

Discovering Dennis: The search for Thomas Dennis among the artisans of Exeter

Exhibition by Marhamchurch Antiques
Exeter Guildhall, 4 & 5 November 2009

Research into the work of the 17th century Massachusetts joiner Thomas Dennis, and similarities between his furniture and contemporary woodwork from the Exeter area, has generally seemed to focus on the American side of this transatlantic puzzle; an imbalance that made this recent exhibition particularly welcome. It brought together around 20 chests and several other items of 16th/17th century furniture from the Exeter area, creating a valuable opportunity to compare constructional and decorative details with those found in New England examples.

The lavishly illustrated catalogue provides a useful opportunity to compare the exhibited items with those directly associated with the New England joiner, and this being a selling exhibition, it will also provide a helpful record as the collection inevitably becomes dispersed (<http://www.marhamchurchantiques.com/exhibition-view>). The catalogue has an extensive foreword by Robert Tarule and seven pages of background history on Exeter with an overview of the furniture by Donald P. White III. It is likely that some assertions made here will fuel interesting discussions, as will a court cupboard included in the exhibition, clearly made from various components of other pieces of furniture, but by no means without interest. Lively discussion is never a bad thing.

An exhibition of this scale is no mean feat as an independent undertaking and should be applauded. Paul Fitzsimmons of Marhamchurch Antiques was keen to stress that this was an exhibition of a work in progress – about discovering Thomas Dennis among the Exeter woodworking community, not Dennis discovered. That remains an ongoing search, and one that will be aided through the gathering together of this distinct group of regional furniture, with the questions and discussions that it will inevitably stimulate.

Chris Currie

See p7 for a related visit, and p24 for Chris Currie's review of Robert Tarule's book, The Artisan of Ipswich, focussing on a chest made by Thomas Dennis in Massachusetts.