

**Treen for the Table** by Johnathan Levi in consultation with Robert Young, published by the Antique Collector's Club, 1998, £35 hardcover ISBN 1 85149 284 4

Treen for the table is the first important book on the subject for almost thirty years, since Edward Pinto's famously comprehensive 'bible' was published in 1969\*. A good reference book should inspire and inform, and in this it succeeds admirably on both scores. With outstanding, sumptuous full-colour illustrations throughout, plus a text both practical and instructive, Jonathan Levi brings vividly to life what is generally a rather obscure and lesser known area of the antique world. His love and enthusiasm for the subject (shared by his wife Mary and son David) is revealed on every page. In addition he feels it is important in a very special sense to pay tribute to the great help received in the book's production, and at the outset, from the book-jacket titling itself, and again within the Preface, particularly generous acknowledgment is made to Robert Young, whom

the author describes as his close adviser and professional consultant throughout the formation of the important treen collection described here.

Treen (made of tree; wooden) is a self-descriptive term, the word itself going back in our language many hundreds of years. Treen is all about wood, and wood is about grain and colour and texture; familiar terms to members of the Regional Furniture Society. But it is also about burrs and knots and cracks and whorls – and feel. Such



**Fig 5** *Left* English sycamore master salt c1600 with wide disc-shaped knop, interesting early foot . 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ "x4"  
*Right* Irish Yew master salt with deep rich colour and surface texture c 1720 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ "x3 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

intangibles are the very stuff of treen and for the first time, through lavish full and half page colour photographs of quite remarkable quality, we are taken right up to the surface of maple wood mazers, fruitwood cups and goblets and a multi-wooded variety of spice cups, quaiches, salts, coffee mills, mortars, tankards, bowls and spoons and much more. The extreme skills and artistry of the wood turner - surely no longer termed 'humble' - is clearly revealed, the vast majority of such items being produced on a simple pole-lathe.

By focusing on the treen made for eating and drinking purposes only, Jonathan Levi has chosen to describe and illustrate the most widely admired and historic section of an enormous subject (fig. 5). Further, in an unusual departure from formal authorship, he has co-opted a fellow expert, John Hawkins, to provide an illuminating chapter about the rarest group of all early treen drinking vessels - 'rose-engine' turned cups, tankards and wassail bowls of the 16th and 17th centuries. The premise here for the existence of a royal court turner to the Tudor court, is forcefully argued. He would have been responsible initially for 'rose-engine' work on exquisite small round ivory boxes and cases, containing either royal miniature paintings, or jewels. For these works of art, consummate skills were needed for the handling of an intricate and complex rose-engine lathe. Again, the close-up colour illustrations used here to show the incredible detail will help the reader understand and appreciate, more than any words, such accomplishments. By the time of Charles I, the royal workshop was concentrating

on the newly-fashionable timber, *lignum vitae*, ('wood of life'), and in the masterly production of rose-engine turned cups and covers, wassail bowls and lidded tankards. Sadly the names of these highly-important turners are unknown – any documentation, dates, makers' marks remaining today are the greatest possible rarities where early treen is concerned.

This book is packed with information and enlightenment for all those who enjoy the study of old woods, whether in the context of furniture or treen. The final three chapters take the reader, by yet more excellent close-ups, through a variety of surface treatments, their visible wear and tear, their many tactile qualities, the right and wrong characteristic of age, and comparisons of the genuine article and the fake. In conclusion there are useful appendices listing museums, dealers, books and articles specialising in treen.

*\*Treen and Other Wooden Bygones*, Bell and Hyman 1969.  
Barbara Pearce