



Mahogany table attributed to the workshop of William Owen, about 1835. *Photo courtesy of Simon Hancock*

## Fashionable Furniture in Haverfordwest: a card table by William Owen

Haverfordwest Museum is a thriving local museum that documents every aspect of the town which it serves, from archaeology to entertainment. Furniture and furnishings are not its prime focus but a recent acquisition of a table made in the town in about 1835 has brought it an excellent example of cabinet-making by a man whose influence on the town eventually spread far beyond his workshop.

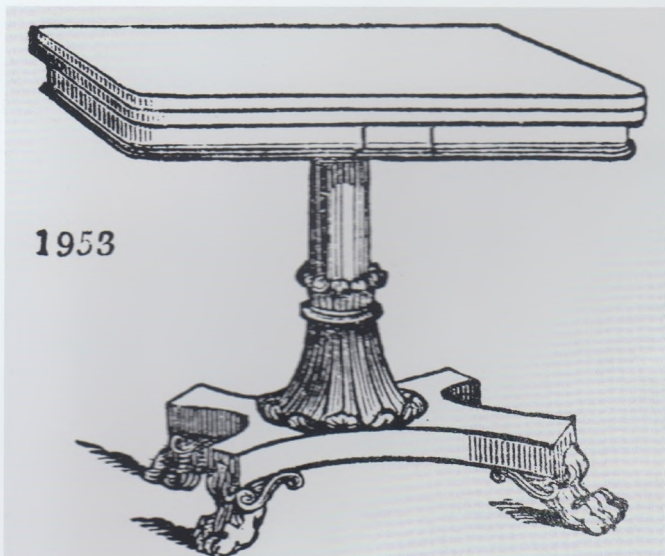
The maker, William Owen (1796–1879), was born in Haverfordwest, the second son of Thomas Owen, also a cabinet maker. He followed his father and his elder brother James into the trade and their workshop was in Short Row – a medieval shambles (now demolished) which stood in a wide section of the present High Street.

This finely made card table reflects the prosperity that came to Haverfordwest in the nineteenth century, in part because of Owen's energy in local affairs, and it demonstrates a lively awareness of fashionable forms and ornament. It is designed in the Regency classical taste that lasted for most of the first half of the century, disseminated by the influential periodical *Ackermann's*



Photograph of William Owen in old age. *Photo courtesy of Haverfordwest Museum*





1953

Design by J.C. Loudon, published 1833 in his *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*

*Repository* and a growing repertoire of printed pattern books. The table is closely related to a design published as figure 1953, on page 172 of J. C. Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, published in 1833.

The title of that book of designs mirrors the clientele that Owen was supplying, although we know from Richard Bebb's book (*Welsh Furniture 1250–1950: A Cultural History of Craftsmanship and Design*, Kidwelly: Saer Books, 2007, vol. II - see index), that he also supplied country houses in and around Haverfordwest, including Scolton Manor (now the County Museum) and Picton Castle. Sources such as Loudon provided ideas to both craftsmen and patrons, and they could be adapted as required. Owen gave this table canted front corners and a rather livelier curling top to the leafy binding of the pillar. The top of the table is cross-banded and the carving of the main pillar and the feet is strong, suggesting the variety of skills that the workshop could offer.

Owen was an energetic and ambitious man, who moved from cabinet-making into the field of architecture and contracting, playing a significant part in the large-scale re-building and development of Haverfordwest. He designed the Shire Hall, and the New Bridge, which he also financed. He was also the designer of much of the fine domestic architecture that still survives in the town, including Victoria Terrace. Unsurprisingly, he played a role in local politics, serving four terms as mayor. William Owen's industry set his family on an upward social trajectory, his youngest son, Henry (1844-1919) becoming a noted antiquary and first treasurer of the National Library of Wales.

The table was purchased from Richard Bebb, who acquired it at a local auction, from a house in Pembrokeshire. He was alerted to it by another RFS member, the late Luke Millar, who had undertaken research for many years on the cabinet-making trade in Carmarthen and Haverfordwest. It was Luke Millar who pointed out the close similarity between the treatment of the large paw feet of this table, and those on documented pieces supplied by Owen to Picton Castle. The table also shares the fine quality of cabinet work that is typical of William Owen's productions, and the crisp (even sharp) carving of the feet. It is a fine acquisition for the museum of his home town.

I am grateful to Richard Bebb and to Simon Hancock, Curator of the Museum, for their help in preparing this notice.

*Sarah Medlam*