

In the early spring of 1996, Bill Cotton received an invitation from the Australian Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies to consider making a lecture tour of Australia in 1998. A list of six possible lecture titles on British regional furniture traditions was duly despatched, and we sat back and dreamed of a leisurely sun-soaked tour of Australian capital cities.

The dream evaporated with the arrival, in October 1997, of the proposed itinerary, listing invitations from fifteen of the twenty one Australian Societies, to give a total of twenty lectures and study days in a five week period, beginning in Adelaide, and ending in Cairns on the Great Barrier Reef. In addition, Bill was invited to give a lecture to the friends of Perth Art Gallery prior to the AADFAS tour, and also to speak to the recently formed Furniture History Society of Australasia based in Sydney, who are members of the RFS.

The tour was fast approaching reality, with Bill wondering, particularly, how his lectures on the British Regional Furniture Traditions would be received in the light of the forthcoming Australian referendum on that country's constitutional links with Britain. He need not have worried. The interest in the furniture of their forebears shown by the groups that met in both capital cities and smaller rural centres was enthusiastic and informed. Audiences usually numbered between 150 and 250, and in the country areas, many people drove for an hour and a half to get to the lecture. What dedication. The lecture venues varied enormously, from a redundant chapel (Scone), to a purpose-built 'village hall' overlooking the Hunter Valley vineyards (Pokolbin), and a high tech lecture theatre at the Science and Technology Centre in Canberra. But everywhere the welcome was warm, and the appreciation shown for the lectures was overwhelming.

The tight schedule usually meant that the day after a lecture was spent travelling to the next venue by air, train, bus, car, or on one occasion, a World War I Jeep in desert colours (but that's another story!) This meant that there was, unfortunately, little opportunity to follow up information given by members of the audience, nor was there much time to visit the many people who invited Bill to see their furniture in their own homes. However, a few of the many coincidences that occurred might be worth relating.

At his very first lecture in Perth, where Bill was speaking on Welsh furniture, he showed a slide of a very highly provenanced North Wales dresser which he explained was now 'lost to us': only to be told by a member of the audience that it was in his ownership, in his house in London. A visit and thorough examination of this dresser has already been made!

In Canberra, having shown some Walter Geikie drawings of Lowland Scottish interiors, Walter Geikie's

great niece introduced herself. The family had no idea of the drawings' existence, but owned oil paintings by the artist. Again, we had to move on without seeing these. Next time, perhaps.

A special event for us was the meeting with the FHS Australasia, which came on Maundy Thursday, the start of our Easter weekend break. A lecture on British Regional Furniture was arranged in the National Trust building in Sydney, and it was a delight to meet so many furniture people and to be able to talk in more depth with fellow enthusiasts. As with the RFS, there was a great mix of dealers, auctioneers, restorers, museum people and interested others at the lecture, and many differing points of interest were aired. A visit to the nearby Lawsons Auction Rooms followed, with a rare opportunity to handle a wide selection of Australian and British Furniture.

Another hands-on opportunity occurred on Good Friday when we were taken to Old Government House, Parramatta, about an hour's drive from central Sydney. Here, the Australian National Trust is refurbishing and refurnishing the house with Australian furniture of the period, working from extant inventories of 1821, 1831, and 1837. Bill was able to explore and discuss the furniture with the National Trust Curator, Ian Stevenson, the FHS (Aus) Chairman, Jim Martin, a keen furniture buff, and Kevin Fahy, furniture researcher and author of many books and articles on Australian furniture. The low-level lighting in this house did not stop the four of them poring over points of construction and wood use until well nigh dark. Here we saw the earliest known piece of Australian furniture, a chest of small drawers on a stand, dated 1810 made in red cedar, and purchased here a few years ago at the Olympia Antiques Fair.

Before going to Australia, we had bought the book, 'Memories' by Graham Cornall which is a description of the McAlpine Collection of Australian outback furniture which had been collected by Lord McAlpine, mainly in Western and South Australia. This collection included the famous kerosene tin furniture and other creative vernacular pieces as well as a whole range of more standard items, including food cupboards, settles, chairs, and tables – all, of course, made from indigenous timbers. This collection has now been sold, and we had assumed that parts of it would have been purchased by the major museums – but unfortunately this was not so, and the richness of that particular part of Australian regional furniture history has been lost to us all. It was a great disappointment not to be able to see this particular collection.

However, not all is lost. There are many local community museums, and one in particular which we did visit was the Pioneer Women's Hut at Tumberumba, between Wagga and Canberra, where a group of local ladies with no museum experience, led by Wendy Hucker, collected



Fig. 10 Lecture at the National Trust H.Q. Sydney, April 1998
Members of R.F.S. and F.H.S. Aus., left to right; Clive Lucas O.B.E. (Chairman), Jim Martin (Vice-Chairman), Jenny Baker (committee member), Bill Cotton and Ann Watson (committee member).

objects from the local community, and set up a museum which demonstrated the domestic life of rural women. The collection of domestic artefacts, including furniture, housed here was both exciting and poignant, illustrating the ingenuity of the men and women who settled in this inhospitable part of the continent.

Later we visited a large farmstead, Lanyon Station, on the Murrumbidgee River just outside Canberra with the Curator, Elaine Lawson, where the farmhouse has been refurbished to an 1860–1905 dateline with more fashionable Australian furniture. This house, owned by the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, has been sensitively refurbished with great attention to detail. Oral testimony from people who worked this station and original documentation have been used to recreate both the furnishing and decoration of this house as well as the farm buildings, which were originally settled as a sheep and cattle station in 1830s, using convict labour. The house was built in 1859 for Andrew Cunningham who came to Australia from Scotland (voluntarily!) and purchased Lanyon.

It would of course be impossible to comment on regionality and design transmission in Australian furniture after so short an acquaintance. There is much work to be done on these fronts, although we met people who were making a contribution to the wider picture in their own areas. However, one interesting observation that can be made in relation to the Australian furniture of the mid-nineteenth century is that the timbers chosen appear to be those which most visibly resemble the timbers used in Britain and the

other parts of Europe whose peoples colonised Australia, despite producing a rich and prolific variety of indigenous timbers. These timbers varied from state to state, of course, with the difference in growth patterns, climate and soil, and in each state, Bill had to learn to recognise a new vocabulary of woods.

But, for example, in Western Australia, Jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) was used as a mahogany look-alike. and in New South Wales, Australian Cedar (*Toona Australis*). Blackwood, (*Acacia Melanoxylon*), was used where one might traditionally expect to find Walnut. The yellow stringing of box wood or sycamore that is found in British regional furniture was reproduced with Hoop Pine (*Araucaria Cunninghamii*); and She-oak (*Casuarina*) was used decoratively, perhaps as a substitute for partridge wood.

But it is not necessary to travel to Australia to see their woods! A gentleman in Cairns informed us that his family firm had exported the Queensland Walnut to replace the floor of the House of Commons, destroyed in the second world war, and that the Speaker's Chair is made from North Queensland Black Bean, described in Kevin Fahy's excellent *Nomenclature of Australian Furniture Timbers* as being 'Very dark colour similar to walnut, often highly figured.'

A future visit for RFS members perhaps?

Gerry Cotton