

THE PLACEMENT OF FURNITURE IN HOUSES: THE USE OF INVENTORIES & PICTORIAL EVIDENCE – PART 2 30TH SEPTEMBER 1995

From Inventories to objects by Charles Kightly

In a fascinating talk, Charles Kightly gave us insights into the York Archeological Trust's restoration of Barley Hall in York and particularly how this is being related to medieval inventories. Unlike most other re-creations of period furnishing, at Barley Hall the policy is to reproduce the original appearance of the furnishings just as they would have been seen by medieval occupants rather than as seen after many centuries of use and ageing. To this end reproductions have been made retaining their 'as new' appearance and avoiding any semblance of patination or distressing. Obviously speculation has been involved in deciding upon the likely appearance of a 14th century 'red chest of Flanders' as recorded in the belongings of Alice Snowshill and we were told how this had been copied from a probably similar chest found near Ripon. Whilst other inventories occasionally include references to furniture such as side tables in green or blue it was assumed that most were left in their natural colour. This has been reproduced using a finish of turpentine and wax rather than linseed oil since it was thought that the latter gave more of a G-Plan finish (although how do we know that the 14th century originals were not also of this appearance?)

Textiles at Barley Hall are also being given much attention since they formed such an important part of the medieval house. Wall hangings of the time were of tapestry, dyed woven cloth (called 'say'), or of painted cloth. However with tapestries being very expensive woven, printed cloths were the norm. These and other furnishings have been copied in appearance from contemporary pictures and tableware from local archeological sources. Among many fascinating details was how the yarn count of the woven 'say' had been established and copied from cloth impressions on lead covered shelves and how, instead of diners having individual napkins, they shared a communal towel perhaps exceeding 30 feet long stretching over the diners' laps. Victor Chinnery gave a very well deserved vote of thanks.

Clive Sherwood

Uses and abuses of inventories: looking at Shrewsbury furniture in the Early Modern Period by Nancy Cox

Nancy Cox proved to be a safe guide through some of the pitfalls and dangers (that she prefers to see as challenges) associated with the use of inventories in understanding the placement of furniture in past domestic interiors. Her involvement in Dr Barrie Trinder's project, which over 25 years has already examined more than 10,000 Shropshire inventories, is an indication as to her understanding of this field. Using 9 examples of inventories and 3 newspaper announcements of furniture sales, we were presented with some valuable pointers towards accurate conclusions from the available information.

The first two examples initially appeared to relate to poor widows, yet Margaret Wright's (1702) with a total value of only nine pounds ten shillings and sixpence contains a substantial bed and bedding. Similarly, Alice Lloyd's (1718) sedan chair seems misplaced in an inventory with a total value of only four pounds ten shillings. The two women would appear to have had little or no means of cooking or heating. Further investigation had revealed that Margaret Wright was a shopkeeper's widow who had been living with a married daughter. Her husband had died intestate, and the estate passed to two sons. Whilst her inventory may comprise her total possessions it would represent only a portion of her domestic environment.

We were told that innkeeper's inventories tend to be detailed and full, perhaps due to a greater number of debtors and creditors than normal. That of Richard Brompton (1663) appears just so, segregated into rooms with detailed descriptions. Yet why is there not a table mentioned in a dining room with numerous seats? It was suggested that being sizeable it was regarded as part of the freehold and as such the property of the heir?

Poor Thomas Amis' (1729) inventory with total worth of seven pounds six shillings and eleven pence is of little use in the placement of his scant furnishings, being compiled as a sale list seemingly in lots as purchased. However, as every penny would have been important it is a very full account of a poor man's possessions even down to a hatchet and quarter pound weight at four pence. Daniel Plumpton (1723) would also appear to have been a poor man from his inventory, were it not for the discovery of a document dated 1710 in which he agreed to give his son a lengthy list of his possessions. Fortunately for us the document had been brought before court for validation thus recording its existence.

The value of studying inventories alongside a relevant will was highlighted further with the example of Gwen Clempson (1676), where a very brief inventory is considerably enhanced by a detailed will. Unfortunately for us, wills list items as bequeathed rather than in relation to their position within a house.

Significantly fewer inventories are found after 1742 when an act was passed only requiring them upon a creditors demand. As this often implied a dispute behind cases, where they do exist, they tend to be detailed. We were given two examples in Jane Roberts (1746) and Richard Wilson (1742). Both are broken down into individual rooms listed in detail, even down to the weight of feathers in Jane Roberts beds, bolsters and pillows. They are clearly useful in establishing how the rooms might have been arranged.

The three examples of announcements of furniture sales, one dated 1794 and two 1798, were shown to be useful by the very fact that they do not list articles by room. Being designed to draw people to the sale, the emphasis given to items by the

order in which they were listed tells us a great deal about what was particularly sought after or fashionable at a precise time. It is interesting to note that beds and bedding appeared first on each example. Whilst a second-hand feather bed may not represent the most attractive lot today, the suggestion that one duck would provide only 1.5 lbs of useable feathers may explain the itemising of Jane Roberts 87 lb bed and bolster in detail.

As Nancy Cox pointed out it is tempting to look upon inventories as easy, reliable glimpses at past interiors, yet without an understanding of the methods by which they were compiled, one could make many false assumptions. With her clear and interesting lecture she showed how to rise to the challenges that these documents present and draw valuable conclusions.

Chris Currie

17th & 18th century yeoman & gentry inventories & furniture from W. Yorkshire by Peter H. Thornborrow

The area of the Upper Calder Valley, beyond Halifax in West Yorkshire, is rich in many fine stone houses built during the late 16th and early 17th centuries by prosperous yeoman clothiers who practiced a dual economy of agriculture combined with textile production. Many of these yeomen became in turn lesser 'gentry' who were highly prosperous wool merchants: supplying raw materials to single clothiers who wove the cloth and then sold their 'pieces' back to the merchants. These merchants finished the cloth and sold it both at home and abroad. The furniture and houses of these different classes of society has long fascinated Peter Thornborrow and was the focus of his talk.

From a detailed study of the probate inventories for the Parish of Halifax, Peter has gained a good idea of how these fine houses were furnished, for the appraisers describe the contents of each room as they perambulate in a logical sequence from room to room through out the house. He shared his findings with us and illustrated many typical regional examples which he has photographed over the years. The Hall or 'Housebody' was usually furnished with a long table and a pair of forms. The mention of 'spits and racks, pans and pots in ye house' in yeoman inventories suggests that the hall was used for cooking. Gentry houses usually have separate kitchens and a buttery. Private dining was provided in Parlours, at all levels of society by the end of the 17th century, with round, oval and 'fall-leaf' tables surrounded by sets of stools or, as in an inventory of 1718 for Greenwood Lee in Heptonstall '12 long Backd Chaires 18s'. Beds were also found, usually in 'The Great Parlour', and were often the most valuable piece recorded worth from £4 to £8.

Yeoman inventories usually have 'goods in the Weaving Shop' such as a pair of looms. Lesser gentry houses often mention more than one loom: the inventory of John Sutcliffe (a typical local name) of Great House in Colden lists 'four pr. of looms & furniture 3£., 5: wheels 3s.' Where as a gentry inventory of the same period, i.e, early 18th century, had 'In the Shop' tools associated with cloth finishing. A good example of this is the inventory of Robert Sutcliffe of Greenwood Lee, mentioned above, who had in his shop: 'Two Cloth Presses 4£. 2 Gavelocks 7s. Eight pair of Plates 6£. 40 doz: papers 6£. Seaven pair of Shears 2£.7s. Seaven pairs Sheets Cappers & Cords 2£.3:0'; making a total of £20.17s. This clearly illustrates that the cloth finishing process involved expensive equipment beyond the reach of most yeoman clothiers, but an essential requirement of the wool merchants. The room

above the main hall, usually described as 'The Chamber over the house body', was used almost invariably for dry storage of large quantities of oatmeal kept in several arks. Peter recorded some 50 arks in 35 Calder Valley inventories, and wondered where they had all gone!

The talk was very informative, often thought provoking and sometimes highly humorous. We were treated to the story of a fine six-legged table, which was discovered in a field some 30 years ago where it served as a hen coup with chicken wire nailed around the sides, and how it was rescued from the farmer who was persuaded to swap it for a new hen-hut. When the proud owner got it home (after hosing it down at his wife's request) he discovered that it was too large and long to get through the door!

We were given just a taste of Peter's researches over the last 25 years in a whirlwind session that knocked at the door of accepted theory by introducing the assembled company to a number of provenanced three-stage cupboards only previously thought to exist in Wales. Like Peate's Welsh longhouse the ubiquitous Welsh 'tridarn' is also to be found in Yorkshire furnishing aisled halls, in and around Halifax. We were shown historic slides taken earlier this century, which illustrated a 'tridarn' from Ponden Hall, Stanbury. This is believed to have been the very cupboard described in the opening chapter of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* covered in pewter 'towering row after row, in a vast oak dresser, to the very roof'. Significantly this cupboard, now part of the National Trust collection at East Riddelsden Hall, Keighley, has an open top stage with a canted top which appears wholly original. We were shown another canted topped built-in cupboard with a Tudor-arched doorway in the side which gave access down to a 17th-century cellar. Peter personally rescued it from a bonfire and ensured that it was restored back to its original position in the house from which it came. The existence of these cupboards with canted upper stages may lend credence to the questioned authenticity of the upper stages of the cupboard of John Wyn Ap Mareduf of Gwydir, c.1530 from the Conway Valley, in The Burrell Collection (see Richard Bebb's excellent article in *Regional Furniture Vol VI* 1992).

We were given a feast of architecture and furniture with superb slides in a relaxed and entertaining way that is the hallmark of the speaker's style. He obviously has a great deal more to show us of his researches in the Pennine foothills, and a lot more stories to enthrall us with. We look forward to his next appearance at the conference to be held in Leyburn, North Yorkshire next year.

E. Jean Hamer

Drapers Hall, 10 St Mary's St., Shrewsbury by James Lawson

After fighting through the traffic, and searching for a place to park, it was a relief to be warmly welcomed into the wain-scotted Drapers' Hall. After a pleasant lunch Victor introduced us to the former assistant Master and Librarian of Shrewsbury School and Archivist of the Shrewsbury Drapers Company, James Lawson. His fascinating talk outlined the history of the company and introduced us to the various documents which still exist pertaining to the furniture and woodwork of the hall.

The Company, established in October 1444 for the benefit of drapers trading in the area, became chartered in 1462 and established land and property ownership rights which enabled the trustees to increase the company wealth and pro-

vide alms for the poor. The cloth trade established from early times became more prominent in the 15th century and cloth from North Wales, Oswestry and surrounds was finished in Shrewsbury, traded on to London and then out to Europe (eg. Rouen, Biscay).

The first hall was built on the present site in 1485 as the Company was now supported by many influential and wealthy merchants within its ranks. By 1570 the hall was dilapidated and money was raised to settle outstanding legal liabilities and build a new hall. The frame was built (probably by Roger Smith a joiner) but the tenant (Andrew Lewis) assisted in completion works up to 1578. A screen of wainscott was built by one Gillon Wisbecke, a French joiner. In 1658 this hall was substantially refurbished. A new fireplace in local Ginsell stone was installed, panelling was reordered and new panelling made by Richard Ellis was coloured to match the old by Thomas Francis a painter-stainer.

Furnishing of the hall is well documented both by commissions, accounts in company records and inventories, which match the furniture in the hall.

The documents of the company were initially kept in an iron bound chest with three locks (Master and two wardens holding the keys). With the increasing number of documents, deeds and account books, two nests of drawers were ordered in 1625 at a cost of 9s 6d. In 1637 an enclosed chest was purchased at a total cost of £4.7.8. (the iron work being made and supplied separately by Thomas Gratie £1.6.8.) from a Francis Bowyer, which nowadays contains two nests of drawers. This piece is clearly in the 'Laudian' group and is Flemish in decorative style. The fixed central group of drawers differ slightly from the nests, and the opening top and hidden lock escutcheons are rare features.

Richard Ellis supplied a 'new table with three new formes' in 1632 at £2.15.0. and a 'new table with A frame & 3joyned formes' in 1635. In 1662 a withdrawing table was also purchased (with other work) at £3.10.0. This six legged extender

(9ft to 17ft) sits on the dais for which it was probably intended. A wainscott chair (together with bedsteads) was supplied by him in 1662 and has similar decoration to the table with both drops and a flat turned panel. Its interest is increased by retaining its full height (23" to seat from floor). 'Mr Ellice' also made a frame for the painting of Edward IV, painted by Thomas Francis in 1660 which is believed to be in original condition. Again the turnings and round bosses show similarities with the decoration of the table and chair.

When viewing any item of furniture or woodwork new questions are often raised as we try to answer others. This trip was no exception.

The 1637 enclosed chest had part chamfered edges to the doors and the carcass. Is this a continental feature suggesting influences in construction rather than just design, or a craftsman following a standard practice from his training? Was this an attempt to use the hinges given? The nest handles did seem a little awkward to access and their finish and quality was not an ideal match for the other metal-work and so the 1622 date for these is quite probable. The present 'butterfly hinges' are an obvious late addition but seem to have been fitted, along with the required oak infills not long after its construction. Did the originals break because they were too small or not able to fold past 90 degrees? Were they made by the door hinge maker?

More intrigue surrounds the alteration to the 1632/5 long table. When the 1662 withdrawer was supplied 'other work' was listed in the bill. Was the table frame altered to accommodate a request for more easy seating access, perhaps for the new chair or a large trustee? Was the table made from a cancelled eight leg order now altered to six? Were alterations made to the 'formes' then or at a later date? One form was stamped IB under the support stretcher a later joiner or relative of FB (Francis Bowyer)?

The interest in regional furniture history requires pursuit of such questions, but the answers, or even just the ability to search for them may be the reward.

Well documented furniture is always a pleasure to see, but the ability to examine it with the help of Victor, Michael et al made the trip all the more rewarding and I am sure all members enjoyed the visit as much as I did. To thank James Lawson and the Drapers' Company once again is necessary and my pleasure. Finally our acknowledgments to Robin Jones for arranging such a worthwhile and enjoyable series of lectures.

Simon Feingold

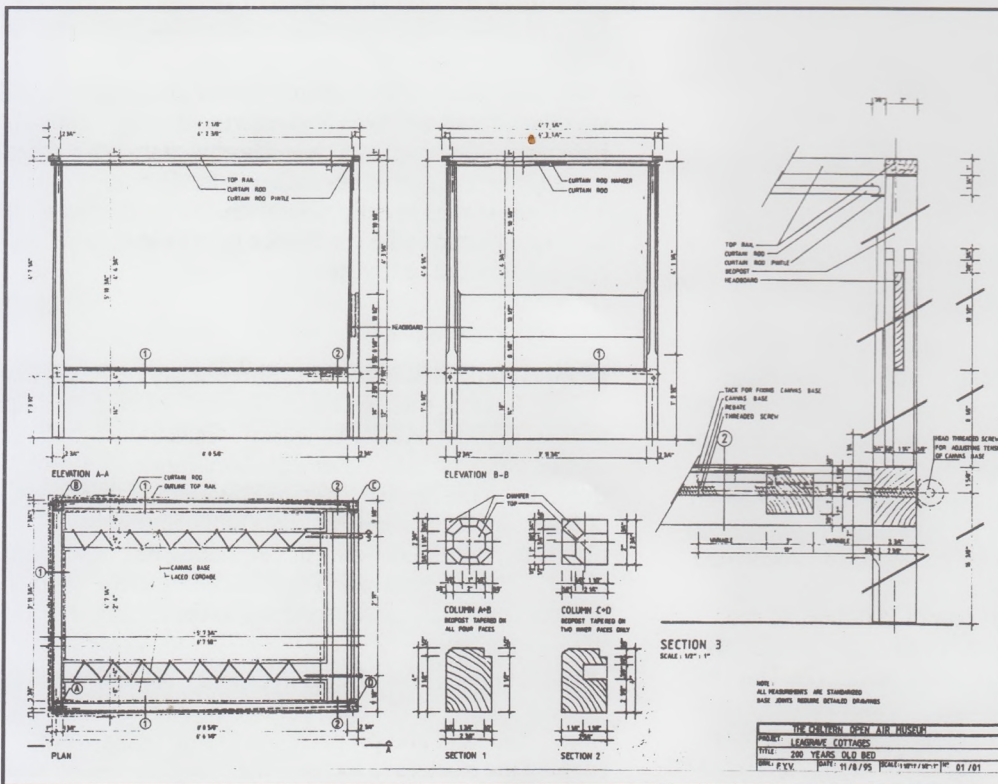


Fig. 5 Tester bed