



## Cover picture

William Shiels RSA (1783-1857):  
*A Courtship*, 1810.



The middle-class interior in which William Shiels has set this romantic event has many distinctive Scottish features. The considerable amount of light indicates the couple are taking tea

(from a silver teapot) in the fashionable upstairs parlour of a small 'improved' town house, while the low ceiling, lack of cornice and simple fire surround suggest this is in a provincial town rather than Edinburgh itself. The development of Edinburgh's New Town encouraged a wave of development in many small Scottish towns in the early 19th century; modern 'regular' houses, symmetrical with classical proportions and detail, became highly desirable as opposed to old, 'irregular' houses.

The repeat-pattern floor covering may well be a 'Scotch' carpet, with a stitched edge visible on the side near the window. The unpainted window shutters, skirting, fireplace surround and door suggest this may be in a town in the east of Scotland, where much Memel pine was being imported at the time and was often not

painted. This is supported by the case of the longcase clock; an east Scottish pattern with straight bracket feet rather than the ogee pattern favoured in the English midlands and north, and the distinctive low-set swan necks of the hood with consequent narrow-waisted frets, often in a light wood, perhaps box or satinwood. The dial may well be an engraved single-piece silvered dial, which remained popular in both Scotland and the west country until the early 19th century.

The tripod table, either of wych elm or mahogany, has been drawn into the window to make the most of the daylight, while the position of the upholstered chair and stool beside the fireplace may well be there to make use of the firelight in the evening, perhaps when sewing. Are the cloth and (sewing) basket on the chair seat her evening occupation? There is a hint in the top rail that the chair might be an after-Chippendale design, a form that was popular in the east of Scotland. Did the parlour also serve as a guest bedroom? She is obscuring the front of the piece of furniture to the right of the window, which may be a chest of drawers but equally may be a press-bed, as is shown in the parlour of the Edinburgh artist Alexander Carse (see the National Museums of Scotland's online gallery – PG 1841 – in which Carse's mother is shown sitting reading, her feet on a creepy stool). Whatever else we may see in the painting, one thing seems definite: the courtship is going well and we are encouraged to feel it should, as Shiels has included a blue hyacinth, the symbol of sincerity.

William Shiels was born in the parish of Westruther in Berwickshire, the son of a farmer and blacksmith. As a youngster, William began farming but soon left to become apprenticed to the Edinburgh cabinet maker William Trotter, which may well account for the detailed rendering of the contents of the interior. He studied painting at the Trustees' Academy in Edinburgh and then at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. This painting was exhibited at the Associated Society of Artists in Edinburgh in 1810, shortly after William Shiels returned from London. He worked in the USA from 1817-1825, where he co-founded and directed the South Carolina Academy of Fine Arts in Charleston. On his return to Scotland, by 1826, Shiels co-founded and played a major role in the early years of the Royal Scottish Academy. He is perhaps best known for his 100 scientifically accurate portraits of domestic livestock made for the University of Edinburgh between 1832 and 1844. A vernacular interior by Shiels is illustrated in Dr B. D. Cotton's *Scottish Vernacular Furniture*, p 125. Shiels' activities and his genre, portrait, animal, and landscape paintings are the subject of doctoral research by Fiona Salvesen Murrell at the University of Aberdeen and anyone with further information on these subjects is welcome to contact her at: [f.v.salvesen@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:f.v.salvesen@abdn.ac.uk)

We are very grateful to David Jones, Dr Bill Cotton and Fiona Salvesen Murrell for information regarding this painting, and to Woolley & Wallis, Salisbury, for the illustration.

*Polly Legg*