

Lectures

Saturday morning, 29 July

Karin Walton, curator of applied art at Bristol City Museums and Art Gallery, who arranged many of our Bristol visits, gave a short **Introduction to Bristol Furniture**. She highlighted the riches of the Brakenridge collection of drawings of Bristol buildings and interiors, and illustrated Greethead's lively panorama of the procession of Bristol trades for the coronation of William IV. She went on to mention Robert James (recorded 1784-1831) and his intriguing speciality, 'polyanthus wood'. During the 19th century, Lavertons and Trapnells were the most prolific producers of furniture in Bristol, and Trapnells' later successors, P. E. Gane, were the makers of Isokon furniture. She reminded us that the aesthetic

designer, E.W.Godwin, was born in Bristol and flagged up the collection of his own furniture at the Georgian House.

Lisa White spoke on **Bristol and the Mahogany Trade**. Bristol had long associations with the import of timber, primarily for its dyeing and shipbuilding industries. By the middle of the 17th century Bristol merchants were importing dyewoods such as fustic, mastic and logwood from the West Indies and may have first started using mahogany for ship repairs in the Caribbean, as the Spanish had done since the early 16th century. After 1721, Bristol merchants benefited from the changes in legislation, especially the Naval Stores Act, which reduced import duties payable on timbers shipped from the American colonies. The Wharfage Books for the port of Bristol record a steady increase in the amount of mahogany arriving directly in the city, primarily from Jamaica as the major British port of lading in the Caribbean.

By the 1750s, auctions were taking place of thousands of feet of prime mahogany planks and baulks. Given the relatively small number of luxury furniture makers working in the city during the 18th century, it is probable that much of the imported mahogany was used for joinery, and examples survive in many houses in Bristol, Clifton and the hinterland. Large quantities also found their way to Bath along the river Avon, to supply doors, doorcases and stair rails for the houses of the building boom in that city from 1750-1800.

The later 18th century trade directories for Bristol (1775, 1793-4) record the names of specific timber merchants. One of the city's most prominent cabinet-making partnerships, William and Charles Court, who provided furniture for Pinney's house in Great George Street (now known as the Georgian House) were recorded as 'Cabinet-Makers, Upholders and Mahogany Merchants'. Many surviving Bristol-made long-case clocks, often with movements giving the details of high-tide at Bristol Quay which suggest they were made for leading merchants of the city, display the skill with which local craftsmen used these supplies of fine mahogany.

Richard Bebb's lecture on Welsh furniture challenged the supposition that Wales was **Located beyond the Established Routes of Commerce and Travel?** The development of Welsh furniture over eight centuries was illustrated with groups that showed influences from various directions. Medieval manuscript illustrations established the early credentials of both stick and turned chairs, at a time when cultural influences were felt from Ireland and Scandinavia. The stick chair continued to be produced in enormous variety into the 19th century, with the heyday of the great turned chairs being the 16th century.

The country had a rich tradition of carving, still to be seen in numerous churches, into which renaissance styles

were incorporated from an early period through direct contact with the continent. The lighter styles of the 17th century were similarly found at an early date, represented by a table of 1567 from Denbigh and seating of 1580 from Conwy, made for individuals who worked in the Low Countries.

In the early 18th century urban walnut and mahogany styles were made in oak along the south coast in areas in close contact with Bristol. These pieces were often embellished with flowing inlay decoration, which was also found on the large and miniature coffer associated with marriages. In the early 19th century, cabinet-makers in Carmarthen and Haverfordwest produced mahogany furniture to pattern book designs, supplying the plainer styles favoured by the nonconformist middle class. The vernacular trade also prospered, accommodating urban features which seemed appropriate while developing local styles, particularly dressers. In the late 19th century Wales participated in the Arts & Crafts movement, reflected in the medievalist furniture at Cardiff Castle and the innovative designs created for *eisteddfodau*.