

Book Review

Samuel Roberts Clockmaker: An eighteenth-century craftsman in a Welsh rural community.

W.T.R. Pryce and T. Alun Davies

National Museum of Wales, Welsh Folk Museum, 1985.

Price £19.50.

Samuel Roberts, clockmaker of Llanfair Caereinion, Montgomeryshire, was one of only a handful of British clockmakers who numbered and sometimes dated their clocks. In addition, by some stroke of good fortune his account book has also survived for the years 1755-1774. Because of these two factors, Samuel Roberts provides a unique opportunity for study, and has been the subject of other notable writers' work. However the present book attempts to broaden the field of study to include areas not previously covered.

The authors, Dr. Pryce, Staff tutor in the Social Sciences at the Open University of Wales, and T. Alun Davies, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Buildings and Domestic Life, Welsh Folk Museum, have combined their knowledge and expertise which covers a wide field, to

make a detailed study of this Welsh rural craftsman. The research was undertaken under the auspices of the Welsh Folk Museum, Open University, and British Academy, and with the co-operation of the Welsh media, (both television and newspapers) which enabled them to trace 102 clocks by Samuel Roberts. The results of this survey together with Robert's account book and a wide variety of estate, ecclesiastical, and local records formed the main research material on which the book was based.

This interesting and attractive book consists of 450 pages of text, well illustrated with black and white photographs and nine colour plates, together with many valuable tables and maps to supplement the text. The content is arranged in ten chapters, and six appendices, which cover such areas as - the background of Welsh clockmaking; Samuel Roberts clocks; their visual design; movements; casework; traces his customers; and places Samuel Roberts (who was also a farmer) against a backcloth of Welsh rural life in the 18th century. This very well researched and scholarly book combines the work and opinions of both authors but was written mainly by Dr. Pryce who avoids the pitfalls inherent in such work by writing in a clear, concise, and unpedantic style. Each chapter is divided into sections under subject headings which makes it both easier to read and to use as a reference book. The references to source material used, both published work and manuscripts, are clearly marked and duly acknowledged in the correct manner only to be expected in such a book but unfortunately sometimes missing in other writers' work on provincial clockmaking.

The chapter on casework will probably interest members most. Alun Davies (a founder member of this society), points out that the plain country style used in rural Montgomeryshire lagged many decades behind contemporary styles seen in English towns. The use of oak casework as opposed to mahogany, is another striking feature, and when mahogany was used it was restricted solely to banding or inlay on the clock casework noted in the survey. Nevertheless some casework has an attractive naive quality, which is well illustrated by one fine mid 18th century example which portrays chequered patterns, exotic fruits and flowers inlaid with bog-oak and fruitwoods, and by another charming case with a pediment carved in the shape of two dove-like birds. Samuel Roberts clock dials were mainly square, a shape which is believed to have restricted the scope of country joiners. Unfortunately the account book does not include any references to cases, and it is the opinion of the authors that Roberts customers ordered cases from local joiners. However one joiner, John Lloyd, had close ties with the clockmaker and is believed to have made some of Samuel Roberts clock cases. One example attributed to Lloyd, houses one of Samuel Roberts "special" clocks, and represents the Welsh country craftsman's finest casework with its fluted quarter trunk columns and beautifully shaped trunk door top crossbanded with mahogany, yet even this example has individual features, not normally associated with town casework of the period, but favoured by Lloyd and his customers.

The general approach to the study should provide a useful example for those attempting to research not only clocks but regional furniture generally, as well as greatly adding to the knowledge and understanding of one particular Welsh clockmaker, his clocks, and the environment in which he lived and worked.

Susan Stuart