

Lecture by Sarah Woodcock: Cupboard Love – Lake District fitted cupboards of the 17th and 18th centuries

Saturday evening, 3 October

Sarah's lecture was based on the findings of a survey carried out by herself, curator, Caroline Cotgrove, conservator, of the National Trust, and Jeremy Hall of Peter Hall & Sons, with archive research by Janet Martin. She spoke at length about a recent National Trust survey looking at Lake District farm and cottage fitted furniture (panelling, cupboards, shelving and free-standing furniture), including case studies and examples from Westmorland, Cumberland and Lancashire. To date, 91 farms and 230 cottages have been looked at, with the aim of familiarising the researchers with their subject, assessing the condition of the furniture and taking forward a programme of repair, and gaining an understanding of the physical and social context of the furniture. Source material has included existing historic building surveys, archival research and the detailed survey of individual pieces.

Case studies have so far focussed on houses with fitted furniture where there is both good building and family history. The area has historically seen a distinct form of tenure, characterised by 'statesman farmers' who had a secure tenancy and could pass this onto the next generation. Early conclusions drawn from the study suggest that the reason much fitted furniture survives across the Lakes is that it could be passed on.

Sarah's first example was Jackdaw Cottage, a simple property of which the main place was the firehouse, which would have functioned as the kitchen parlour and an area in which to welcome guests. Apparently it is here that spice cupboards and press cupboards are found in this type of property. Rooms would have been partitioned with wood panelling, and press cupboards were often fitted into this. An interesting yew partition was examined by the survey at Little Langdale, dating to the 18th century and of muntin and plank form.

The definition of a press cupboard for the purposes of the survey was given as 'a large cupboard with a recessed superstructure containing small cupboards with a narrow shelf in front of them. In the Lake District they are usually three tier with the upper tier recessed six inches or so with a projecting frieze above and a turned drop pendant or baluster at each end'. Members were then shown two examples, one from c.1628 and one from the mid to late 17th century, the latter being highly decorated. So far, the results of the survey suggest that balusters and drop

pendants were in contemporary use with no clear chronological development from one form to another. In the 18th century, the decoration mostly disappears and drawers begin to appear. An example was shown from 1756 which was a transition piece, like a sideboard, set in the wall, and the back projected. Fifty per cent of press cupboards in the survey were located in the back wall opposite the front door and the remaining half opposite the fireplace.

Moving onto spice cupboards, Sarah described these as small and built in the wall next to the fireplace as members had seen at the Castle Dairy. She explained that 'spice cupboard' was a 20th century term and that secondary sources suggest 'salt boxes' as a contemporary term. They were used to store salt, tobacco and spices. Their location meant that the goods they contained would be kept dry and were at hand for cooking. Twenty-five spice cupboards have been recorded in National Trust properties and mostly date to the 18th century.

We then saw an example of a piece of fitted furniture from a high status property at Causeway Farm, Windermere, with a triad of initials for John and Mary Phillipson. From a sample of 26 dated and initialled cupboards, the survey has managed to identify 14 families through archival research. Very often the carved dates are three or four years after a marriage and only two of the 14 relate to the date of a marriage. This led to a discussion between Sarah and members, where it was suggested that the dates may refer to when a house was altered.

The decoration of fitted furniture was looked at with reference to the press cupboard example from Causeway Farm and others from Oak Cottage, Crosthwaite and the How, Laughrigg dated 1688 and initialled TBIB. Elaborate ferns, stylised scrolls and interlace were seen to be quite common in the Lake District.

Sarah summed up an excellent talk by stating that pieces of fitted furniture are very special and of high status, often being the only elaborate piece within a simple home. Evidence for their use is rare.

Vanessa Clarke



Press cupboard at
Swarthmoor Hall