

The Burrell Collection - Oak Furniture

British traditional oak furniture was always a favourite with Sir William Burrell. 'Take it from me,' he said on one occasion, 'you start with oak and then go to mahogany and other woods. But mark my words, you always come back to oak.'

His preference is well to the fore in the furniture section of the Collection: the majority of the more than-500 items in this category are of oak. Many of the pieces were purchased for Hutton Castle near Berwick-on-Tweed, which Burrell acquired in 1916. This medieval and 16th-century Border house formed an appropriate setting for his oak furniture, which ranges in date from the 14th to the late 17th century. A considerable number of the pieces can be seen in the three reconstructed Hutton Castle rooms, the Dining Room, the Hall and the Drawing Room; and some of the most important individual items are exhibited in various galleries.

THE FURNITURE MAKERS

Oak furniture was made by several different trades: carpenters, joiners and turners, who were organised into various self-protecting and regulating organisations. The first of the woodworking trades to establish itself as a craft guild was the carpenters and the Royal Charter for the : Guild of Master Carpenters of London, was granted in 1477. During the late Middle Ages the London joiners escaped from the shadow of the carpenters and in 1570 severed themselves completely from them: From the middle, of the 16th century turning became an important element-in furniture-making and the: Worshipful Company of. Turners of London was incorporated in 1604. The various, crafts, fought hard to maintain their lines-of demarcation and there were constant disputes between them in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Similar squabbles occurred in the larger provincial cities, but on the whole the furniture makers co-existed more harmoniously outside London. In several cities various trades even belonged to the same guild and in the smaller cities and towns one organisation was sufficient to serve all the furniture crafts.

The workshops of those engaged in furniture-making during the 16th and 17th centuries varied in size. In London and the larger cities a master craftsman could employ several "tradesmen" (journeymen) and apprentices, whereas in the smaller towns and the villages there would only be sufficient demand to occupy one man.



1. The Bury Chest c 1340 (14-352)



2. The Durham Table c 1500 (14-312)



3. Hutch, or food cupboard early 16th century (This one is NOT 14-411)



4. The Brome Table dated 1569 (14-306)



5. Court cupboard c 1580-1600 (14-432)



6. Press cupboard late 16th century (14-398)



7. Conyers armchair early 17th century (14-71)



8. 'Aberdeen' armchair dated 1627 (14-92)



9. Armchair with arms of Charles II made in the 1660s (14-199)

THE MIDDLE AGES

Very little authentic medieval domestic (as distinct from ecclesiastical) furniture has survived. What there is comes from the houses of the well-to-do classes: the merchants, manorial lords and the aristocracy; the meagre moveable furnishings of the peasantry do not appear to have survived or else have remained unrecognised.

Medieval inventories and contemporary paintings and illuminated manuscripts show that from the 14th to the early 16th centuries even the largest residences were sparsely furnished by today's standards. The principal items of furniture in this period were chests, cupboards and tables.

The earliest piece of oak furniture in the Collection is the chest made for Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham between 1334 and 1345 (ill. 1). It is a 'boarded' chest, i.e. it is made of oak boards nailed together and strengthened by iron bands. There is painted heraldic decoration on the inside of the lid, a feature the Bury Chest has in common with two chests of slightly later date in the Public Record Office, London. The Bury Chest was originally in the Court of Chancery of the Palatinate of Durham and was probably used to contain documents. Chests in medieval times were also used for storage and transportation of clothes and valuables.

Tables in this period consisted of heavy boards set on trestles which could be quickly set up in halls and just as swiftly removed. The Durham Table (ill. 2) marks a step towards a more permanent form. It has a hinged top which when folded out rests on a pair of trestles. The central section contains storage cupboards with panelled sides carved with linenfold decoration; the feet and supports are also finely carved and moulded. The Durham Table is one of the most elaborate medieval tables to survive. Like the Bury Chest it comes from Durham and was made in about 1500.

The most common surviving form of food storage in the 15th and early 16th centuries was the cupboard known variously as a press, aumbry or hutch. It usually consists of interior shelving, a front with a hinged door and openings to permit ventilation. These perforations are frequently carved to represent windows and

sometimes animals. Originally there were cloth coverings behind these openings. There are several hutches in the Burrell Collection (ill. 3).

The word 'cupboard' in medieval times and later meant literally what it said: it was a board or boards for the display of gold and silver plate in order to demonstrate an individual's wealth; it was also used as a sideboard for serving wine and other drinks to persons of rank. Originally the cupboard was, like the table, no more than a temporary arrangement of boards on trestles, but from the 14th century it evolved rapidly into a precise form and became one of the most important pieces of household furniture, a distinction it retained into the 17th century. The permanent version was known as a buffet or dressoir. The Burrell Collection owns the Wynne Buffet, a rare if somewhat restored survivor from the end of the Middle Ages; it consists of a closed storage space surmounted by a canopy overhanging an open area for exhibiting the plate. This buffet was made in c.1535 for Sir John Wynne of Gwydyr Castle in Wales and bears his arms and initials. Some of the decorative carvings are based on Italian Renaissance designs which infiltrated into the British Isles during the early 16th century.

THE ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN PERIOD c. 1560-1650

Few pieces of furniture can be assigned securely to the early years of Elizabeth I's reign, but one of them is in the Burrell Collection and is of outstanding quality (ill. 4). It is a joined table resting on tapering legs linked by stretchers acting both as ties and footrests. The most remarkable feature of the table is its inlaid marquetry decoration, comprising strapwork cartouches and arabesques enclosing satyrs, putti, birds, animals and shields of arms of the Brome and Crossley families; the cartouche in the centre of the top enframes the initials IB and MB and the date 1569. There is a similar table at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire and both pieces were probably made by the same craftsmen, who had knowledge of the type of Renaissance decoration made fashionable by the Italian designers of the palace of Fontainebleau in France.

The restrained decoration as found on the Brome Table was soon submerged by an extravagance of carved ornamentation, which characterises English furniture between c. 1570 and the middle of the 17th century. It was an expression of the owner's status in society. The more elaborate and therefore costly the piece, the more its possessor hoped to impress his guests and his servants alike. A press cupboard in the Collection (ill. 6) shows not only how the repertoire of ornament had changed from that used in the Middle Ages to certain stock elements based on Italian, French and Flemish sources, but also how it invaded almost every available surface. Ostentatious furnishings like this cupboard complement the great Elizabethan 'prodigy' houses such as Longleat, Hardwick and Burghley which were built by the Queen's courtiers and ministers.

Although trestle tables continued in use into the 18th century, from the middle of the 16th century they were replaced in fashionable households by the framed table. This has the top supported by a secure and permanent under frame with legs and stretchers, as on the Brome Table (ill. 4). Dining tables of considerable length were required for large households. The joined table displayed in the Hutton Castle Hall is more than 20 feet long and is supported by no fewer than eight legs. The top is constructed from a single massive piece of oak. This table has the initials RCB and is dated 1581.

The construction and decoration of cupboards was closely linked with that of tables and many were no doubt made en suite. The unenclosed cupboard was little more than a side table and was used, like the medieval buffet for the display of plate (ill. 5). A variant of this has an enclosed storage compartment often with canted sides, on the upper stage. These are usually known as livery cupboards, and the fully enclosed cupboards, with compartments fronted by doors, are termed press or parlour cupboards (ill. 6). These are normally in two sections for ease of handling.

During the Middle Ages and the first quarter of the 16th century the common form of seating in the houses of the well-to-do was the stool. As the 16th century progressed, joined armchairs with turned legs and open arms were introduced and in the following century they became increasingly common. The decorative carvings on chairs were derived from the same repertoire as tables and cupboards. In addition a number of armchairs have the initials and, if appropriate, the shield of arms of the owner; the date is also quite frequently carved on them. These elements have led to attempts to identify regional styles in chair-making.

It has been suggested, for example, that a small group of chairs connected with the Conyers family of Hornby Castle in Yorkshire, one of which is in the Burrell Collection (ill. 7), was made either in north-west England or south-west Scotland.

Another armchair (ill. 8) dated 1627 and with a shield of arms and the initials PG and MG can be associated with Aberdeen because of its similarity to a series of chairs made for Trinity Hall in that city. A third armchair in the Collection together with a standing chest and another chair appear to be connected with William Stanley (1640-70), a younger son of the Earl of Derby. The Burrell chair/dated 1659, has the initials WS.

A rare instance of the royal arms on English 17th-century oak furniture is the armchair bearing the heraldic achievement of Charles II, which was no doubt made in celebration of his restoration to the throne (ill. 9). It is not a sophisticated piece, but the idiosyncratic spelling of the inscription and the earpieces in the form of primitive warriors add to its charm.

The Burrell Collection also includes a number of oak furnishings other than chests, cupboards, tables and chairs. Amongst them are small desk boxes, stools and rocking cradles.

FURTHER READING

Chinnery, V: *Oak Furniture The British Tradition*, Antique Collectors' Club 1979

Chinnery, V: 'A Scottish Collector par excellence Oak Furniture in the Burrell Collection', *Antique Finder*, 15 no. 12 (December 1976), pp. 27-31

Eames, P: 'Furniture in England, France and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century', *Furniture History*, 13 (1977)

Girouard, M: *Life in the English Country House*, Yale 1978

© 1985 Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries The Burrell Collection