

## The 5th Frederick Parker Lecture

30th October 2003

The 5th Annual Frederick Parker Lecture was held at Chatham House, St. James's Square, London on 30th October, when some 170 people gathered to hear two papers, from James Ayres FSA, who spoke on 'Vernacular Furniture in Context', based on his recently published book, *Domestic Interiors, The British Tradition, 1500-1800*, and from David Dewing.

The title of David's lecture was 'English Cane Chairs, Origins and Influences, in the late 17th Century', a subject that he has been researching since he realised how little work had been done in the field after the acquisition of a caned armchair for the Geffrye Museum in 1997. Since then Adam Bowett has produced an excellent account of the stylistic development of cane chairs, while David has concentrated on foreign influences, the social context and their manufacture.

The earliest English caned chairs, low-backed, twist-turned and restrained in style, usually of walnut but occasionally of oak, appear around 1670. They were thus contemporary with upholstered backstools which were covered in leather or cloth, often turkeywork, and, apart from a loose cushion with which they were generally used, the basic cost of a cane chair was only about half that of an upholstered one. It is therefore not surprising that they proved attractive to Londoners who were rebuilding after the Great Fire. The East India Companies were crucial to their development as the cane was a product of Malaysia and Borneo, while cane-seated chairs, particularly of ebony and based on the backstool, were made in India and Batavia by the mid-17th century for the Dutch and English settlers. This novelty value probably increased the popularity of cane in the West.

The Cane-Chair Makers' Petition was submitted to Parliament in 1689-90 in order to counter a petition from the woollen manufacturers who produced turkeywork and claimed that chairs of imported walnut and cane were undermining their business. It states that cane chairs had been made in England since about 1664 and that many thousands of makers produced 72,000 cane chairs a year. The figures may be exaggerated, even though the Cane-Chair Makers' case seems to have been upheld by Parliament, but it does show that a substantial industry had grown up by this time. By 1680 cane chairs are regularly mentioned in inventories of better class Londoners, mainly in parlours and dining rooms, and towards the end of the century they are common among middling and upper classes outside London, until the fashion for them peaked in the early 18th century.

The industry was centred on London, particularly around St Paul's Cathedral Churchyard and elsewhere in the city, rather than in the increasingly fashionable area around St Martin's Lane. So far about thirty makers' names are known from documents between the 1670s and 1740. The earliest known mention of cane chairs appears in 1673 in the records of the Orphans'

Court, while Richard Price was the first to supply such chairs to the Royal Household in 1681. He was succeeded as Royal Joiner by Thomas Roberts in 1686 and then by his son Richard in 1714, both of whom continued to supply cane chairs for subsidiary areas rather than the Royal Apartments themselves: they were always considered second best to upholstered chairs. The descriptions of these chairs serve to identify the quickly changing fashions in elaborate turning and carving which in themselves are indications of the competition in the market place.

Although the motif of twist-turning found on early examples came from Continental countries where it was common by the 1640s, it is not recorded in the English Royal Accounts until 1672. However research to date has shown few examples of early cane chairs in the Low Countries. Very few are discernible in the ubiquitous pictures of Dutch interiors of the period, nor do they appear in inventories there, nor in Dutch dolls' houses which tend to reflect real houses in close detail. They do, however, seem to appear in the 1680s in a form very similar to English examples, but with differences in twist-turning, carving and joints. In England, where by contrast views of interiors are rare at this date, a few examples showing cane chairs are known, notably two views of Samuel Pepys' library at Buckingham Street, London, of circa 1692.

Current evidence suggests that the caned chair industry began as a peculiarly English development, which only later spread to the Continent and America.

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