

# Dr. B.D. Cotton: Beatrix Potter and her Love of Regional Furniture

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As a preface to his talk, Bill took the opportunity to speak about the early years of the RFS and the important part that Christopher Gilbert had played in setting it up and nurturing the subject of regional furniture. Yet, over 50 years before the society was set up, the at-first-sight unlikely character of Beatrix Potter, the children's author, was expressing remarkably informed observations and interest in the subject.

Born in London in 1866 to a wealthy family, Beatrix had a solitary education from a governess and developed a passion for studying the natural world, which she did by drawing animals and objects from multiple angles. She belonged to the last generation that did not see the arts and sciences as mutually exclusive. Her family rented a house on Lake Windermere for holidays and she took a fancy to the Lake District. There she met Canon Rawnsley, one of the founders of the National Trust and of the Keswick School of Industrial Art, who was influential in her writing for children.

In 1905 her fiancé Norman Warne died, and in the same year she purchased her house, Hilltop at Sawrey in Cumbria, which she later passed, with the 14 farms which she eventually purchased, to the National Trust. She was married in 1913 to her solicitor, William Heelis. However, as their correspondence when she was in her 60s and 70s shows (she died in 1943), the most abiding influence on her interest in furniture was her friend Bertha Mahoney Miller, whose husband made reproduction furniture in Boston, Massachusetts. She was able to discuss with her the finer points of furniture including rushed and turned chairs, and she knew well the low-armed rush-seated chairs that were typical of the area.

Several pieces that Beatrix owned feature in the illustrations for her books. For example, the 'bobble' back chair shown in *The Tailor of Gloucester* is a Sussex type, but other similar chairs are known in the Dales where they have continuous front legs rather than legs morticed into the corner blocks. She was astute enough to spot spurious dates carved on oak chests, but observed that the authentic dating of 'bible' boxes and court cupboards was much more common.

Of the furniture that she bought that is still on show at Hilltop, she particularly loved her court cupboard, whose provenance and stylistic development she dutifully recorded. She realised that it had originally been made as a

fitting but not, apparently, that it lacks a whole bottom tier. Her observations on the Celtic runic carving on a Westmorland cupboard and other symbolism on a chest from Ulverston were most intelligent.

Beatrix also realised how old Cumberland and Westmorland oak furniture should naturally have developed a golden grey colour but tended to have been stained up, 'possibly with bullock's blood', before beeswax and turpentine polish was applied. A chest from Shropshire on the landing looked 'almost as warm as mahogany'. Indeed she admitted that for her own use she preferred more sophisticated mahogany furniture in traditional styles and she was aware of the importation of this timber through Liverpool and of its 'working up' in Lancashire, although the finest work came from London.

In 1934 she wrote that she was collecting any genuine pieces of local furniture that she could get hold of at local farm sales in order to put them back into her farmhouses. 'It is a great shame to take [court cupboards] out of the old farmhouses...'

There are a good many in cottages belonging to the National Trust which will be preserved safely'. Bill and his wife Gerry have been recording this very furniture, still in the tenants' hands. It was fascinating to hear about such a rewarding project where the evidence survives in this way, and for this we are indebted to the foresight of Beatrix Potter.

Christopher Claxton Stevens



The frontispiece to *The Roly-Poly Pudding* showing a bobble-backed chair and a Dales type rocking chair. Iron grates like this one, made locally, can still be seen in the farmhouses once owned by Beatrix Potter and now in the hands of the National Trust.