

A Private Collection of Oak Furniture and Related Items

May 22–23, 2013

Society members were warmly welcomed in two groups on consecutive days to a stone-built house, formerly a tenanted farmhouse on a great estate when it became the family home thirty years ago. The owner's interest in historic, decorative arts began in boyhood with an inherited snuffbox. However, it was a joint stool that later precipitated a lifetime's enthusiasm for British furniture of the 16th and 17th centuries, overwhelmingly in oak, although a large, late 17th-century gateleg table in cedar was an impressive and pleasing exception. By way of introduction he explained that as his collecting developed, it was qualities of structural integrity and natural surface that he learned to seek out.

Joint stools have remained a consistent feature of his collecting, and twenty or so examples amply demonstrated the variety and versatility of the form and we made good use of a selection during an excellent lunch. Interesting examples included an elegant triangular example with trefoil top and distinguished by very neat joinery, and a curious example with one turned leg inverted in relation to the others, possibly an idiosyncrasy of taste or a workshop

error that went forgiven or discounted. One unusual and important example of about 1575 in walnut (ex. coll. Rous Lench) with elaborate classical ornament, features mitred facings pegged onto the structural rails, presumably to maintain a seamless ornamental frieze.

We admired two boarded stools, one of unusually large size. Such boarded stools are difficult to date or even identify a region of origin with any accuracy; although they are often called 16th or even 15th century, they regularly appear in Netherlandish genre paintings with domestic interiors, indicating long popularity, and presumably manufacture in northern Europe throughout the 17th century.

As well as stools, most of the standard forms of Tudor and Stuart furniture are well represented, notably wall or 'glass' cupboards with turned spindle fronts, folding ('credence') tables and armchairs. We admired a modestly-proportioned oak tester bed formerly owned by Roger Warner, and a small boarded chest with incised X decorations, which was discovered in recent years in the cellar of a house in Diss. Useful comparison was drawn with a simpler version salvaged from the Mary Rose, and a larger chest in a Norfolk church close to Diss. In addition to moveable furniture, a number of smaller fragments, such as panels (especially with renaissance ornament), figures and church ornaments revealed their owner's particular



Oak chest dated 1646, shown closed, and (facing page) with the top rail and sliding front removed to reveal 3 drawers under a false bottom.



appreciation for gutsy, 16th-century carving in its rich variety.

The collection was assembled with the assistance of various advisers, but in recent years a number of significant pieces were spotted at auction and reflect the owner's personal taste, and special regard for idiosyncratic furniture with exceptional design features. Notable was a slender six-legged oak table and concealed beneath the top, behind the scratch-moulded side rails, were four compartments the width of the table and about 15 in across. They are accessed from above, simply by sliding the un-pegged top to one side of the frame.

Most surprising among these unusual pieces was a panelled oak chest, possibly Scottish, dated 1646, and with arms that may represent Maxwell and Harris. The front top rail, with dovetailed ends lifts out, allowing the whole panelled front to slide up, revealing three drawers underneath the false bottom, and a further secret compartment behind, accessed via a loose bottom board. Dates appear on a high proportion of the pieces, including one simple boarded oak box 36 in long, (perhaps for candles), inscribed HENRYE CAS WARDEN 1597, the lettering was emphasized with black mastic infill, a technique that survives on a few pieces of furniture and panelling and that must have provided a boldly satisfying contrast in colours when new.

The visit provided an illuminating opportunity to study a number of early armchairs. Some were good examples of types that have been cogently studied in recent years: two 'caquetteuse' armchairs, from Salisbury and Aberdeen, and a

Durham, crested armchair. Others are exceptional pieces of less certain origin that made significant appearances at auction in recent years. An armchair with a large panel carved with a romayne head (ex. coll. Clive Sherwood) may be the reduced and repaired survival of an early 16th-century great chair, possibly an English version of a French, high-backed throne chair; it was recently attributed as Anglo-Scottish c. 1510. The bravura carving of the panel was somewhat at odds with the stolid form of the frame. A spectacular early 17th-century enclosed armchair, possibly Yorkshire, with extravagant guilloche cresting and plain front panel; Clive Sherwood had also owned this chair. Oddly, it seems never to have been fitted with side or back panels, rendering it as impressive as the box armchairs that were often placed near a bed and used to hold perfumed linen, but without the storage capability. Another late Elizabethan armchair with an inlaid floral back panel, steeply set arms and decoration on front and back of the back rails, but now missing much of its crest, was perhaps an accomplished metropolitan production c.1600. It can be related to the Burrell collection piece (ref. 14/178), which Victor Chinnery has previously suggested might have been made in a West Country city.

The furniture forms a pre-eminent part of the house furnishings, but was complemented by outstanding delftware and pewter of the 17th century, and sensitively chosen pictures and textiles. All were generously revealed to us by our hosts, to whom we are most grateful for a stimulating and very pleasant visit.

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