

# Auld Reekies sticks:

## A guide to Edinburgh Furniture from David Jones

Having given us a broad introduction to the subject in Riddles Court that essentially underlined the importance of the Incorporations for the manufacture of anything in Edinburgh David went into more detail on the furniture making.

Furniture making had, of course, started in the Old Town and near Riddles Court was Brodie's Close the home and workshop of Francis Brodie, the younger son of an Aberdeen family; he would have thought of himself as a professional and he was Treasurer in 1749 and Deacon in 1755 of the Incorporation of Wrights and Hammermen the equivalent of the London Guild/Company for cabinet makers. He was known for pier-tables with carved eagle bases and we saw one later in Gosford. Also at Gosford was a 1st edition of Chippendale's *Director* that another Lawnmarket cabinet-maker had used, Alexander Peter. He made along with other Edinburgh makers, single drop-leafed 'bedroom tables' a very Scottish type – we saw several during the course of the Conference, especially in Newhailes.

The late 18th-century development of the New Town also saw a comparable growth in the suppliers of furnishings to the new large houses being built. The houses had large draughty sash windows and high ceilings that may have been showy but were slightly impracticable for the 'social machines' that they were intended for. Many Scottish families rented apartments rather than whole houses and each 'flat' had a large lobby to gather in before

going into the large dining room then upstairs to the drawing room. Typical Scottish designs evolved such as the sideboard with a back shelf or stage and a tambour front for glasses. A very typical design was used on the legs that had boxwood stringing with a 'dot' inlaid at the top. Prominent names of makers in Edinburgh New Town were John Biggar from c. 1805; Francis Braidwood who used a distinctive inlaid or carved 'Federal Knot' on his furniture; and of course the great Thomas Trotter.

David also mentioned idiosyncratic names and uses for pieces of furniture such as a 'guardevine' for a wine cooler; the use of linen presses in the dining room – really very practical as one would put in table linen etc. Another distinctive feature for Edinburgh furniture was the Grecian sofa that had a pronounced out curve in the armrests to hold a cylindrical cushion.

Built for the Musical Society of Edinburgh in 1763 by Robert Mylne, **St Cecilia's Hall** is the oldest concert hall in Scotland and the second oldest in Great Britain after Oxford's Holywell Music Room of 1748, described at the time as 'the most selectly fashionable place of amusement'.

Entering from an unprepossessing alley off the Cowgate, along which cattle were driven to market, we climbed the Imperial stairs flanked by excellent capriccios of Rome by Panini and assembled in the skylit oval domed concert room to hear David Jones' principal lecture.

Before we left St Cecilia's Hall we were invited to view the Russell and Mirrey collection of early keyboard instruments. Fifty historic examples from throughout Europe of clavichords, virginals and harpsichords packed densely into two long galleries – rather like Harrods piano department – it seemed a little sad until we learned that they are frequently brought out to be played, and indeed an example by Goermans and Taskin built in Paris in 1764, considered the world's finest for performing Couperin, was chosen to be played by Christophe Rousset at a Edinburgh Festival concert shortly after our visit.

However the instrument which caught several members' eye, was a japanned rectangular virginals c. 1570 attributed to Lodewyk Theewes, a native of Flanders who settled in London and became naturalized in 1567, decorated with delightful images of flowers and birds in reserves.

A short walk along the dusty cavern of the Cowgate took us to **Magdalen Chapel**, lurking unnoticed by most, under the George IV Bridge. The chapel is a unique demonstration of the status of the Trades in 16th-century Edinburgh as introduced to members by David Jones that morning.

Founded in 1537 as a Chantry chapel with a chaplain and seven bedesmen to pray for the soul of Michael McQueen and his wife Janet, insufficient funds led the patronage of the hospital, aimed at the poor living in

Cowgate, to be passed to the Incorporation of Hammermen in 1553 at McQueen's widow's death. After the Reformation of 1560 the bedesmen continued to be housed and pray (in Protestant form) but the chapel was probably stripped of its furnishings. In 1617 a new front was added to the Cowgate.

The high single cell interior, now resembling a court, with central 18th-century brass chandelier is lit by a south window containing four mid-16th-century stained glass roundels of the Royal Arms of Scotland and Mary of Guise, above McQueen impaling Kerr – the only surviving pre-Reformation stained glass in Scotland in situ.

The east and north walls are clad with arched paneling carved with lily and whorl spandrels of various dates stretching back to the early 17th-century repairs. These panels record benefactions by Hammermen, many of which were later copied on to black painted adjacent panels, obliterating other inscriptions, during refreshment work recorded in 1725 and 1813. Sitting high in front of the east wall sits the Dean's armchair of 1708, described earlier by David Jones, recently controversially refinished in blue with upholstery covered in Russian reindeer leather retrieved from a wreck off Plymouth Sound. Below were two semi-circular tiers of seats made by William Eizat, a wright, of 1725. The back of the lower tier was painted by Alexander Boswall with the arms of the Trades, which formed the Incorporation of Hammermen, fronted by a wrought iron railing of the same date. Here, members were seated, to enjoy a detailed introduction to the history of the chapel by Mr Home.

After the Chapel we split into two groups the first went to the Georgian House, 7 Charlotte Square while the other went to **The Conventry of the Trades of Edinburgh, Ashfield, Trades Maiden Hospital** at 61 Melville St, New Town, and here we were met by Henry Stewart Fotheringham. The Conventry, celebrating its 450th anniversary, consists of the leading members of the fourteen main trades in the city, Masons, Wrights, Hammermen, Goldsmiths, etc. Today it is essentially a charitable organisation but even that is long established as part of it concerns the Trades Maiden Hospital founded to educate the female orphans of deceased tradesmen. The hospital was founded in 1704 and a superb double gate-leg oak table around which the hospital's governors have always gathered dominated the room where we met. There was also a fine mid-18th-century master's chair decorated with the badges of the incorporated trades. Another special object on display in an anniversary year is the Blue Blanket, The Edinburgh Trades Banner and said to have been carried at the Battle of Flodden Field, September 1513.

In another room was a splendid and large oil painting of representatives of all the trades including possibly the

earliest depiction of a Scottish upholsterer at work. There was also a stunning example of cut-paper work in the form of the arms of the Convenery and a fine wrought-iron multi-locked money chest.

*Jeremy Bate and Treve Rosoman*