

BOOK REVIEWS

THE PRIOR'S MANOR HOUSES. David Yaxley. 1988

Printed & published by The Larks Press, Stibbard, Norfolk. ISBN 0 948400 08 0. Price £3.95

This book by David Yaxley sets out to 'translate and explain' the inventories of eleven of the manors of the Prior of Norwich made in the year 1352, not only by a straight translation of the text themselves but also in the light of what can be gleaned from the surviving account rolls of the same holdings. In addition, his text is illustrated by his own meticulously executed drawings of objects mentioned in the inventories as depicted in contemporary illuminated manuscripts etc.,

It provides an admirable introduction to the study of such early documents and demonstrates what they can tell us of the furniture and furnishings of a group of manors of varying size spread over a wide area. It must be admitted however that by their nature they were manors without a resident lord but nevertheless visited from time to time by the Prior or his officials.

The continuity of the farming tradition down the centuries comes out very clearly in many of the entries. One 'hair cloth for the kiln' noted at Sedgford on the 24th of April 1352 can be equated to the 'carthen' or sheet of coarse woollen cloth on which the grain was placed for heating in Welsh corn drying kilns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described by Trefor Owen in his recent *Guide to the Customs and Traditions of Wales*, and nearer still to our own times the cloth screens on which the hops were laid in the oast houses of Kent. Such continuity of practice meant a similar continuity in the furniture and furnishings in the farmhouse, and a study such as this makes sense of much that one sees 'below stairs' in houses like Erddig. The term boulder, as used for a sieve in the fourteenth century, comes down to us as the corn boulder of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in the windmill, driven off the main shaft to sieve the newly ground flour into various grades and in the home, housed in a chest, sometimes simple sometimes grand, where with its drum turned by hand, flour from the mill would be further graded for the use of the cook.

In his glossary of terms used, 'the table dormant' is described as one where the top was attached to legs, either standing upon or embedded in the earth floor of the hall. A bench so embedded in the floor still exists in a farmhouse elsewhere in Norfolk. We read of oak, oak from the Baltic (estrichbord) and deals, probably from the same source, being used for furniture etc., Wakefield boards for buildings, are these the same as the Yorkshire boards of today's suppliers? Was Wakefield a centre for this trade?

This book raises many questions in the mind of the reader, and to those who wish to interpret what they read in inventories, or what they see as they study furniture in all its regional variety as they travel around, it can be thoroughly recommended.

Lionel Reynolds

WELSH STICK CHAIRS by John Brown, 1990. 94pp., 62 photographs, 14 line drawings, 244mm x 185mm., Softback. £6.25 from Abercastle Publications, 2 Back Lane, Fishguard, SA65 9LD.

In his foreword, John Brown apologises for being "more of a doer than a writer" if so, more doers should try writing, because his terse, off-the-cuff style has filled ninety one very readable pages. It is a very personal account by a vernacular chairmaker, working in West Wales, who has strong feelings for his country and his craft.

Of the quality of his products there is no question. His descriptions of the processes in making his "Cardigan" chair are illustrated with forty two sequential photographs, and are entirely practical, taking up the second two thirds of the book. He has no electricity in his workshop; he saws out his chair seats with a frame saw he made himself; no modern chairmaker can be closer to his traditional roots than John Brown.

The first third of the book is taken up by "The Tradition of Welsh Stick Chairs", a historical survey of Wales and its rural chair traditions. His material is an entertaining, if sometimes rambling mixture of facts and opinions. In writing of his own discovery of the craft of chairmaking, and the close affinity he feels for the "...carpenter, wheelwright, coffin-maker...men who were handy with tools" who made stick chairs, he comes close in spirit to the poor people to whom "everything then was hand-made by people, and was of value". He stresses the wildness of much of Wales and the isolation of rural communities, each producing their own designs amid scenery "travellers.... proclaimed as wild and romantic, they were not trying to make a living here!"

He gives examples of styles from different areas, illustrated with photographs and line drawings. He draws parallels with American styles, and is quite rude (speaking partly through quotations from the American connoisseur, Wallace Nutting, (1919) about English Windsors. In this he is unfair, in view of recent work which has demonstrated their enormous diversity.

It is not a text that will meet the rigorous or exacting criteria of modern scholarship, but in its own way it deserves respect. He says that there is "...very little evidence of any kind concerning the history of Stick Chairs, to prove these statements correct. But there are equally no facts available to disprove them". This personal licence to speculate has led him to unsupported but perceptive conclusions. Rather than disregard them, we should turn them into questions; if the answers are known, or better comprehended, then it is time that a scholarly work, well researched and foot noted, was written. If not, then there is much belated research to be done.

This is a book which deserves to be controversial, and those who take the trouble to read it sympathetically will find it rewarding as such. It is well produced and illustrated, with a respectable bibliography and an index, and is a "must" for the practical chairmaker's library. If it inspires some readers to try their hands at making Stick Chairs, it will have served a valuable purpose.

Luke Millar