

Drapers' Hall, Shrewsbury

The Drapers' Hall is a well-documented work by Shrewsbury carvers of the late sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century, famous for having retained much of its original furniture, including nine pieces identifiable in the 1664 inventory (See Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture. The British Tradition* (rev. ed. 2016), pp. 37–40).

The Hall is unusual in providing not just examples of early furniture, but also makers' names, including those of Francis Bowyer and Richard Ellis (Ellice), listed in the Account Book in 1637. Ellice was the provider of the frame to the painting of King Edward VI and a long table for the Hall. Stylistic similarities suggest he was also responsible for the Master's chair.

Star among the furniture is the low cupboard, on tall feet, listed in the 1664 inventory as 'One Cupboard of drawing boxes with three locks and keys'. Designed to hold the Company's most important documents, it is exceptionally finely designed and made, suggesting that Francis Bowyer, who supplied it in 1637 for £3.01.00 (the locks by Thomas Gratie costing £1.06.08), was well aware of current fashion and may have trained in London or Oxford. Its elegant exterior, with applied motifs of split balusters, shows two doors with urns carved in relief. The three locks are accessed by removing the central pilaster. Examining the inside of the cupboard, it is clear that the mitred edges of the sides and doors gave little opportunity for forcing entry, and the long strap hinges, inset into the interior of the boarded doors, would have proved a further deterrent. A long drawer above the cupboard and a long compartment at the base within, provided for large rolled documents. The main body is fitted with drawers,



Interior of the main body of the cupboard by Francis Bowyer, 1637, Drapers' Hall, Shrewsbury. *Photo David Dewing*



left to right Keith Pinn, Robin Passant (who restored the piece) and Doug Allen (Curator, Drapers' Hall) examining the construction of a drawer in the Drapers' Hall cupboard.
Photo Jeremy Bate

in three tiers, those to the sides built within removeable oak 'drawing boxes', which can be taken out, and lifted by large iron handles to a convenient table. The drawers within these are finely made, dovetailed and with moulded edges to raised panels on the fronts, with neat, turned oak handles. A treat to end a rich day of study.

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