

# Robert Tarule, *The Artisan of Ipswich: Craftsmanship and Community in Colonial New England*

**John Hopkins University Press, 2004 (price £28).**

Woodwork attributed to Robert Searle and Thomas Dennis has been a subject of study since at least the 1930s. In that time, a number of pieces of early colonial American furniture have been linked to the two craftsmen and tantalising similarities between these items and a sizeable group from Devon, England, have been observed by researchers on both sides of the Atlantic, including John T. Kirk, Victor Chinnery and Benno Forman.

Over this time items of furniture have been scrutinised in a way in which American scholars excel, and various claims over the transmission of style and techniques between the old and new world have been suggested. Pieces of an intriguing puzzle have come together and, from time to time, have been re-arranged. Yet each wave of published work seemed to have closed, leaving an impression that far more remained to be explored, and that a comprehensive study of this fascinating group of

furniture was still fertile ground for furniture historians. Tarule's 2004 addition to the published work is not that comprehensive study, but it is an interesting development of the work previously available. It is a book written from the perspective of both the workbench and the record office, combining Tarule's experience as an historian and craftsman: having graduated in comparative medieval literature, Tarule later became curator of mechanick arts at Plimoth Plantation where he researched and made replica wooden items. It is based his doctoral dissertation.

The focal point of the book is a late 17th century chest, attributed to Thomas Dennis working in Ipswich Massachusetts. Tarule uses the processes by which the chest was constructed as a framework for exploring aspects of the social, economic and cultural context in which it was made and used, as well as explaining many technical details. A chapter on Ipswich covers the topographical background to the settlement, patterns of immigration, land use, government, allocation of holdings and common rights. It also presents details of Dennis's personal background and an outline of the apprenticeship system under which he possibly trained in England, before immigrating around 1663.

A chapter on oak outlines its qualities as a favoured material for much 17th century furniture, how it was cultivated and used in Britain, how that compared to the situation found in New England, and the availability, demand and access to timber around Ipswich. A further chapter is dedicated to discussing in detail how Dennis might have harvested the material for the chest in the woods around Ipswich. This includes the sights he might have seen as he made his way to the woods, how trees might have been selected, felled and riven into manageable sections by his apprentice, and their transportation back to the workshop.

Documentary evidence, particularly a court case against Dennis in 1671 for felling more trees than his allocation, is

combined with Tarule's personal experience of processing timber by hand to make this a very detailed chapter. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the writer slips in and out of a narrative style that that will probably increase the appeal of the book to a wider audience than the subject might otherwise attract. This does however require a degree of imagination from the writer, making it at times akin to an historical novel. While clearly built upon extensive research and Tarule's practical experience, this style will possibly compromise the integrity of the book in the eyes of the scholarly community.

The socio-economic context that Dennis worked in is recorded in a chapter on Ipswich at work and includes some detailed information about the carpenters, coopers, wheelwrights, turners and other joiners that worked alongside him. The longest chapter is given to a detailed description of the construction process of the chest. This contains information at a level only someone that has undertaken the processes described could truly explain. Academics have tried and often failed to achieve this in the past, missing technical subtleties only learned from using tools and experiencing how wood reacts to them. This chapter again uses narrative to make what might otherwise be a dry procedural description into a read likely to be palatable to the non-technical, but with the aforementioned implications. If Tarule has evidence that Dennis had to break off from constructing the chest to mend a milking stool for his wife while the pig 'squealed hungrily in the hog cote toward the back of the yard', it would be fascinating to know the source.

An epilogue describes the possible path by which Dennis's chest survived to the present day and an essay on methods and sources at the end of the book gives

interesting insights into Tarule's research journey. It also records many characteristics of chests attributed to Dennis, and sections describing the books and manuscript sources used also outlines their respective qualities in Tarule's eyes; while this is an unconventional form of bibliography, it may be an accessible one for the wider audience that Tarule seems to have targeted for what is essentially a very specialist subject. The book contains a number of useful illustrations, particularly clear for some technical aspects; pictures of the chest are sparser than one might desire, in black and white and of a lower quality than is now generally expected.

In conclusion, this book brings together technical understanding and documentary sources in a detailed illustration of how a piece of joined furniture was made in colonial New England. It also records a great deal about the chest's maker and much about the society that it was made for. It could only have been written by someone with both experience of working in wood and a sound research background. It is possibly compromised by excursions from solid historical analysis of the documentary and archaeological evidence into narrative reliant on an element of speculation and assumption. This will increase the book's accessibility to a wider audience but inevitably compromises its integrity in the eyes of some. It is another useful addition to the published work on Dennis/Searle furniture and its Devon connections that will hopefully help facilitate a comprehensive study of that fascinating group of furniture before too long.

*Chris Currie*

*See p25 for a review of the recent exhibition, Discovering Dennis.*