

## THE PLACEMENT OF FURNITURE IN HOUSES: THE USE OF INVENTORIES AND PICTORIAL EVIDENCE (PART 1)

18th March 1995

We gathered at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum at Singelton, near Chichester, East Sussex for the first of two study days on the placement of furniture, based on evidence in period pictures and inventories. Victor Chinnery chaired the day and we are grateful to him for his introductory comments and his guiding of the discussion throughout the day, as well as leading our visit to Bayleaf after lunch. This medieval hall house has recently been decorated and furnished with replica hangings and furniture; both Victor Chinnery and Dr. Pat Hughes - one of our lecturers - had been involved with this project and we much appreciated visiting the house with them both. Our thanks are due to all our lecturers and also to Robin Jones for his care and thoughtfulness in the organisation of this very informative and thought-provoking day.

Polly Legg

### (A). 16th century domestic interiors - evidence from contemporary documents and illustrations, by Richard Harris, Research Director at Singleton.

An empty medieval house called Bayleaf was equipped and furnished after extensive research by Richard Harris, Vic Chinnery and others, using evidence from contemporary inventories and medieval paintings, together with archaeological evidence, although there are few surviving artefacts.

The 16th century probate inventories for Kent had been copied into a register by the Archdeacon of Canterbury. This proved to be an excellent resource. The minimum value of property requiring an inventory was £5, but many were far less, thus giving a good coverage of society at that time. Half the inventories give room names; 80% mention the Hall; 50% mention it first, indicating the importance of that room. Next is the parlour, with the parlour chamber over, which was also the best bedroom. Half the parlours have the best bed. Was the bed downstairs because the owner had just died at the time of the inventory, or was it habitually used as the master bedroom?

The service rooms follow the classic pattern; a pair below the cross passage. Butteries are frequently mentioned, but the second room often has no name. Was it used as a kitchen? Of 42 inventories 28 had a kitchen equipped for cooking. The halls of these houses has no cooking equipment, and these may indicate a transition from cooking in the hall to cooking in a kitchen, which might be a detached building.

The inventories showed that the hall invariably had a table; 85% had forms; 75% had chairs, 70% had cupboards, 45% had stools, and while the quality would have been varied their presence was constant. There is some question as to whether the table stood against a wall, with the form on the hall side, or with a fixed bench on the wall.

Most inventories showed chests in chambers and parlours, varying from 3 to 10 in total. They were rarely found in the hall. Most were mentioned as being next to beds. Beds were joined or boarded. Twenty examples are given of hanging beds in storage with linen, in a folded pile, but mentioned only once in situ. Were these curtains only? or a type of bed suspended from the ceiling as in some Flemish illustrations?

The evidence from medieval paintings such as The Duc de Berry at dinner, shows that the houses of the rich were dominated by textiles.

Mary Green

### (B). Some evidence for the placement of furniture - by Pat Hughes

The focus of Pat Hughes' lecture concerned here researches into the documentary history of post-Medieval building in the West Midlands. Whilst this may have seemed, at first, to be of passing relevance to the theme of the day's lectures, we were soon made aware how germane her methods and material were to that theme.

The aim of her research is to map the history of buildings through interpretation of existing, historical, documentary evidence. In addition, she brings this documentary evidence (usually in the form of inventories) to life by producing scale drawings of the recreated interiors on which she is working and thus, by using this method, demonstrates the positioning of furniture in that interior. In some cases the evidence used may not refer directly to the building concerned, but will relate to occupiers of the same socio-economic class, trade and date. The use of these documents, such as probate inventories, is intended to create an image 'how the building worked'. By studying these probate inventories, for example, and establishing how each room was, or may have been, furnished and with what, a clearer picture emerges of the functioning of that building and the hierarchies of the various rooms within that building. Some of these researches were intended to aid the recreation or reconstruction of the buildings, such as the Merchant's House at the Avoncroft Open Air Museum or the Commandery, Worcester, sometimes with surprising results.

Using a contemporary probate inventory of a dyer called Richard Lilly of 1558, the function of a room at the front of the reconstructed Merchant's House was deduced. The inventory of a particular room listed furniture, including 'a board, a form, two old chests and other chests' in a front room, which was assumed to be a shop. By recreating the rooms, and their contents, by use of the documentary evidence and pictorial mapping, it became clear that this 'shop' was, in fact, not a shop, but an office - a secure place for the storage of wares and a counting house. The placement of individual items of furniture was also elucidated by the use of inventories. During research of the furnishings of the Commandery in Worcester, an inventory of 1610 was used to establish the furnishing arrangements of the principal rooms. Initially, the inventory perplexingly placed a court cupboard in a bay window. Working with the evidence of the inventory and preparing a meticulous drawing of that interior, the location of the item, gradually made sense. The court cupboard was positioned in the seemingly unlikely position for a practical reason - to enable the better display of objects on the court cupboard by taking advantage of the natural light from the window.

Whilst by her own admission, she is not a furniture historian, Pat Hughes demonstrated that her research methods and material have contributed much to the study of the placement of furniture in post-medieval interiors. As the recent reconstruction of Barley Hall, York has shown, the recreation of altered and/or emptied historic interiors is fraught with problems (see *Country Life*, 8/12/94, article by John Goodall). Correct interpretation of the terminology found in inventories and other documents is also of great importance to the proper understanding of historic interiors (see Victor Chinnery's *Furniture Terminology in Post-Medieval Middle Class Inventories*, *Regional Furniture Society Journal* 1991). Reliance on one method alone to achieve this recreation or reconstruction can lay a project open to questioning the validity of the resultant findings. All tested and valid means at our disposal need to be put to use to ensure as accurate a recreation of that interior as possible. Pat Hughes' methodology, comprising the use of contemporary, historic

inventories, their careful interpretation and the production of her detailed, pictorial representations to establish room function and the placement of furniture, enabled her audience to appreciate more clearly how these buildings worked and how furniture was arranged within the rooms of those buildings.

*Robin Jones*

### **(C). The Table and Settle in West Country Farmhouses by Gabriel Olive**

A pre-lunch cocktail of personal recollections, scholarship and wit was in prospect when Gabriel Olive wound up the morning's proceedings and we were not disappointed.

Having stayed in a number of west country farmhouses in the thirties, Gabriel began by painting a picture of the kitchen as both living room and workspace with the only fireplace in the house, an enormous kettle for hot water and furnished only with robust and useful items 'and nothing fancy'.

The table, and there was only one in the kitchen and often in the whole house, always stood under the window and was of substantial size and strength. William Cobbett writing in 1825 of a farm in Reigate refers to a 'score or more of men sat down to feast at table'. Drawers appear on one side only, presumably the one facing away from the window, and the deep frieze rail is usually made from a single piece of timber with the drawer holes cut out of the solid. Cock beading, where present, is on the rail and not the drawer. Seating was a form or bench on one side only, diners on the other side being accommodated in the window seat. Gabriel sadly recalled many of the benches being destroyed during house clearances in the 50s and 60s. Settles were tall, came right down to the ground and were placed at right angles to the hearth both for seating near the fire and to exclude draughts. The back of the settle faced the back door of the farmhouse and was sometimes provided with hooks for hats and coats. West country settles are curved as frequently as not and often of elm. Lockers in the base were used for storing a variety of items and, according to Gabriel, to 'pop the baby in to keep it warm'. Bacon settles (Dorset, Somerset, Devon and South Wales) had doors at the rear and space in the back with hooks for hanging side of bacon. The settle's function as a draft excluder and its fixed position between fire and door was nicely illustrated by Gabriel's story of a cottage where match boarding was run along the top of the settle and a door attached to the side making a completely separate room.

A dramatic rendering in dialect of William Barnes' 'The Settle by the Great Wood Fire' sent us off to lunch in one of Singleton's open air houses where settle or fire - and preferably both - would have been much appreciated.

*Keith Robinson*

### **(D). Irish Vernacular Furniture: The use of inventories and illustrations in an interdisciplinary methodology by Claudia Kinmonth**

With effortless expertise, Claudia Kinmonth gave a fast, fluent and visually kaleidoscopic tour of the Irish vernacular interior and the sources needed in its study. This was someone in total command of her subject: brimming with enthusiasm herself, she enthused all those who were there to hear.

The historian of Irish domestic life, it seems, has an interesting but difficult task. Many of the probate inventories that we rely on so heavily for our knowledge about early domestic life were destroyed in Ireland during the upheavals of the 1920s (the few remaining tending to come largely from the homes of Ireland's elite). Of those that do survive, few

seem to be arranged by room so the historian is thrown upon other sources: these are rich indeed.

Artists seem to have been fascinated by the theme of rural simplicity and have left us numerous canvases devoted to home and hearth: these often sing with vibrant colour and are populated by a large cast of varied inhabitants and their possessions. There are problems, however, inherent in the use of this material. Nichol, for instance, was a prolific nineteenth century artist whose large output frequently related to the home. Too often, however, the same pieces of furniture turn up in different contexts. How staged were these particular interiors? Were these accurate portrayals of the life of the period? What were the motives of the artists concerned? Nichol, for instance, seems to have been moved mostly by the desire to create a pleasing image but other illustrators seem as if they might have had a satirical thrust or, at least, were inspired by the need to get across a social and, perhaps, political message. Claudia Kinmonth is only too alive to problems of this nature and warns us to accept this evidence only when a study has been made of the whole of an artist's output and when it is confirmed by several sources.

The historian is aided in this task by the work of the numerous Irish folklorists who were at work, from the 1930s onwards, collecting the oral tradition at first hand and recording what they saw and heard in homes which had, apparently, changed little since the 19th century and before. More recent work on the folk tradition, especially that of Dr. Alan Gailey, has been supportive in another way. His classification of Irish long-house types based on the gable/central hearth and direct/lobby entrance oppositions has enabled many canvases to be located to a particular region, even when the artist failed to label the painting itself.

Another rich source has been that of the social and political activists of the earlier nineteenth century: in particular, the 'Memorial of Patrick M'Kye' written in an appeal to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and illustrating the extreme privations of the population of the northwestern parts of that nation. In his survey of 9000 inhabitants he found that each woman was lucky if she had one shift; over half had no shoes (nobody had boots); there were no fruit trees and no pigs; of poultry there were only 27 geese and 3 turkeys; there was one cart and one plough. The poverty of Ireland is a byword yet there cannot have been a member of this audience who was not shocked by the extreme privation that this record revealed. Worse still, this evidence seems to have been collected before the great potato famines of the late 1840s. Given this level of hardship, it is no surprise to find that the people of the same area possessed so few domestic goods; for example only 8 brass candlesticks, 93 chairs and 243 stools - the wonder is that they had so many. Although conditions in the northwest were extreme, the standard of living of the general population was still low by English standards - nearly half the Irish population lived in single room cabins in the 1840s.

We could now begin to appreciate the importance of the hearth rather than the table, as the centre of the Irish home. It was here, in the poorest households, that the whole family took out straw, rushes or bracken (hidden away by day) and lay down to sleep under one cover but in a strict and in given order - even the animals arranged alongside. It was in these houses that the clothing was pegged out on a line (not to dry but to store out of the mess of the floor); that turf benches or beds were found; that cradles were crude baskets slung from the beams and that tubs and barrels doubled as tables and chairs. Multifunctional usage of both space and item was born of necessity.

Even in wealthier households where there was 'the room' in addition to the kitchen, beds were still hidden in settles and hen coops housed underneath the dresser. The Cust inventory of 1797 shows that, in a relatively substantial townhouse,

press beds could be found alongside fashionable mahogany furniture. Where a four-poster bed was found, its top was often festooned with goods in store and its apparent connivance at fashionable practice was partly motivated by the need to provide warmth and some sort of privacy in a crowded interior. Box beds, settle beds and bed-outshots obviously maximised the use of limited space but practical considerations did not dominate entirely. There are survivors of a simple version of the canopy bed - a crude but recognisable imitation of the Hepplewhite original, yet functional in that it was deep enough to house the thick wadding of straw and other insulating material needed in a damp climate.

Tables came comparatively late to Ireland; originally they may have been little more than a board that lay across the company's legs. In any case, they seem to have doubled as extra seating, just as tubs and stools operated as tables as well as chairs. The practice of using a barrel as table with a basket over it to strain the hot potatoes that made up the family's meal has been recorded in use within living memory.

The clock was always a great status symbol - a rarity - none at all had been found in M'Kye's survey of northwestern Ireland in the 1840s (this was sixty years after Francois de la Rochefoucauld had noted one in every 'peasant' household in Suffolk). When the clock arrived in the house (usually the wall mounted variety) a special party was thrown for the 'setting up of her'. Parties seem to have been a feature of Irish domestic life if the illustrators were accurate in the record they have left - this was a society poor in things but not in spirit.

Despite the undeniable poverty, Claudia Kinmonth's evidence finally left us with an impression of Irish domestic life which was rich in its own peculiar fashion.

*Janet Sleep*

#### **(E.) Will you walk into my parlour?**

After tea, Janet Pennington and Joyce Sleight gave us an interesting talk on parlours. I found their presentation style quite rivetting, constantly switching from one speaker to the other for best effect. With their in depth local knowledge of the area we were taken on a tour of six Steyning (Sussex) households through the eyes of probate inventories between 1672-1732, looking at the contents of the parlour.

Introducing us to Steyning first of all, we learnt that this parish was a rich and fertile agricultural area at this time, exporting wheat up to London and down to the coast, creating with it wealthy farmers, general prosperity and a rising standard of living. For each inventory, the entire entry for the parlour was reproduced for us in a detailed handout. They related to the homes of two Yeomen, two gentlemen farmers and two tradesmen.

Each parlour included tables and chairs or stools, in varying quantity, and a cupboard or sideboard. Only one, the gentleman farmer, James Colley's, (1662), contained beds and bedding. He also had a 'payre of Virginalls' and 'playing tables'. The Yeoman, Richard Patching, (1667), had a 'payer of harpsicalls'. Each parlour had a 'payer of andirons' and accompanying fireplace pieces?

The Yeoman, Francis Goble (1732) had 'four round tables, twelve chairs, two punch bowls, and a couch! We were able to picture these parlours as being used for socialising, entertaining (with music), card playing or just single-family relaxation, all in warm, quite comfortable surroundings. Our blacksmith and butcher had much less in their parlours but again we were able to imagine the room being a little haven for the family. Benjamin Newark (1667) had a spinning wheel there for his wife. Perhaps one hundred years earlier beds would have featured far more frequently.

Our attention was then turned to the practicalities of the

inventory making and the bearing this could have on an interpretation of the placement of any furniture in any room or dwelling. How indeed were these inventories prepared? It was noted that current practice (1995) did follow a more or less accepted pattern with some permissible although consistent variation. But in the 17th century would an inventory be taken in any particular order: order of size, order of value, in a clockwise fashion? What happened if the scribe was in a hurry or cut corners, or indeed could not remember the name of something; might he add it later, out of order? What did it mean when items were grouped together, e.g. 'one joyined cupboard and one payer of playing tables' (James Colley, 1662)? Can we rely on chairs and tables being used together when they are mentioned as being together?

More questions than answers, but all pertinent thoughts when researching the placement of furniture. Our thanks to Janet and Joyce for a stimulating presentation.

*Simon Green*

#### **(F.) Some evidence for the placement of furniture in Blandford in 1731 by Polly Legg**

.....or some evidence to show that Polly is not the only one to battle for living space against the demands of earning a living.

Drawing attention to an unchanging aspect of human nature, she used an eighteenth century inventory of the Bastard brothers' firm of cabinet makers, to suggest that the items found in their home were not necessarily an accurate indication of their lifestyle, or necessarily there for their own pleasure.

A disastrous fire in 1731 destroyed much of the small Dorset town of Blandford, including the premises and stock of the company. They were fortunately insured, and the inventory taken to show their losses has survived. It shows that they were a prosperous firm, with their fingers in architecture, building and interior decoration; clock and barometer making, funeral arrangement, and stone carving; as well as upholstery, chair making, cabinet work and joinery. The fire itself in fact presented many business opportunities for them, and they successfully undertook much of the re-building of the town.

They had a 'shop next the strete', which was clearly packed, containing amongst other items, 2 bedsteads, 27 table tops, 9 large tables on frames, 27 other tables, 32 mirrors and a marble monument.

The parlour was directly behind, with fine quality decor in high fashionable style, and was also fairly full with a buffet, 1 large and 2 small tables, 10 chairs, 10 statues and 40 carvings and models. This is where their clients would have been entertained and shown the quality of their work.

Their own quarters - by modern evidence - showed a complete lack of decorative plasterwork or finish, but large quantities of upholstery and other materials. The bedroom of one of the brothers contained clock-making parts, but they did not possess a clock themselves.

A will of 1728, before the fire, indicates that this was not entirely a new set-up, a result of the need to get on with the building work in the town. They had probably always had to put to one side their own comfort. The earlier document records certain rooms and their contents, and shows that the front parlour was overlaid with stock.

As Polly pointed out, the pressures of running a business from home have not changed in 250 years.

(An account of the inventory was published in Furniture History Journal vol. XXX 1994 P15-42).

*Richard Bebb*