

'English Furniture 1660-1714, from Charles II to Queen Anne' by Adam Bowett, Antique Collectors' Club, 2002 ISBN 1851 4939 99

This book, which is intended to be the first of two covering what has traditionally and too loosely been known as *'The Age of Walnut'*, is a major work by a past Secretary of the Regional Furniture Society. Its intention is to concentrate on provenanced items and documentary sources, which, unsurprisingly, relate largely to London-made fashionable, royal and aristocratic pieces. However the book's careful reassessment of the dating of English furniture of the period, the first for three quarters of a century, as well as its wealth of technical information on materials and processes, will be of considerable interest to collectors and students of more regional and less genteel furniture.

Adam claims that, because of the rapid pace of stylistic change, pieces can be dated more closely than he had thought possible. He refers here to the introduction of new features and techniques at the top end of fashion. It is well known to enthusiasts of vernacular furniture that such features can linger to a surprising extent as the signatures of a particular workshop or area. This can sometimes be shown to have been the case in more sophisticated circles too.

Divided into two sections, each with an historic overview, the book deals in turn with the chronological development of case furniture, seat furniture, and tables, stands and mirrors, with excellent sections interspersed on topics such as making floral marquetry, staining and colouring wood, gilding metal and wood, japanning and varnishing, and manufacturing mirror plates.

The text is liberally supplied with descriptive illustrations, very largely in colour. The details are particularly welcome. It is refreshing to see so many photographs that one has not encountered on a regular basis in other standard works, but this does sometimes come with the limitations of their not being studio productions. The photographic costs of modern books are a perennial problem, made worse by the expectations of many readers to see so much in colour rather than black and white, sometimes at the expense of clarity.

Adam is not averse to courting controversy, such as querying just how influential were the French Huguenot immigrants who come here in large numbers escaping from the intolerance of Louis XIV's Catholic government (p.33f), or the importance of one Huguenot in particular, Daniel Marot (p.186f). Such questions will no doubt encourage healthy debate as other evidence is brought forward, but the raising of them is part of this new, analytical approach, unencumbered by so many received traditions. None of it should be taken too dogmatically; as Adam himself admits in his potted biography, this is his first book and he is still learning. Nevertheless, his achievement is remarkable.

Reviewed by Christopher Claxton Stevens