

# STUDY DAY ON WEST COUNTRY FURNITURE

Winchester 14th September 2002

## Trees, timber and their uses

The day began with a lecture by Oliver Rackham, mainly concerned with the availability of wood from local woodlands. About half the original settlements in England had their own woodland, which was managed in various ways, particularly by coppicing. The wood produced in this way was often used in house construction, fencing, or for fuel, but could in some cases be used in making chair legs.

Plantations occurred from 1600 onwards. Non-woodland trees were also used, and these often gave larger timbers, such as those used in the construction of the lantern of Ely cathedral. Windmill posts were also made of single pieces from giant trees. Much furniture was also made from non-woodland trees.

The lecture ended with a number of questions; for instance, does the predominance of oak in early furniture represent its true usage, or has it been exaggerated by differential preservation, and what other woods were used in furniture at the same time? Is there any early cherrywood furniture, and did anyone use alder to make furniture?

*Jim Green*

## West Country Furniture with particular reference to articles in the Cotton Collection

Dr. Bernard Cotton commenced his talk by explaining that this was not to be a narrative or a typology of West Country furniture, but rather an opportunity to pick out some of the principle aspects of the study of this particular group of vernacular furniture. He explained how he came to this study by noting the absence of vernacular furniture in museums, and a lack of understanding of painted furniture in particular. Much of his early knowledge was gained by closely observing the furniture so accurately portrayed in the Newlyn School of Painting, particularly the works of Stanhope Forbes and Walter Langley, emphasising the importance of context. We were shown a slide of a polychrome cream and brown dresser to illustrate original paint finishes, with some stylistic elements fundamental to the region, and some optional. Careful observation enables the compilation of a vocabulary of essential components, for example the bowed shelves, multiple drawers and rudimentary pilasters found in Cornish dressers. Construction shows the work of the carpenter, and use of copper nails in some pieces indicates the work of shipwrights.

The wider availability of bone china in the second half of the 19th century led to the introduction of glazed fronted dressers, in parallel with dressers, for the display of pottery. Glazed dressers dominated the later 19th century. Most West Country painted furniture was constructed of white pine. Red lead paint was used to simulate mahogany, or alternatively green. Much of the

late 19th century painted furniture was prone to dispersal, and only comes to light if caught at auction – eg a fine example of a glazed dresser found in the Lostwithiel salerooms made in 1903 by Pooley and Sons.

In his explanation of the characteristics of West Country furniture Dr. Cotton emphasised the importance of diagnostic analysis. He encouraged his audience to identify the features which make up a vocabulary of design; for example the bead found on the edge of the framework in Cornish work. Different glazing configurations, elongated, lozenge, and cross glazing were shown on a food cupboard. This vocabulary of regional features can illustrate likely stylistic connections, for example, the similar profile of cornices to be found in Newfoundland and Cornwall. The appearance of 13 paned doors on Irish and Cornish pieces also suggests connections. The pilasters surmounted by complex cornice extending forward also feature in Cornish work.

Moving on to the furniture of Dorset, the connections with Newfoundland are equally strong, as illustrated by the identical configuration of drawers on dressers found in both regions. However, the difference between the two regions is reflected by the absence of backboards in Newfoundland (against a timber wall) in contrast to the backboards found on Dorset dressers. The so-called 'Bridgewater' dresser (something of a misnomer as similar pieces are found in Dorset, Gloucestershire and the Severn Valley) is, by contrast, one of great simplicity, constructed of single pieced shaped sides and dressing boards with no cupboards below.

Cotton then turned to the characteristics of West Country vernacular chairs. Diagnostic tools are of great use in understanding the regionality of chairs. Looking first at chairs in the extreme South West, the hooped backed chairs feature a flattened hoop, and spindles show the use of the draw knife in shaping. A particular feature here is the outward splay of the spindles, and it was emphasised that much can be understood by appreciating the background to the makers; Eathorne, a Penzance maker, described himself as a cooper by trade. Another diagnostic tool is the way in which the back spindles fit into the seat or arm bow, as illustrated by chairs attributed to Mrs May, working as turner in Truro in the mid 19th century. In place of elm, sycamore is sometimes used in the seats, combined with a painted finish.

Cornish stools feature a top board with slab ends wedged through and cross stretcher with wedged tenons. It was suggested that a thorough study of stool types might be a fruitful field for further research.

By 1812 a particular sub group of West Country chairs was appearing at Yealmpton in Devon, characterised by imitation bamboo turning painted in yellow ochre. Similar chairs of this style, and featuring the continuous back hoop running between the arm posts through the back are found at an earlier date in the United States, suggesting a possible source of inspiration. One particular feature that distinguishes

the Devon chairs is the absence of bamboo turning on the rear stretcher.

The talk finished with some examples of semi-industrialised production of West Country chairs in the 19th century, such as the blue/green painted Windsor chairs supplied to the Bristol Guild of the Handicapped in the 1880s by the firm of T. Miles of Bedminster, Bristol and those made by Uriah Alsop's Steam Cabinet Works in the same district. Even in this context it has been possible to identify the participation of the chair framer Samuel Pring in production. Finally Dr. Cotton described his excitement in finding work of the Bristol maker Hitchings in the far flung corner of the British Empire, in a shop in Adelaide. As usual, Dr. Cotton's exposition of his subject was not only masterly and comprehensive, but also led the audience themselves forward in to an understanding of the way that a vocabulary of distinctive features can be compiled to appreciate the regionality of vernacular furniture.

*A. Buxton*

### **Linda Hall – Fixed Woodwork and Interiors in Hampshire and the West Country.**

Linda began by stating that even fixed woodwork and panelling may have been removed and re-fixed in another building, and that we have to keep this in mind when looking for a reference style.

#### **Doorways.**

Two-centred doorheads date from the 13th century but appear in many 14th century and 15th century houses indicating a continuity of style. In the 15th century four-centred arched doorheads with plain spandrels were taking over and in the 16th century the spandrels were decorated, although not on a Somerset example.

Doorframe stops were plain, truncated and pyramidal in the early 16th century, but by the mid 16th century they had become decorative. Barrington Court had been dated to the early 16th century, but a re-interpretation of the documentary evidence has re-assigned it to the late 16th century, which is confirmed by the style of the stops. Unfortunately when mouldings went out of fashion in the 18th century, many decorated stops were hacked off, thereby destroying an important dating element. The Butterwalk in Dartmouth is a spectacular example where fortunately this has not happened.

From the late 17th century there is often a bead moulding around the doorframe, a feature also to be seen on furniture.

#### **Doors**

These are typically two planks thick, with the outer ones vertical and the inner ones running horizontal. The doors are therefore draught-proof and very strong, a feature that was important to farmers, who were often moneylenders. The doors have applied mouldings, which often cover up the gaps between the planks and simulate a geometric panelled effect. In Gloucestershire the lozenge was a popular design, often being placed in the centre of a panel. In the 17th century doors had a

single large panel top and bottom, with a six-panel arrangement coming in the 18th century. A large opening, too high in the door to be a spy hole, was used to control a draught to draw the fire. The 18th century versions were often heart shaped. Door-knockers always knocked onto metal such as a hinge or nail, this saved the wood from wear. Window catches were very decorative and door handles were of the drop loop type, often with back plates. In the Cotswolds there remains much ironwork from the Arts and Crafts period. Unlike earlier work these have stamped decoration around their edge.

#### **Screens and Panelling.**

The screen in the Great Hall of Chawton House, Hampshire, has carved marks in the form of a wave or a diagonal cross. These may be atrophic since the cross of St. Andrew is believed to bar evil. There are post and panel screen partitions in Somerset, Dorset and Devon, but not in Gloucestershire. Sometimes there remains the evidence on these screens of where a fixed bench had been. Unusually, Linda has seen a Squires' pew that had been removed from the local church and fixed to a wall inside the manor house. Friezes are often decorated with a guilloche pattern or lozenges. A two-colour inlay of arabesque design was dated to circa 1604 and flowerheads in another design were thought to be chrysanthemum. Walls are sometimes painted to simulate panelling.

#### **Over-mantels.**

These often had caryatids between arched panels, with stylised leaves in the spandrels and geometric panels in the arches. At the Merchant's House in Marlborough, the over-mantel has geometric panels and little niches for ornaments and has been dated to 1656. The Angel Inn, Andover, has a row of small open cupboards that are thought to be for the storage of clay pipes. Pairs of rack ends, fixed above mantels, have been wrongly called gun racks. Dating from the 17th C and later, they were for supporting spits. Several dog wheels have survived, but not necessarily in their original position.

#### **Staircases.**

In the great hall at St. Cross, the stairs balustrade is of latticework, but it is difficult to date. Turned stair balusters date from the early 17th century and the earliest mirror turned ones that Linda has so far seen are from 1623, some 25 years earlier than ones that have been seen in furniture. Twisted balusters can date from the second half of the 17th century, but are generally early 18th century, gradually becoming more slender as the century progressed. The flat balusters at St. Margarets, Tichfield, have been tree ring dated to 1624, but most are from 1650 onwards. Pierced hearts in the flat balusters are a West Country feature. Flat balusters often mirror the turned balusters of the more important staircase in the same house. In the 17th century the square baluster bases were small, but by the 18th century they had become relatively large. A candle could be stood on a newel post with a flat top or a coat

could be hung on a finial. A feature of an open string stairs from the 1720-1740 period, are the brackets under them featuring scrolls and decorative foliage.

### **Storage Rooms**

Flat balusters were used in ventilation grilles of pantries and are typically late 17th century, but early 18th century if they are wavy. The latter were favoured for use in closets and dairies, for which they could also provide light. Grilles are frequently uncovered during alteration work and many probably still await discovery. Turned balusters and woodwork generally, was quite plain in the mid 17th century, but around 1660 they became decorative again after the restoration of the monarchy.

### **Dressers, Settles and Cupboards**

Built-in dressers usually had open bases, very few having doors before the 19th century. Late 18th century Gloucestershire dressers had a vertical support between the shelves, with a shallow convex vertical radius to its front edge. Settles had one-piece shaped ends and were often used as partitions. Spice cupboards had motifs on them that were similar to those on house doors. These were typically lozenges in the panel or door centre and date from the second half of the 17th century. Frequently due to a breakage of the wooden pivots of the har-hung door, iron butterfly hinges have been used as a repair. Also recorded was a highly decorative Gloucestershire cupboard of 1674 with strap-work on its upper and lower frame, flower motifs on its side frame and scrolls around its door, which enclose a large tulip design. This superior cupboard, set into a bedroom wall, might have been used for jewellery.

### **Food Storage**

Cheese rooms frequently had lattice ventilation and some attics still have moveable shelving, which being easily cleanable was probably for cheese. Bacon was stored on racks suspended from the ceiling. One can still see the evidence for these in the square shaped hooks, set at regular intervals along the beams.

Linda illustrated her fast moving lecture with a great many slides taken during her investigative journeys, sharing with us her sources and giving us a tantalising insight into her ongoing research.

*Ian Phillips*

### **Guided Tour of the Exhibition by Gabriel Olive and Michael Legg**

Following the slide presentations of the morning and early afternoon we moved, as a group, to examine the items of West Country furniture and associated objects in an adjoining room, fig. 7. Our guides for this last session of the study day were the curator of the exhibition, Gabriel Olive and Michael Legg, who talked about the two long-case clocks on display. As mentioned in one of the morning lectures, slides of three-dimensional artefacts are but a poor substitute for the real thing; it was therefore a real pleasure to discuss the assembled objects with two knowledgeable and informative guides.

Gabriel led the first session and each object in the exhibition was examined in turn, chests were held up for display, chairs brought forward and turned up-side down, a form with the notice 'please do not sit on this piece of furniture' was commandeered by Gabriel (it did belong to him!) as additional seating for the group – as he said his grandchildren sat on it when they visited, so why shouldn't it be used now! As each item was discussed certain themes were picked up from the morning's lectures – the distinctive beading on the front of an early nineteenth century oak and elm dresser base from east Dorset; the chamfering on the seat-rail of Yealmpton chairs, the distinctive 'notching' cut into the end-grain of chest lids and the tops of stools from the West Country. Gabriel shared with the group his detailed observations concerning diagnostic features of the furniture. Distinctive features which help to more precisely localize such furniture were discussed, including, for example, the use on Dorset dressers of sliding dovetails to secure the plate rack, the way that the makers of West Country boarded chests made inverted V-shaped cuts in the slab ends to form simple legs and how at the apex of that cut-out section the saw marks nearly always ran over – this feature revealed on one or two chests might have indicated a lack of skill on the part of the maker but Gabriel noted how he had observed this on many chests from the region, indicating in his view that it was deliberate and common practice rather than clumsy work. In fact another chest, the front carved with opposed serpents and dated 1642 also revealed the above feature, the saw marks on this example actually being chamfered.

Gabriel's deep historical knowledge and his empathy with the people who made and used the furniture were also abundantly evident and added greatly to our understanding and appreciation of these items. He admired the skill of the maker of a late 18th century oak tripod table from east Somerset. The table followed the profile of a fashionable type but the legs were silhouette cut – however as Gabriel pointed out the line of these curved legs was as beautiful as any found on that of its metropolitan cousin. The skill and 'eye' of the craftsman



**Fig. 7 West Country exhibition**

who made an elm stool from north Dorset with sinuous S-shaped hand hold was also highlighted. Other details such as the slightly swept or shaped profile of the lower shelf of an elm round or 'cricket table' (bought from a sweet shop in Taunton) also received an appreciative mention from Gabriel.

As well as furniture from the West Country, other items of everyday life from this region were included by way of context in the exhibition. Gabriel shared with us the history of each object, as well as the history of his connection with that object – amongst these items were



**Fig. 8 Longcase clock made by John Spinney of Blandford and a Cornish Windsor chair**

a candle lamp from Radstock, a child's patten found under a hearth in Wincanton, a brass club-head with beguiling profile which formed part of the ceremonial processions of the Wincanton Septennial Friendly Society and Donyatt pottery jugs, including a puzzle jug with the potter's hand-written instructions as to its correct usage (these instructions were put to a practical test by Gabriel during one of his lectures, as he noted, with unfortunate results!)

The last session of a long and information-rich day was led by Michael Legg, who discussed the two West Country long-case clocks in the exhibition – one by John Spinney (1707–1780) of Blandford (with brass dial and 30 hour movement) fig. 8 and the other, an early 19th century long-case clock, with earlier movement and painted dial by Joseph Weare (1796–1886) of Wincanton. Michael provided us with an object lesson in visual analysis. He meticulously examined the cases and movements in turn, highlighting significant features of case construction such as characteristic details deployed by Spinney; how early and later features were combined and how idiosyncratic constructional details could be convincingly rationalized. In his examination of these two objects Michael's profound knowledge and understanding of clock-making and historic clocks was clearly evident as was his infectious enthusiasm for the

subject. He related the construction of the movements and cases to metropolitan practice and drew on his knowledge of primary sources such as the Gillow archive to enrich his discussion of Joseph Weare's clock. Criteria such as spandrel decoration and latinization of the makers' name assisted in the dating of each clock. Michael's description of the collets as 'lumpy' and not the sort of thing one wished to see in a clock movement, memorably described the feature and also aided the dating of the clock. His audience were fascinated by his deconstruction of the life history of the movement in the Weare clock, which in fact started life as a lantern clock and had been through major modification to be accommodated into its new home.

Through their guided talks, both Gabriel and Michael brought the West Country furniture in the exhibition to life. The generous sharing of their knowledge and enthusiasm for the objects, borne out of many years of handling, study and discussion added much to the success of the day and we are extremely grateful to them both.

*Robin Jones*

**A note from Alison Lee, Winchester Museums Service.**

The exhibition was organised to coincide with the launch of Gabriel Olive's book *Farm and Cottage Furniture in the West Country* published by the Society. Gabriel curated the exhibition, which featured many examples of the furniture he describes in the book. We had two distinguished guests to open the exhibition at the private view, the Right Worshipful The Mayor of Winchester, John Steel and Simon Jervis, Chairman of the Furniture History Society and until recently Director of Historic Buildings for the National Trust. Seventy members and invited guests attended the evening event.

The exhibition ran from 30th August to 22nd September and attracted 1400 visitors. Gabriel's book proved a success with sales of 87 copies, nearly one third of which were to non-members.

I would like to thank all those members who helped with the exhibition especially Michael and Polly Legg, David Dewing, Luke and Freda Millar and of course Gabriel.



**Fig. 9 Simon Jervis, Gabriel Olive and John Steel**