

## THE RUSHLIGHT AND RELATED HOLDERS: A REGIONAL VIEW

by Robert Ashley, Ashley Publications, (Brocante, 6 London Road, Marlborough, Wilts SN8 1PH), 2001 (£45+ UK postage £4). ISBN 0-9540090-0-2

When I first encountered this considerable volume by Robert Ashley (Duff), my first reaction was that, even for a mad bibliophile of furniture books, this was a book too far and very much a subject of fringe interest to furniture studies. However I was soon convinced otherwise. This is a great feat of self-publishing and the result of long and painstaking study of the subject.

The methodology of Robert's research makes an interesting comparison to that of regional furniture and is well worth taking a close look at. Whether one can spot any direct physical connections between a Merionethshire rushlight holder and a piece of furniture from the same area is a subject for further study, but the book lays out with good and copious drawn and photographic illustrations (who needs colour anyway?), the niceties of numerous local types, covering Wales and Ireland in detail and most counties of England and some examples from Scotland and the Continent. Also included are other interesting objects, such as goffering iron stands, wax jacks, cruisie lamps and grissets. Some rushlight holders have iron bases and some wooden ones. There is even an appendix of comparative features for regional recognition and short sections on reproductions/fakes and on their continued use in the 21st century.

Robert has kindly provided some additional thoughts on the comparative study of regional rush lights and furniture, which I reproduce below:

- 1) Rural ironwork was mostly sold locally (unless a blacksmith moved from one area to another), so that items tended to stay in the vicinity of the area in which they were made. In the case of furniture, this is less so, apart from built-in pieces. Furniture was passed round families, given to children to help set up their own homes or sold when families were able to afford to 'update'.
- 2) Furniture usually retained some value and was therefore less likely to be left in situ when people moved homes or died. Rural ironwork was often just discarded in a barn.
- 3) Documentation, trade labels etc can help a great deal with researching furniture, but hardly exists for my subject. However, my work seems to have succeeded because there was little interest in the subject, except for a few collectors in the 1880s, until the 1960s, when rising values began to bring examples out of their original situations, particularly in Ireland and Wales. A lot more information could have been saved if only collectors and dealers had recorded their sources.
- 4) Linked with the last is the point that rushlight

holders fell out of use in many areas about the time that some museums were starting to collect items in the late 19th/early 20th centuries. Local people donated these holders since there was little value in them. Many of these acquisitions were not well recorded, many being taken just for display. Some were bought from dealers and were not necessarily of local origin, but local information such as 'my grandfather made this; he was the local blacksmith' was useful in sorting out some styles. Also, a few early collectors 'saved' examples and sometimes did record where they had found them. This does not apply in the same way to furniture where there was no cut-off date of usefulness which led to collecting by museums.

- 5) The research into blacksmiths and their local produce does not work for goods produced for a wider market, such as brass candlesticks, foundry items or furniture where a bigger market was needed to sustain production. Rushlight holders were generally made just as a sideline, to order when required. For example, a friend of mine made furniture in Kent for about 15 years, then moved to Wales and still makes the odd piece from time to time. Although by employing local craftsmen some details change in construction and type of finish, his basic style is still recognisable. By contrast, I found that few blacksmiths moved from their village forge (this still applies today) and styles remain recognisable to an area or region.
- 6) It is important to learn to recognise the different types of ironwork (eg Irish as opposed to Welsh; English as opposed to Continental). Handling the pieces is really the best way to do this. This is perhaps easier than trying to tell where most timber comes from in furniture.

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