

# Shropshire 17th century furniture?

## Problems of interpretation

Identifying 'regional' furniture in the 17th century is difficult. The best indicators (e.g. documentary evidence, inscribed owners' or makers' names) are rare so it is worth focussing on cases where they are found.<sup>1</sup> Ideally we would like to use documented pieces to identify (sets of) features that can serve as 'regional' or local markers. These markers may be specific types of furniture, or features of decoration and construction. Since the area over which a shared feature is found can range from a single workshop or town (e.g. the Darvel type of Windsor chair) to a whole region (e.g. the South West) the usefulness of any marker for precise identification will be variable.<sup>2</sup>

The most useful markers are those that are shared by all the examples in the locality, and none at all outside the locality. In practice these are likely to be rare, and the more common markers are likely to be features which are *often* found in an area and not elsewhere, or (less usefully) features which are found very widely but with more or less frequency in different areas. For example, Gabriel Olive suggested that crossed saw cuts above V cut-outs in the ends of boarded coffers were 'a typically West Country feature.'<sup>3</sup> If this feature is found outside the West Country, it becomes less useful as a regional marker. In practice such knowledge can only be built up by cooperative effort over time.

The focus here is on two pieces of furniture belonging to the same owner which were sold at Christies, King Street on 25 October 1990. One is an oak chest with drawer with a central shield inscribed 'Jane Corbett 7 Febuarie: 16 57' (Fig 1); the other is an armchair with a shield on the cresting rail inscribed 'Thomas Corbett 1657' (Fig 2).<sup>4</sup>

It is rare to find a precise date as well as a name and, assuming the two pieces are related, they give us the name of a couple. A search of the



Fig. 2



Fig. 1

www.familysearch.com website revealed only one match with these names and this date: Thomas Corbett married Jane Eves 7 February 1657 at Broseley, Shropshire. Subsequent research revealed that Thomas and Ann Corbett are likely to have lived at Little Dean Farm, The Dean, Broseley, Shropshire, and that the Corbetts were an important borders family.<sup>5</sup> If this documentation is accepted, the question is whether the two pieces help identify Shropshire furniture.

Unfortunately, Shropshire is not a county whose furniture has been well studied. Richard Bebb notes the difficulty of demarcating Wales from the border counties in his survey of Welsh furniture and does not demarcate Shropshire furniture as a sub-category.<sup>6</sup> The 17th century furniture at Drapers Hall, Shrewsbury is the best documented in the county.<sup>7</sup> Victor Chinnery shows a 1632 long dining table, a 1637 deed chest, and a 1662 armchair all made by named local joiners. Francis Bowyer made the table in an 'undifferentiated vernacular style' and the deed chest in the (non-regional) Laudian style. Richard Ellis made the armchair which Chinnery notes is the only piece



whose decoration has a regional character (black colour on the back of the armchair, probably as part of a black and red combination known in Cheshire).<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates the ability of joiners to adopt different styles, presumably at the request of their customers, and is evidence that furniture made in a particular locality may not all show a local style.

There are many differences between the 1657 Corbett armchair and the 1662 Drapers Hall chair, but they have some similarities in construction: a slightly raked back, narrow turned front legs and arm supports, and arms which are fairly close to horizontal, but these are hardly very specific (such arms are found in Gloucestershire and the West Country too). They differ in decoration: the restrained applied 'inner frame' moulding on the Drapers Hall armchair contrasts with the Corbett example where every surface is decorated. The Corbett chest is likewise very fully decorated in a mix of architectural features (columns, arches, consoles), faces and acanthus leaves. Both Corbett pieces show central shields surrounded by similar foliage, and tablets with (different) animal supporters.

Faced with such differences on documented Shropshire pieces, we are far from identifying Shropshire (let alone Shrewsbury) markers. But, hopefully, the Corbett pieces will be useful in combination with other documented Shropshire pieces to allow future progress in identifying possible Shropshire sets of markers.

**Chris Pickvance**

<sup>1</sup> V. Chinnery, *Oak Furniture*, Antique Collectors Club, 1979, p. 444.

<sup>2</sup> D. Jones, 'Darvel Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, 1X, 1995, pp. 64-70.

<sup>3</sup> G. Olive, 'West Country Chests, Coffers and Boxes', *Regional Furniture*, 1V, 1990, pp. 49-70.

<sup>4</sup> Reproduction is by kind permission of Christies. Thanks to Simon Green for supplying the pictures. The chest with drawer was subsequently sold at Bonhams, Chester in May 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Steve Dewhirst of Broseley Local History Society for this information.

<sup>6</sup> R. Bebb, *Welsh Furniture*, Vol.1, Saer Books, 2007, p.17.

<sup>7</sup> See Chinnery, op.cit., pp. 53-7; Bebb, op. cit., Vol.1, pp. 308-9.

<sup>8</sup> However, Bebb notes that the chair has a 'carved crest incorporating the regional feature of a central swirl' (made up of four commas) (Bebb, op. cit., Vol.1, p. 308).