

Peter Brears:

*Vernacular Furniture in its
Original Context: A Study of the
Textile Area of the West Riding*

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Peter began his talk by recounting a few memories of Christopher Gilbert: he had a wicked sense of humour; his approach to researching furniture was different to Peter's. Christopher started with the object and then researched its history. Peter by contrast worked the opposite way by researching from information about an object. His talk was excellently presented, with a combination of slides, handouts and proactive demonstrations.

The textile area moved from Yorkshire to the West Riding area in the 16th century. To set things in context Peter showed us slides of the West Riding landscape from the moors to the small villages and towns lower down. The handouts showed us four typical 19th century cottage interiors from the West Riding illustrating the vernacular furniture settings. The first two, from Stanbury c.1835, and Saddleworth c.1920 (Figs 1 and 2), were typical of one up/one down weavers' cottages, with spindle back chairs, tables, chests, a longcase clock or wall clock, spindle wheels and beds. The second two illustrated a town house setting in Faxfleet Street, Bradford, from an illustration by Christopher Pratt (Fig 3), and a miner's cottage from the Dewsbury area (Fig 4). An interesting feature of the Stanbury cottage was a chair with only one armrest, used to make it easier to spin using the spindle wheel.

Peter is an acknowledged food historian, and he explained that what one might assume to be clothes hangers strung across the ceilings in the illustrations were in fact 'creels' or 'flakes' used for hanging oatcakes – a local traditional food – out to dry. Also included were illustrations of typical West Riding vernacular tables and chairs, spinning wheels, pirn winders and related textile accessories, each drawn from particular settings Peter had researched. Large spindle wheels were known as walking wheels because the worker would stand beside them to spin. One would sit beside the smaller wheels such as pirn or bobbin winders, and children were employed to work these, chanting in the local dialect, 'Winnd-a-bobbin, Winnd-a bobbin, Boom, Boom, Boom'.

A 19th century tradition in this region was to attach coloured ribbons to items of furniture to signify ownership. To conserve space West Riding cottages sometimes had 'shut up' beds, often referred to as 'turn-up' beds. These folded up into the wall to free up floor area. An interesting tale of c.1860 was about a couple who had lost their baby, only to discover they had folded it up with



Fig 1 Weaver's cottage, Stanbury



Fig 3 Town house setting in Faxfleet Street, Bradford, from an illustration by Christopher Pratt.

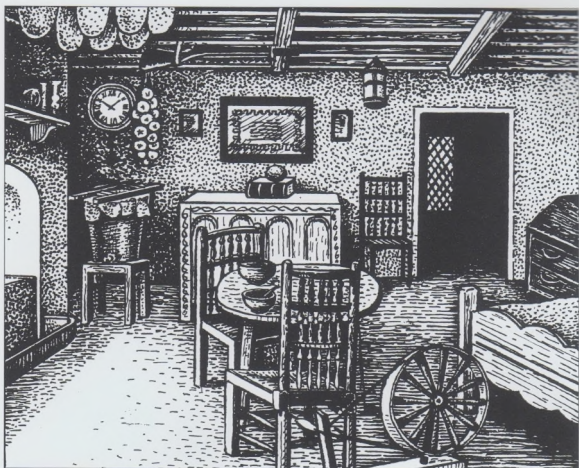


Fig 2 Weaver's cottage, Saddleworth



Fig 4 A miner's cottage from the Dewsbury area.

the bed into the wall! A bed of no less than 14ft diameter was discovered in the Calder valley area, apparently used by a labourer. In the early 18th century people in the more remote cottages traditionally ate standing up next to a round table, dipping their spoon into a pot of porridge. Later, and closer to Halifax, people ate sitting at square tables where their diet was a more traditional meat and vegetables. In 1863 a design for 'bakestone' was patented by Joseph Wright & Shipley comprising a specially designed plate about 12in square. A prepared oatmeal was placed on this 'oatmeal batter pudding hurler', as Peter described it, and skilfully thrown, travelling at 45 degrees to land on a 5ft long hot plate ready for cooking. We were entertained to a demonstration on roughly how this was done! Thank you Peter for a most informative and entertaining talk.

Valerie Bryant