

YORKSHIRE FURNITURE - STUDY DAY AT LEYBURN 20TH APRIL 1996

The Vernacular Architecture of the North Yorkshire Dales by Jane Hatcher

Jane Hatcher opened the day with a measured and informative introduction to the vernacular architecture of the North Yorkshire Dales. She showed that there was (and is) a dominant stone building tradition in the area, seen in a variety of different sized houses. Timber, being very scarce, was often recycled from one house to another. "Joggled" stone voussoirs caught people's interest; they are specially checked stones forming an interlocking, and therefore strong, fireplace arch. Some enthusiasts later investigated these voussoirs in the nearby Coverbridge Inn. A member of the audience pointed out that the same feature can be found in Norman Castles. Three different architectural features; the semi-circular staircase tower restricting the passage of furniture, the fire window and the steep bowed roof gable, at Gunnerside Gill aroused particular interest. The stair tower, found at Brocka Bank, Swaledale, and Fea Fow, Grisedale, appears more commonly in Scottish domestic architecture; the fire window used to light the inglenook fireplace, seems ubiquitous in Dales farmhouses and the steeply bowed gable, now a rare survival, was designed for ling thatch. Jane's talk on the architectural form was a fitting preparation for Christopher Gilbert's detail on house plan, room use and furniture which was to follow. *D. Jones*

Inventories of Swaledale & Wensleydale 1750-1850, Christopher Gilbert

It is a curious paradox that more is known about the styles of seventeenth century furniture made in Yorkshire, than that produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Christopher Gilbert's lecture was all the more welcome, therefore, in taking us into that largely uncharted territory of Yorkshire Dales Cottage and Farmhouse furniture, from the period 1750-1850. His entry point for this was the information contained in Probate Inventories and Wills, and particularly those wills held in the Leeds Record office for the Eastern Deanery of the Archdeaconry of Richmond Customary Court for the years 1541 to 1858, which numbers some 50,000 documents, and covers the whole of Swaledale and Wensleydale, a predominantly hill farming district.

The wealth of material was reduced to a manageable 160 entries made between 1750 and 1775, with the majority relating to Yeoman farmers or widows, with a scattering of miners, labourers, innkeepers, and tradesmen. Of these, about 30 included room-by-room details of the contents.

Taking this latter sample, a sense of the furniture conventions and living standards from the largely rural community was developed. Terms tumble out, clarifying the use of rooms; read for kitchen, firehouse, forehouse, or house-stead. The upstairs room, we learned was for storing farm gear, boxes, meal chests, wool, corn, cheese, and bulky objects not in daily use. In terms of the demographics of households, we learned that every thirty or so years, an extended family tended to emerge, with grandparents and the young grandchildren living together, and at such times, the attics became bedrooms.

Of the many revealing and important findings of

the inventories it appears that there was little difference between the forms, if not the quality of furniture, found in the homes of labourer, tradesmen, or prosperous farmers. A typical anthology of furniture, for example, was given for the house of Matthew Heslop, Yeoman, of Langton upon Swale, 1751.

In the Forehouse. A dresser and pewter, A table, clock, chairs and long settle.

In the Parlour. Beds and bedding. Chest of drawers. A little table, chairs and corner cupboard.

In the Back Kitchen. A kettle, pans, bowls, milk vessels and some other small implements.

In the Chamber

2 Chaff beds. A chair. 2 Tables. A Churn. 4 chairs and some other implements.

The total value of this household shows at £21.00 Such a complete and tantalising list of regional furniture leaves us with the wish that wills were illustrated!

The Archdeaconry of Richmond Inventories, Gilbert discovered, fell away in their information after 1773, but the fortunate location of 27 inventories dating from the 1820's from a remote parish in Swaledale, refers to the possessions of miners and sheep farmers in reduced circumstances, offers that rare glimpse of how change, and a resistance to it, had occurred in a particular regional furniture tradition. In comparison with earlier inventories, for example, long case clocks, dressers and racks, Delft racks, corner cupboards, kitchen tables and chairs still predominated; whereas long settles had largely been replaced with squabs - couches with upholstered seats. Other items, whilst present in the mid-18th century inventories, had greatly increased by the 19th, including spinning wheels, seeing glasses and pictures.

In addition to the sure footedness of the inventory analysis which Gilbert offered, he handed down yet more revelations during the final period of his talk, during which he showed slides. Not satisfied with presenting us with a typical North Country boarded chair, of a type commonly known as a 'lambing' chair, he pointed to a specification for such an item in the **Preston Book of Prices, 1800**. Yet another piece of common furniture in Dales Farmhouses, a settle, was shown outside a farmhouse, and with his usual unerring eye for documentary research, he told us of entry in the **Bolton Book of Prices 1802** which informs us that a basic model with four back panels was called a couch chair, and when made, cost thirteen shillings (65p) and that cabriole legs associated with these settles were called 'Dog' legs.

The skilled blending of the architectural context, comparative detail of home contents, both synchronically and diachronically presented, and the display of pieces known to have originated in the Yorkshire Dales, created a lecture packed with detail and significance. It demonstrated beyond doubt that important general and specific images may be drawn from documentary evidence for that most obdurate of periods for those interested in regional furniture, that of the eighteenth century.

Dr. B. D. Cotton

The Housebody at Shibden Hall, Halifax by Ros Westwood

After coffee we were introduced to Shibden Hall by Ros Westwood, Museums Officer there. The Hall, a truss-framed building just east of Halifax, is now owned and opened to the public by Calderdale Council.

The building was started c1420 by William Oates, from Southwram, the money from the wool trade, ‘Shibden’ being a compression of ‘schepdene’; the valley of sheep. A standard ‘H’ plan was employed, the housebody (Hall or Main room) being open to the roof. A succession of ‘good’ marriages allowed changes to occur; these included chambering over the housebody to create storage rooms upstairs and the insertion of a twenty-four light stone mullioned windows in the south-front wall, illuminating the housebody and showing off the very fine stained glass panes, recalling in their vibrant colours the polychrome nature of contemporary interiors. A new dining room was also introduced with ‘tapestries’ painted directly onto the wall, which is still in existence.

From 1612 until 1933 Shibden was the home of the Lister family from Ovenden. Seven household inventories survive from this period, comprising along with documents stretching back five and a half centuries; a remarkable quantity of information on a house and family of essentially local status. The 1677/78 inventory includes a withdrawing table in the housebody stated to be ‘old’ and valued at £1, which is still in the room. Of c1595, and attributed to Gunby, working from Bury in Lancashire, the table extends to over eighteen feet and was originally decorated to face outwards into the room. When later repositioned more centrally, the fourth side of the lunette frieze was carved, but in an inferior manner and with mistakes in the sequence. Also listed in the housebody together with thrown chairs, field chairs (backstools) and joined stools is ‘one little chair’, very likely the child’s chair c1650 illustrated for us with a floral inlaid back board in the contemporary West Yorkshire manner, Ref. 1. All the furniture listed, of Oak throughout, was covered with cloths or cushions, probably of Halifax weaving. In the parlour next door, three hour glasses (why three?) and the only ‘seeing glass’ in the house. The 1766 inventory of Samuel Lister includes the contents of his textile shop and his notably fine carriage, then valued at £20 and still at Shibden. James Lister, who died in 1826 had a more leisured lifestyle, his inventory reflecting this; tea and backgammon tables, two weather glasses and ‘the instrument’, perhaps the piano. The withdrawing table is noted, now valued at £3. With the rise of the ‘Romantic’ interior this would have been back in fashion, which is also confirmed by the presence in the housebody of a press cupboard in similar style. A composite piece with seventeenth and nineteenth century parts is illustrated in a watercolour of 1840. Ref. 2. A Gothic revival process was given full rein by Anne Lister, James’s niece, inheriting on his death. Influenced by Scott and Byron, her transformation of Shibden into a Baronial Hall was far reaching though still incomplete at her death in 1840. Employing the architect John Harper and the carver John Wolstenholme, Ref. 3, Anne gutted the housebody and staircase so thoroughly that the position of the latter remains conjectural. Wolstenholme carved the balusters and newel posts, to Harper’s designs of its replacement. Anne died, at aged forty-nine years whilst travelling in Russia, leaving the Hall to her partner Anne Walker and her diary, of some four million words, one sixth encoded, detailing her unconventional and adventurous life. The last Lister at the Hall, a keen antiquarian, did much to catalogue and interpret the Shibden docu-

ments. Our speaker continues the research upon the house. She warmly invited us all to visit this much changed and most interesting building, and we should thank her as warmly for an enthusiastic and informative talk.

William B. Vincent

1. Similar example in Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture the British Tradition* p404 fig. 3: 490.
2. Similar (but not composite) in Victor Chinnery as reference 1 above, p322 fig. 3: 267.
3. Much more of his work may be seen at York Minster.

17th Century Oak Furniture in the Upper Calder Valley: A Study in Regional Furniture, Peter Thornborrow

With his customary enthusiasm and Yorkshire pride, Peter concentrated on the vernacular architecture and furniture of this valley which runs west to east on the south side of Halifax in West Yorkshire. Unlike the region further east, this is an area of good gritstone, as is shown by the impressive ‘wool’ church of Halifax and many solidly constructed houses. On the basis that fixed furniture can give a sound basis for regional attributions, Peter began by looking at the carved woodwork in Halifax parish church, although the pews had been lowered by some three feet in Scott’s 1864 restoration.

A fine wainscot chair, now at Shibden Hall but provenanced to the Sunderland family from the early 18th century Coley Hall and before that the Elizabethan High Sunderland, was shown to be identical to one at Tamworth Castle, except that the back panel inlaid with flowers in a vase was precisely reversed as to the colours of the woods used. An arched panel of similar character from High Sunderland survives in Halifax church and some stone carving remaining from the house shows similar motifs. The question was posed as to whether this, and the fact that the ‘ear pieces’ on these chairs were exactly matched in a stone lintel of 1698, could mean that the same carver was working on furniture and masonry. The guild restrictions, observed in some areas, seem to have been disregarded in Halifax, at least so far as the weaving industry was concerned. The master’s desk at Heptonstall Grammar School has a very similar cresting to the chairs, as does an overmantel at New Hall, Elland (1623).

Another distinctive local carved motif, of a lozenge with fleur-de-lys strapwork terminals, was traced from chairs in Halifax church, via others such as one now at Oakwell Hall and variations at Bolling Hall Museum, Bradford and St. John’s church, Leeds. By the end of the 17th century, carving tended to become shallower and less empathetic. Yet another group displays winged head crestings and panels carved with a fronded tree motif. A series of high back settles made to commemorate marriages, including one at Shibden Hall, are, to say the least of it, ‘busy’ with carving.

Other interesting pieces that Peter showed included a low press with two birds carved on the door panels which is lined with posters of the 1830s from Huddersfield, and a late 17th century chair branded W. Ombler. He also brought up the question of a type of green painted stick-back Windsor chair, with a waved top rail, which is quite frequently found in the Halifax area, and questioned whether they were imported from High Wycombe or the West Country, or were made locally.

Christopher Claxton Stevens

Eighteenth Century Yorkshire Furniture Makers at Burton Constable Hall – Dr Ivan Hall

The day was closed by Ivan Hall mounting a robust defence of the eighteenth century, in the face of the triumphs of the sixteenth and seventeenth that had been laid out before us. And how better to do this than by giving us a whistlestop tour of the glories of Burton Constable, a house with strong Catholic traditions lying just outside Hull, which Dr Hall introduced as one of England's glories, and proceeded to explain why.

He divided its later development into three main phases - William Clifford's ownership during the mid eighteenth century, following that the house's development in favour of the family's Staffordshire estates at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and finally its 'tarting up' by Sir Clifford's exotic second wife, Rosina. William Clifford was a model *dilettante*, undertaking no less than three grand tours, and clearly a 'Yorkshireman in Roman guise'. He determined to have his house improved by local craftsmen who would not defy him in the name of fashion, and developed architectural schemes together with Thomas and Timothy Lightholer, Robert Adam and James Wyatt. The furniture was all made locally by, among others, the Wrightsons of Beverley, Thomas Hyam the estate carver, Jeremiah Hargrave of Beverley and Hull. Reynoldson and Farrar of York, and John Lowrey. Scagliola throughout the house was created on the spot by Domenico Bartoli who was employed for several years at the not inconsiderable rate of £50 per year.

Like all good grand tourists William was more concerned with architecture than furniture, and his first pieces were hall tables composed of scagliola tops supported by perfect mahogany Doric columns as legs; one top was rococo in design, the other neo-classical, reflecting their chronological creation. Other curiosities from this period include a dining table and chairs made by Lowrey in a fashion apparently at least twenty years ahead of their time, a sidetable with limetree detailing rather than the brash gilding which William disliked, a sarcophagus painted as porphyry, and the Staircase Hall, completed twenty years after it was designed.

When he came to his Grand Drawing Room William succumbed to London taste and briefly employed Wyatt, who was sacked on producing semicircular pier table designs for William's newly acquired rectangular tops. Thomas Chippendale, a native Yorkshireman of course, did however supply the furniture, complementing Hargrave's meticulous architectural joinery. Other work included commissioning Thomas and Robert Walker's fabulous secretaire desk, furniture from the Rawlings of Beverley, and Wright and Elwick's 'doom bed' (apparently a direct transcription of Chippendale's misprint in the *Director*).

Sir Clifford's first wife paid for the next phase of furnishing and development herself, employing Thomas Wilkinson Wallace and Thomas Brooks, as well as acquiring items from the Fonthill Sale. The spectacular Brighton Pavilion room of the 1830s incorporated the most improbable furniture designed by Lady Constable, with dragon chairs for which she was charged £33 each.

Rosina the second wife continued the theme of local patronage, having the Drawing Room and its furniture revamped in black and gold by Richardson's of Hull, for which the sumptuous textiles largely survive, down to the numbered tassel bags.

The treasures of Burton Constable are clearly far too expansive for even as exuberant a speaker as Dr Hall to encompass in an hour, but our appetites were fully whetted, and we were even treated to an encore, a mirrored bed commissioned by Rosina, the like of which the gentlemen of Hull had never seen before. We were left in no doubt that Burton Constable is one of the glories of England, along, of course, with Dr Hall.

Sebastian Pryke