

# The Christopher Gilbert Lecture: *A Social History of Cumbrian Furniture* by Peter Brears

Cumbria, formerly the counties of Cumberland, Westmoreland and a bit of Lancashire was, until the late eighteenth century, an area of subsistence level yeoman farming. Furnishings were oak, locally grown, and, after 1628, yeomen had rights to timber, a privilege normally reserved for landowners. A taste for old oak furniture took off in the 1830s but access to Cumbria by packhorse routes over Shap and via Appleby and Brough made it difficult to get out. The coming of the railway in 1846 changed all that and the best furniture, some 2–3,000 pieces, has now been taken from the Lake District.

What sort of furniture was there and how was it used? A typical small house of the period would have a cross passage with direct access into an open *downhouse* on one side and a kitchen or *firehouse* on the other. Beyond the firehouse was a parlour or *bower* frequently used for sleeping and really a 'bedsit'. A small staircase rose to the lofts above, which were without division, the farm servants and daughters at one end being divided by a rope and blanket from the men at the other.

The firehouse would typically contain a small cupboard set into a dry wall and called the locker. This was for storing salt and not, as often thought, for spices. A set of shelves would be attached to the beams above. For seating there would be a *scemmel* or *skemmel* beside the fire and bench seating with wide splayed legs 'scrubbed lily white'. Chairs with arms and plain backs, divided or T-shaped, sometimes with cresting and turned front legs would also be found together with dugout or hollow chairs. Joined stools were rare. Tables with four or six legs were between 12 and 24 feet long and often referred to, as 'table frames' indicating perhaps that the tops were loose.

Cupboards, not described as press cupboards but as oak closets or oak cabinets, were of conventional form and, whilst often built into the wall, they could be free standing. In this case they would be covered with a linen cloth on which the pewter was displayed. There is an enormous variety of shape and carcass form; after 1660 some have drawers. The use of these cupboards was typically for storing bread in the form of oatcake. This was not easy to make and not many people could do it so a woman would come and make six months' supply. Some sort of storage was therefore necessary.

Joined chests were also occasionally used for oatcake but more commonly for clothes, bedlinen and cash. These

kists had three or four panels at the front and the ends were often divided by a central muntin. *Arks* and *garners* were used for holding meal or malt, sometimes salt meat and for general storage

There is an incredible variety of carved decoration, highly distinctive, and found not only on cupboards, but on panelling, joined chests, chairs and other furniture. The rich diversity of design usually makes it possible to tell the region but not the date. Motifs include lunettes, guilloches, S-scrolls, serpentines. Lozenges and X-motifs occur in panels. Pieces were often finished with a mixture of blacklead and milk producing a durable polished surface. Furniture could also be washed and rubbed with bracken to produce a green or brown colour.

## References

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HMSO 1936

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## Contemporary artists illustrating interiors

William Collingwood 1819–1903

Emily Nicholson RA fl 1842–57

*Keith Robinson*