

## Victor Chinnery (1944 – 2011)

It was with the greatest sadness that members of the Regional Furniture Society learned of Victor Chinnery's untimely death in early December. He had fought a brave fight with cancer over a long period, with hopeful periods when his resilience gave everyone the hope that he might overcome it. Alas, that wasn't to be, and the packed crematorium at Semington, Wiltshire on the afternoon of 16 December gave witness to the deep affection and high regard in which family, friends from many walks of life and members of this society held Victor. Being the good company that he was, he would have enjoyed the gathering afterwards at Cleeve House, Seend, when those attending were able to meet and share memories of him, view images from his life on a film loop, and enjoy each other's company. Above all, however, the most pervasive sentiment was that of a sense of loss of this charming and avuncular scholar who, in the early years of his career as a furniture history researcher, pioneered the academic study of early oak furniture, crucially placing it within its historic and social context. It was his fresh and comprehensive view of the subject which raised the status of early oak furniture above its common role of mere house decoration and, with a few others, he was about to contribute to the long climb towards oak and vernacular furniture studies becoming a scholarly subject in its own right; one which focuses on furniture from the perspectives of historical construction, regional styles, historic purpose, inventory analysis, and the place and identification of furniture and other furnishings in their authentic context.

His deeply intuitive sense of the place of oak furniture as part of the material and aesthetic culture of the largely middling or yeoman class of Britain and elsewhere, particularly during the late 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries, came together in Victor's seminal publication, *Oak Furniture - The British Tradition* which he and his equally committed wife and research colleague, Janet, produced in the years 1974-1979. This work quickly became the core reference publication in its field, and the publishers, John and Diana Steele of the Antique Collectors' Club, showed their considerable entrepreneurial skills in promoting this book to become the standard reference work on this subject. Other authors have been inspired by this work, and new books on aspects of oak furniture have been produced since. This is exactly what Victor and Janet would have wished; and indeed, in a real sense, the greatest legacy of their work is the firm foundation it has provided for the field to continue.

It cannot, however, be over-stated that Victor's success as a researcher and writer, a skill which he practised with an elegance and warmth transcending the pedantry of some historical writings, was substantially aided by the consistent

involvement and support of Janet. She worked with him in all matters, and his affection and indebtedness is recorded in the frontispiece to his book above a woodcut of a kneeling Elizabethan figure, (uncannily resembling Victor) holding out a book. Below this, Vic spells out his philosophy for the book in quoting, 'It hath been...mine endeavour... to give unto every limb and part not only his due proportion but also his due place, and not to set the head where the foot should be, or the foot where the head...' (Henry Denne, *Grace, Mercy and Peace*, 1645).

Victor and Janet had the great ambition to produce another work of significance in his field, and shortly before his death, this author had received a draft copy of what Victor had entitled, 'Notes towards a Glossary of Furnishing Terms illustrating the Furnishing & Decoration of Houses by means of contemporary references 1500-1700.' This text exhibits Victor's personal growth as his knowledge and experience had continued to develop over the previous 30 years. The content of this work is detailed, well referenced, and absolutely fascinating. However, Victor, in his usual understated way, claims that 'The following glossary is not intended as a definitive and exhaustive etymology... but merely offers simple indications as to the likely origin and meaning of particular terms.'

In fact, the bibliography he includes is vast, covering many European sources. He relies on many authors from the 16th and 17th centuries, including, of course, his old friend Randle Holme, with whom he maintains a respectful if sometimes wryly humorous relationship, and quotes, in tune with the often confusing nature of writings of the time with Holme's entry for 'ladle' which says, 'The Ladle is an instrument of householdry made either of wood or any other mettle, and is of great use and so generally





known that I need say no more of it.'

Victor's association with the Regional Furniture Society originates from the very first meeting some quarter of a century ago when a small group of furniture enthusiasts met in the attic of the High Wycombe chair and local history museum at the invitation of the then curator and librarian, Ivan Sparkes. Under a single light bulb, and looking rather like the group of clandestine activists that some thought we were, we decided to form a study group for those who wanted contact with others drawn to our field of study, and it was only later that the society was officially formed. Since then it has flourished, and Victor was a key member, as well as an invaluable study day and course leader, becoming president of the society in 2003. Happily, he was well enough to chair the AGM in Dorset in July 2011. His active role in many aspects of the society's life is marked by his indelible contribution, and sense of a scholar's life cut short so prematurely. Victor also leaves behind his only daughter, Kate, son-in-law, Ben, and two grandchildren, all whom he loved dearly and with whom he spent as much time as he could.

Victor was born in London in 1944, but moved with his parents to South Wales where he spent most of his early childhood, returning to the London area, and attending grammar school. He followed this by attending London University Institute of Education where he obtained a teaching certificate in art and geography (1962-65), followed by a period of teaching pottery, art, and geography. His fascination with early objects began to develop while he was at college, and he started dealing in antiques during the halcyon days of popular interest in antiques, during the mid 1960s.

His first venture was to share a stall in the Portobello Road, and he was quickly drawn to early furniture, pottery, metalwork and carvings. This ever-changing market place provided Victor with the chance to handle a vast range of objects, and after a few years, combining dealing with teaching, he moved to Salisbury where he opened a business as a specialist dealer in early oak furniture and associated objects (1970-74). Later, in 1980, he started, with Janet, a consultancy business (Quercus Consultants) which provided 'Research and advice on the authentication, care, development and presentation of furnishings and interior decoration in medieval and post medieval buildings; including the acquisition, interpretation, conservation and repair of original material; and the design and manufacture of replicated material'.

This ambitious agenda of skills demonstrates the versatility and breadth of knowledge that Victor and his wife brought to the subject, and the list of projects which they undertook over the 30-year period, 1979 - 2009, is prodigious. A few highlights from it might indicate the range

of their work. For example, in the period 1995-1999, Victor and Janet were consultants to the Office of Public Works for the Republic of Ireland, where they advised on proposals for furnishings and interpretational methodology for nine historic properties, including Ross Castle, Killarney, Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary and Drimnagh Castle, Dublin. From 1991-2009 they worked as historical consultants to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, advising on care and interpretation of many of the trust's properties, including Shakespeare's Birthplace and Ann Hathaway's Cottage. During 1988 and 1989, a project undertaking exact replica making for the Bayleaf Farmstead at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum was undertaken.

In addition to the many projects that he and Janet undertook, he also formed close links with both auction houses and collectors of furniture. Over many years, he was a consultant first to Sotheby's and then, for a long period, to Christie's South Kensington. His contact with these and other provincial auction houses has also raised the historical evaluation of oak furniture to new levels, and he will be a great loss to all those to whom he gave advice so generously. He also undertook advisory work for the National Trust, notably at Cotehele in Cornwall, where he headed a memorable RFS study day in 2008.

Perhaps the project which Vic had the greatest affection for, lay in his love for the town of Marlborough, Wiltshire, where he, and a group of others in the town, gained local council support for the restoration of the 17th century Merchant's House which survived in the High Street. This house revealed, beneath layers of later materials, vivid paintwork and other physical evidence of this home and its use. Members of the society paid several visits to the house during the course of its restoration, and after many years of work and fund-raising, it is now open to the public, a fitting testimony to Victor.

When not working on projects in the UK and Ireland, as well as in the USA and Japan, Vic and Jan ran their second company, The Marlborough Lectures, to provide lectures, study courses and seminars in aspects of furnishing and interpretation in early buildings. Victor lectured widely to different bodies in this area, and in 2004 he was admitted as an accredited NADFAS lecturer. Shortly before his death, Victor had been proposed as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries: unfortunately he died just a few days before the election was to take place.

Clearly, the contribution that Victor made in his chosen field of study was highly esteemed, and he leaves a huge and significant legacy, one which will be an inspiration to others for generations to come. At a personal level, I regret that opportunities for the conversation and good fellowship of our later years are now gone: *Carpe Diem*.

**Dr Bernard 'Bill' Cotton**