

Matthew Hutton Corner

1875–1956: A Whitby joiner, ship's carpenter, and cabinet maker

Matthew Corner was no Thomas Chippendale, he was like thousands of woodworkers across Britain, a jack-of-all-trades who through economic necessity worked in several branches of the wood trade. Nevertheless, we hope RFS members will be interested in hearing a little of his story.

Matthew, or 'Matty', Corner was born on 28 August 1875 in Silver Street, Whitby, North Yorkshire, the fifth child of Robert Matthew Corner and his wife Jane Hutton. Following his father's trade, Matty was apprenticed to a Whitby cabinetmaker and joiner, a Mr Langdale. Periodically he went to sea as a ship's carpenter, when he was unable to find work on shore, and because he welcomed a change. Like so many Whitby men the sea was in his blood. In 1814 his grandfather, appropriately named Nelson Corner (1800–1846), sailed on the whaling ship *Esk* to Greenland as a 13-year-old apprentice with William Scoresby (1789–1857). Scoresby was an eminent explorer, scientist and inventor of the crow's nest, and a mechanical harpoon which would have been used on the *Esk*. On this voyage the *Esk* was trapped in the ice for nearly three weeks.

Matty served in the Merchant Navy during the First World War and was torpedoed three times. In 1925 he was awarded two campaign medals: the Mercantile Marine Medal and British War Medal. The former was awarded to merchant seamen who had served in war zones, and the latter was the victory medal awarded to all service personnel.

Matty worked for several firms in Whitby and the neighbouring district, including Skiningrove Ironworks and the Whitby Shipbuilding and Engineering Company. He made the wooden roof in the apse of Aislaby Church. His daughter, Lilian, told us proudly as we admired the roof, that her father was the only man in Whitby who could build it in this style, which strongly resembles a boat. His skill as a ship's carpenter and his work for the Whitby Shipbuilding and Engineering Company must have made him the ideal joiner for the job.

In October 1914, when the hospital ship *Robilla* was wrecked off the East Cliff in a rough sea, Matty Corner was involved in rescue operations with other Whitby men, forming at one point a human chain to bring survivors ashore. Women and children also played a role, gathering on the cliff top above the wreck to pray and sing hymns. Lilian told us that she, aged 10 years,



The crew of the SS *Firfield*, with Matty Corner holding the lifebelt. Built in West Hartlepool, the ship was torpedoed in the Mediterranean in 1916. *Photo Susan and Ian Stuart*

and her mother Constance, were amongst the hymn singers.

Later, like many Whitby joiners, Matty Corner made some pieces of furniture from the wood salvaged from the *Robilla*. He also made the fireplace surround in the sitting room at Sandbeck hotel, on the West Cliff, Whitby, the extended family home. The swing doors behind the front door of Sandbeck were another item made with wood from the *Robilla*, and they can still be seen in the hotel today. We do not know if the oak corner cupboard which we inherited was made from the *Robilla*, but we do know it was made by Matty. We

were given it because Lilian appreciated Susan cleaning the butterfly hinges, which are typical of the Edwardian period. Ian's brother inherited a smaller carved corner cupboard, so Matty was also a carver. These pieces were made in his workshop in Cliff Street. In the mid-1960s we cleared the workshop and have a collection of Matty's tools with his name 'M.H.CORNER' and the manufacturer 'ARVILL & SONS EBOR WORKS YORK' impressed on them; most of his tools were made in York. Unfortunately, his name stamp itself has not survived. If he stamped his furniture, we have not noticed it on family pieces.



Aislaby Church apse roof, woodwork by Matty Corner. *Photo Susan and Ian Stuart*



The hospital steamer *Robilla* of Glasgow, wrecked at Whitby, 30 October 1914. Postcard. *Photo Liz Hancock*



Corner cupboard by Matty Corner. *Photo Susan and Ian Stuart*

Although Matty was exceptionally good with his hands, he had no business sense. He backed a horse almost every day of his life, mostly unsuccessfully, and he also drank pretty well every day, and spent the money he earned at sea in the pub. He used to chew tobacco, and drink tea from his saucer, in the time-honored tradition, but Ian was banned from imitating his grandfather!

Susan and Ian Stuart



Plane made by Arvill & Sons, York, branded 'M.H. CORNER'. *Photo Susan and Ian Stuart*