

RICHARD BEBB

'WELSH COUNTRY FURNITURE'.

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One fact about Welsh furniture which cannot be denied is that, however much may be known about it, to date very little has been written. This is all the more surprising, given the variety and quantity of surviving pieces, many still in their original areas. The furniture is in fact as varied as its environment, which ranges from isolated central mountain regions to rich coastal areas which traded far and wide; a long border with England, sea contacts with Ireland, and coastal trade with most areas of Britain. The wealth of Wales's lowland agriculture brought much contact with contemporary fashions, and the industrialisation of the Southern valleys created its own peculiar needs.

One might imagine that, given so many influences, indigenous styles would have been swamped. The reverse is the case, as Richard Bebb has demonstrated in this short but packed book, which relates the variety and richness of Welsh country furniture to its social and domestic environment in a mere thirty-one compulsive pages. People who have read his articles in 'Antique Collecting' and 'Regional Furniture' will recognise the source of much of what he writes here, for this book is based on his own researches, concerned as much with social history as with the furniture itself.

The book is based entirely on furniture in context; hence in the first section, 'An Ancient Tradition', the author refers to the mediaeval establishment of woodworking in the forests, and the traditions which arose from it, while under 'Hearth and Home' he surveys the qualities and types of Welsh cottages and farmsteads and places the variety of furniture in them, drawing on contemporary sources for examples. The decorative quality of many utilitarian pieces, such as meal chests, is stressed, as was the need to make maximum use of limited floor space; hence the usefulness as well as display value of the various forms of dresser. Tall cupboards and double chests-of-drawers, as well as dual-purpose pieces such as table-settles and bacon cupboards ('not necessarily used for bacon') fulfilled this need, too, as did fold-away beds, fitting into false cupboards and chests-of-drawers, used where rooms had to double as parlour and bedroom. In the terraced homes of industrial workers, the sole ground-floor living-room might be divided in half to form a 'smart' area.

In 'The Craftsmen and their customers' he relates the techniques of furniture-making to the other timeless skills of the craftsmen in wagon-building and implement making, for example, and he is, I believe, the first writer to have quoted an actual written reference to the tradition of travelling furniture-makers.

In 'The Development of Style' he balances the need for pieces to serve their owner's needs and to show individual, creative features. Most importantly, he touches on the rural social order, in which the minor gentry, clergy, farmers and their labourers formed a social whole; even the better-off members showed a preference for furniture made in native woods and to local patterns, with decorative features which ensured that 'no two pieces were the same'. In this and the subsequent section too, he describes specific regional types, such as the 'Cwpwrdd Tridarn' of North Wales and the tall 'Carmarthenshire

Coffers' of the South West, and considers the development of pieces over time, and the balance of change and conservatism which makes dating such a problem in country furniture of all areas.

Given the book's small size, omissions are inevitable, but there could, perhaps, be more reference to actual outside influences, such as North Devon pottery-type decoration on the Gower Coffers, and the European 'Delft' patterns which appear to have brought the tulip head to Welsh decorative arts (see the West Wales Coffers, Page 2). Illustrations of the three inlay varieties mentioned (North Carmarthenshire, South Pembrokeshire and the Vale of Glamorgan) would be of special interest, particularly because these designs have been associated with those of New England and continental Europe. In general though, the author handles the 'three-dimensional' problem of covering the range of furniture types over time and over the social spectrum in an extraordinary small space with skill and readability.

Throughout, his view is fresh, questioning entrenched ideas, and posing questions which expand the subject far beyond the scope of this little book. The illustrations, many from his own collection, support the text by showing a cross-section of furniture types which exhibit the individual decoration that gives so much Welsh furniture such a powerful sense of identity.

Under 'Further Reading', the author gives a range of useful modern texts which contribute to the subject of Welsh Furniture, although out of nine mentioned, only four are devoted solely to this subject. Of these, all are under one hundred pages long, and one is out-of-date, and out-of-print.

It is greatly to be hoped that Richard Bebb's knowledge and insight will soon give us the substantial work on this subject which has been so sorely lacking for so long.

Luke Millar



Fig. 2 Glazed oak dresser, Carmarthenshire. Made in 1912 by David Davies of Llandeillo