

ENGLISH VERNACULAR FURNITURE 1750 - 1900 CHRISTOPHER GILBERT

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It is twelve years since Victor Chinnery produced his standard work on early British furniture (*Oak Furniture - The British Tradition*). The majority of the material that he covered would have furnished the homes of a small, well-to-do percentage of the population. A great deal less evidence has survived of the houses and furnishings of the less well-off majority. Yet it is a survey of just this that Christopher Gilbert has attempted in this very readable analysis, scholarly and well-illustrated, which shows that 'common' furniture can hold as much interest as more fashionable types.

Having ventured a rather negative definition of the native vernacular tradition as not furniture professionally designed, made of mahogany or other imported woods, nor with specialist decorative techniques or upholstery, he admits that quite a proportion of the furniture he includes is institutional rather than domestic and hardly vernacular in its true sense, because it was supplied by specialists or large contractors. Nevertheless these areas such as schools, prisons, hospitals, offices, shops, railways and barrack rooms, have in the past been little considered and deserve a good deal more. Christopher's pioneering enthusiasm for them is evident. But this does at times lead him to stray rather outside the boundaries of his title, both geographically and chronologically. Although it is a splendid colourful piece, it is unfortunate that the Kirkbride bed on the dust jacket cover is clearly dated a quarter of a century before his declared commencement date, while the bulk of the rest of the chapter on beds relates to Scotland and the Celtic fringes. This is not surprising since it is in these areas that traditions tended to survive longest. The choice of a mid 18th century date comes from the time when the fashion for carved oak furniture had given way generally to simpler solid forms with traditional methods of construction and functional considerations. Such furniture, with its inherited local characteristics and slow assimilation of fashionable elements in a simplified manner, is the heartland of Regional Furniture studies. During the latter part of the 19th century, the rapid social and economic changes brought about the decline of some vernacular traditions, particularly in the major urban areas.

In some areas little more is given than an outline of the range of available source material and suggestions on how it can be interpreted, or as in one place, a tantalising Rowlandson watercolour of a university undergraduate's room is illustrated to point to further possible directions of study. Furniture to be found in churches, as opposed to humbler chapels, is passed by all too quickly. However the importance of Price Books as a source is emphasised by the inclusion in appendices of a bibliography of known examples and the reproduction in full of two rarities from Bolton (1802) and Wycombe (1872). Besides his division into sub-groups of the

institutional uses of furniture, Christopher examines his subject from several other angles: by origin from country and urban homes and inns, backstairs in country houses (presumably in wealthy town houses the pattern was similar?), furniture connected with

sport and made for children, by materials employed such as straw and wicker and the more common woods which can sometimes point to regional preferences, and finally three actual types of furniture: beds, chairs and (a very subjective choice) ducking stools.



Fig. 4 Ipswich Ducking Stool

The twenty seven pages devoted to regional

chairmaking traditions acknowledge the trail-blazing of the weighty tome that has recently appeared, Bill Cotton's more specialised 'English Regional Chair'. The section forms a good introduction to the subject, differentiating between the nearly separate traditions of turned and joined frame making. However, having covered the main areas of manufacture, it was perhaps a shame to leave out the South West of England completely in favour of dealing with Scotland and the Celtic fringes.

In spite of Christopher's acknowledged versatility within the field of furniture studies to which this new work bears ample testament, it is not surprising to find a marked preponderance of documentary sources quoted from the Yorkshire area. In seeking illustrations of securely provenanced pieces he has spread his net as widely as possible although there is an amusing touch of introspection in his inclusion of the oak deed chest made by William Chippindale of Farnley in 1770 as a reminder of the kind of furniture that might have been made by his cousin Thomas had he remained in Wharfedale.

There are undoubtedly many other valuable books to appear pursuing the new-found interest in vernacular furniture and some initial theories will be challenged as more evidence comes to light. But for bringing order to a mass of random information and providing the first comprehensive scholarly analysis of the subject, Christopher Gilbert is to be heartily congratulated.

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