

FROM BLACK HOUSES TO MANSIONS

Dr Bernard Cotton gave Scottish audiences a rare insight into the research he has undertaken into Scottish furniture made during the 18th and 19th centuries.

On 21st and 23rd October 1997, in Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively, Dr Cotton was the principal speaker at the Mark Medcalf Anniversary Lectures, held in association with the Edinburgh Antiques and Fine Arts Society and the National Art Collections Fund.

His highly elucidating lectures were entitled '*From Black Houses to Mansions*'.

Dr Cotton started off on the theme of life in the Black Houses, some of which still exist on the Isle of Lewis and other islands. However most of them, albeit only deserted since the Second World War, have in fact deteriorated almost into oblivion. The Black House was a long, low stone-built house with dry-stone walls filled with wet soil having a thatched roof made from heather or whatever other materials came to hand. There would be one central door, to the right of which the animals would live during the winter. To the left-hand side would be a living room, where the fire would be in the centre burning peats, causing smoke to rise and in fact it would be extremely dense above the smoke layer. This caused furniture to be made in certain ways, thus chairs were always on the low side. Creepie stools - small simply-made stools consisting of five pieces of wood were often used for sitting on. There was no table. The storage would be up the walls, mainly in the form of dressers. These Highland dressers have particular characteristics:

1. A sloping top, not so much so that they would fit under the eaves of the thatched roof but more that they would prevent the water that leaked through the roof from falling on to the crockery below.
2. They would have shelves that would be designed for plates that faced forward in the French style - in fact these dressers were much influenced by French dressers.
3. The lower shelves would hold sponge-decorated pottery bowls

Among other interesting aspects that Dr Cotton pointed out was the deep working surface of the dressers with decorative shaped side-pieces, made in this way because the dresser top was used instead of a table and the sides prevented food falling off.

Much to the surprise of the audience, he said that often a large cauldron of porridge would be cooked and this would be put straight into a drawer and then left to solidify. As the men of the house went out during the week, a piece would be cut off out of the so-called porridge drawer. He also pointed out how small many of the drawers were. This was because, quite simply, the people had few possessions to put into drawers. They had little in the way of bed or table linen or cutlery.

Cutlery, he explained, was generally made out of horn - cow horn - that had been cut up and was then moulded in simple presses.

He told us of the difficulty that islanders in Black Houses had in acquiring wood in almost treeless areas. Much of it was found wood or driftwood, and sometimes this even had worm holes, not of woodworm but of sea boring insects. He told of the influence of Scandinavia both in the use of words such as 'kist' for coffer, and of the particular sharp and hawl hinge.

He explained how much of the furniture would have been made by a wright who was really what we might know today as a joiner.

Going back to kists; these were used as containers in which their owners, often a young farm worker or a young girl in service, kept their worldly possessions - clothes, letters, bedding. They sometimes served as a seat or a table.

He explained about the fascinating Walter Geike drawings. Walter Geike was a profoundly deaf young man who was an expert draughtsman, and there is a series of thirteen pencil drawings in the collection of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Scotland. These very accurate drawings would show complete interiors with the kist and the Lowland dresser - a simpler version of the Highland dresser, as well as what we know as the press, which many today, Dr. Cotton told us, would expect to find in a bedroom. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these presses were made, and used in the kitchen and living areas, as storage.

He told us of the status symbol of the long-case clock, often a particularly fine piece of furniture, even in low or middle income houses, and also of the low sofa with a back rail and one scroll end, that always looks inviting in pictures, but is not so comfortable in practice.

He told us of the use of local woods such as sycamore, pine, both imported and native, oak and elm. Also less usual ones such as alder, a wood that frequently grows beside canals and streams and when cut oxidises to a reddish colour. This oxidation can be further enhanced by burying it in peat so that it looks like mahogany. He explained that alder stained in such a way was known as Scotch mahogany.

Dr Cotton explained the significance of the column chest. Chests of drawers made a late entrance into Scottish furniture; the earliest date being 1825, fully 100 years after they were widely available in the more prosperous areas of Southern England. These chests, of which he showed us an example made by the well-known Kelso cabinet maker, James Mein, would have an arrangement of short drawers across the top - the central one was deep and often known as the 'lum drawer'. This is where one put one's stovepipe hat known as a lum hat. Then there would be 3 or 4 graduated drawers below.

As the century progressed, the columns at the side changed from being fairly plain or fluted to being split columns of a much more elaborate spiral form until finally at the end of the 19th century they would just be applied mouldings with carved decoration to the upper drawer and base.

He then went on to describe the importance to furniture historians of pieces where we knew the history of

them or the provenance – pieces such as James Mein's where they were stamped or had labels attached, how the history of the Darvel type of Windsor chair was first discovered in Ayrshire, and that of many other Scottish makers around the central belt.

The importance of the box bed, both in the Black House and in the more prosperous parts of Fife and other parts of Scotland, was discussed. Whole families might sleep, often in two tiers with storage.

He further elaborated on the grander furniture including pieces from Pollock House in Glasgow made from *laburnum alpinum* or *laburnum*. This native Scottish hardwood has a wonderful pale brown, almost yellow fleck to it. It was very fashionable in the 19th century and much used by cabinet makers both for turned wood handles and in the solid for chairs.

The finest use of laburnum in Scottish furniture is seen in the 18th century suite of furniture at Blair Castle made out of laburnum by a Perth cabinet-maker. This dramatic suite has its finest piece in the magnificent bureau bookcase and the use of laburnum in this piece is technically highly accomplished – as good as any piece that could be made in Edinburgh or indeed even in London.

Laburnum veneers were glued together and used for veneers and mouldings both for cornicing and astragal glazing bars for the windows.

Sponsor of the lecture series, Mark Medcalf, thanked Dr Cotton for his enlightening lectures, commenting how they had provided a fascinating insight into the life – and hardships – of Scottish people around 1700–1900, but also reminded us how ingenious our forefathers were in creating and adapting natural materials in order to furnish their homes.

Mark Medcalf Associates is Scotland's leading independent firm of antique and fine art valuers. It has special expertise in the valuation of pictures, furniture, jewellery, silver, porcelain and books.