempting to see this as part of the specialised vocabulary of a joiner in the 17th century, but unfortunately two references in a single inventory hardly support this!

The same word, in a different written form and with a different association occurs in the inventory of a potter from Westbury, dated 1732, which lists 'One Gimmel Gold Ring'. This combination of 'gimmel' (or 'gimmal') and 'ring' is better documented and according to the OED, is first recorded in 1607, having the meaning of a 'finger ring made as to divide into two or three rings'. In a sense the ring is 'hinged' and here we can see, no doubt, the source of the dialectal use of the term.

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