

Turmoil, Peace and Migration

Influences on Furniture

A study of the development of furniture and its embellishments is an excellent way of demonstrating the influence of political, social and technological change on furniture design. To demonstrate this point a quick meander through the Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean eras follows.

Throughout these eras the predominant timber used was oak. Though most of it was grown in England, some timber was imported from the Baltic areas for the finer pieces. In the latter part of the 16th century inlay was popular using native woods such as oak, holly, sycamore, poplar, beech, ash, yew and fruitwoods. In the late 16th and early 17th century walnut was increasingly used for finer pieces. However, it is less durable than oak and so few early examples have survived. Native timbers, such as elm, which were used for tabletops, are also poor survivors into the 21st century. Ash and beech and occasionally yew were used in chair manufacture.

Tudor furniture (1500-1558) was both sparse and utilitarian, for it had to be readily moved in case of household fire or enemy attacks. Much of the furniture of this time was collapsible, portable or expendable. The main items of furniture at this time, listed in order of sophistication of design, were the bed, the chest, crude stools, benches and tables. Wealth and prestige of households were physically displayed by the fineness of banners and wall hangings, the amount of silverware and gold on show and the quality of the blankets on the bed.

Furniture decoration was mainly done by carving and in households this meant copying ecclesiastical styles including gothic arches and medallion heads. Much of the furniture was carved with the date and initials of the owner. Slab construction predominated which utilised mortice and tenon joinery. Willow, with its long fibres, was favoured as the pegs, since it was almost impossible to break. The man who jointed the frames became known as a joynor.

In the 16th century the most common type of stool produced was probably that of trestle construction. These stools had boarded ends, seats and underframes and shaping and carving of the Gothic influence. One of the earliest known chairs from the Middle Ages was of box construction with panels beneath the seat and arms. Carvings which looked like loosely folded or arranged linen (linenfold carvings) were in the panels beneath the seat and in the back. Chairs like these were both heavy and cumbersome and designed to be permanently kept in one location, such as the raised dais found at the end of the hall in most houses of the period.

Lighter jointed chairs such as the *caquetoire* were introduced in the earlier part of the 16th century, from France. The verb *caqueter* (to chatter) gave basis to its name, and these later became known as conversation chairs. The backs are typically high and narrow and the arms usually widely splayed.

Tables provided in the communal dining halls were generally of trestle construction and had elm tops. These very long tops, (up to 27 feet) were supported by massive oak pillar supports. In the late Middle Ages, tables of framed construction were produced as an alternative to the trestle type. Sixteenth-century chests continued to follow designs from the 13th century. They consisted of boards nailed or doweled together to form a box that was raised off the damp floor by extending the end boards to form short legs. Carpenters made such chests from native timbers, most commonly oak. Although simple to construct, there was no allowance for movement in the timber, and so shrinkage and warpage could result in the boards splitting away from the nails or dowels used for jointing.

Chests were later made using a framed construction with mortice and tenon joints.



Jacobean dining chair

Such construction enabled chamfered edge panels to fit in grooves provided on the frame members. Dominant decorations were of the ecclesiastical style.

Portable writing desks have a long history, going back to the Middle Ages. A curious example fitted with drawers and finished in gilt and painted leather dates back to c.1525. Most

surviving examples from the 16th century, however, are much plainer consisting of a carved oak box with a sloping surface at the top on which a book or papers can be laid for reading. Frequently referred to as Bible boxes, their true function is for storage of writing materials.

The bed in the Middle Ages was little more than a wooden frame, the mattress being supported on a mesh of ropes fixed to the frame. A canopy or tester was suspended from the ceiling, later to be replaced by supporting posts. Curtains surrounded the bed to keep out draughts and these particular hangings in the finer homes were of rich imported cloth.

Elizabethan furniture (1558-1603) saw the introduction of turnings, canopies, and early cupboards with simplistic sliding drawers (run in and out of the carcass frame) and doors.

General prosperity, peace and progress followed the accession of Queen Elizabeth I. A new middle class of tradesmen and businessmen emerged and their homes were large and often similar to the titled and landed gentry. Servants' quarters became separate to the master and his family. Different classes of people led to different styles of furniture.

Turnings and carvings became more ornate and separate trades and their associated guilds (the turners, carvers and joiners) developed in the major cities. Provincial furniture makers were jacks of all trades, covering the three different aspects in their workshops.

In rural areas turning was done with a pole lathe. A young springy tree was cut and set at an angle with a rope attached to its tip. The spring in the tree pulled the rope up, and the pressure on a treadle pulled it down. This caused the piece of timber to turn one way and then the other. This method was used even in the 19th century prior to the impact of industrialisation. Foreign craftsmanship was much admired and acknowledged to be finer than that available from English craftsmen. Considerable importation of furniture and migration of talent occurred bringing new ideas and skills to England.

The Tudor dining hall with its tables along the walls evolved into the Elizabethan dining room. Chairs with backs were required once the tables were moved away from the walls. Fires were built into walls and the dining table was placed in the middle of the room.

Chairs from the late 16th century tended to be of frame and panel construction. Backs were often carved and the finer pieces were inlaid and surmounted by carved cresting. Stretches were near to ground level and pegged. Such chairs retained popularity until the Restoration, but following the 1660s became unfashionable in London, and in the early 1700s became less fashionable in country areas too.

Settles of joined construction were made to seat two or more people. Chair-tables and bench-tables, now known as monks' benches, were also constructed. These were chairs and benches characterised by hinged backs which could be lowered onto the arms, should a table be required. Lighter and more portable chairs without arms were produced late in the 16th century. These were known as back stools or when upholstered known as farthingale chairs. Most chairs were made more comfortable with the addition of loose cushions.

Tables became smaller as the family no longer dined with their servants. These were usually constructed of oak, rectangular in shape and supported at the corners by carved and/or turned legs which were connected by stretchers near to the ground level.

Frame construction chests continued in popularity though now they tended to be more decorative. Carved and sometimes inlaid panels depicted both floral and geometric designs.

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Custom designed Jacobean oak dining table

From the late 16th century some chests incorporated drawers in their bases. These mule chests (named because they are a hybrid of the chest and drawer function) became very popular in the 17th century.

Towards the end of the 16th century houses had various types and variations of cupboards on stands. Initially they were a series of open shelves used for the storage or display of drinking vessels, literally a cupboard. Canopies were developed over hall and buffet cupboards, and these were supported by ornately carved turnings.

Court cupboards represent one of the earliest pieces of furniture designed purely for display. They consisted of open shelves, usually two, which were designed to display plates and cups. In wealthy households, plates would be of gold or silver. Tradesmen and yeomen usually had pewter plates. These cupboards were

frequently elaborately decorated with carving and inlay. Court cupboards often had a drawer in the frieze (a border, often decorated, just below the cornice).

Up to the end of the 16th century valuables had been kept in small leather-covered chests or coffers in England. Some cabinets did exist in royal households and leading families of the nobility. These would have been small and would have stood on another piece of furniture, or a stand made specifically for the purpose. In the main, these would have been foreign pieces. Such items were not typically made in England until after the Restoration. Writing boxes were still popular and incorporated elaborate inlay detail.

Beds with their four posts, panelled headboard and cornices were richly carved and inlaid. The bedroom was a much more public place than it is today. Important visitors might



Sympathetically restored oak panel chest with original hinges

be received there, and the births of children were spectacles attended by numerous relatives and other people. The furniture decoration and hangings were most important in this main reception room. It is interesting to note that wills written in these times often describe the bed in great detail, whereas other items of furniture rate only the briefest notation.

Jacobean furniture (James I 1603-1625) was mainly advanced through the influence of the Continent and the inventiveness of local craftsmen. Furniture became even more ornate and deeply carved. Cup and cover turnings were replaced by the more elegant vase-like baluster shapes. Bobbin or ball and ring turnings were quite popular and sometimes used to make up complete chair frames.

Chairs for people of consequence were elegant, upholstered armchairs on X-frame supports. Often they had matching footstools. A number of these chairs have survived, and a contemporary painting exists of James I seated on such a chair.

Table legs now were formed in a most ornate fashion with great turned and carved bulbs resembling covered cups. These bulbs were decorated with either acanthus leaf carving or deep gadroons. The underframe or frieze of the table was either carved or inlaid with geometrical designs in woods such as bog oak and holly. Some tables incorporated two leaves that were pulled out to extend the length of the table. This type of table was known as the drawleaf, draw or drawing table.

A whole range of smaller ancillary tables was also made, mainly in oak. Small gate-leg tables became popular in the 17th century. They often had baluster-shaped legs of simple designs turned on the pole lathe. The joinery was typically mortice and tenon secured with wooden dowels. A single gate at the rear swings out to support the semi-circular flap that otherwise folds flat onto the fixed half of the top. Other tables had hinged tops to reveal a storage box beneath. Country craftsmen continued to construct oak furniture throughout the 17th century, even once it became unfashionable in London and large urban centres.

Although most of the surviving tables are of oak, inventories from these times indicate that tables of walnut, some with imported marble tops of intricate design, once existed in the houses of the wealthy.

By now, drawers no longer just slid in and out of the carcass frame. Efficient runner systems were developed including side runners, drawer runners and a rabbit groove worked into the sides of the drawers. The dovetail joint was in place in 1632 according to an agreement made between the Joiners' and Carpenters' Companies of London. By the end of the 16th century drawers were beginning to appear in chests (for instance the mule chests). Originally they were called tills or drawing boxes. These were

originally very crude in construction.

Cupboards existed in a number of forms. Some with pierced or barred doors were clearly designed for the storage of food. Today these may be known as dole or livery cupboards. To keep them free of vermin, some were hung from walls. Decoration showed architectural influence and both carvings and inlays depicted geometric and floral designs. Elaborately framed cupboards (presses or aumbries) were used for storage in 16th and 17th century halls and parlours. Some had upper and lower sections, typically the lower section would be the cupboard and the upper section would be a shelf for display. Bulbs on the turned corner supports for the cornice and ornate carving and inlays were typical of these times.

Wardrobes or clothes presses were used to store clothing. Typically of frame and panel construction, they were quite common until the late 17th century, after which tallboys and chests of drawers, enjoyed greater popularity.

Court cupboards began developing a simpler baluster form and the bulbs protruding from the supports of earlier examples were no longer used. Writing boxes, still common, were embellished with carvings and inlays typical of this time. The woodwork of beds became less ornate in the 17th century, though the hangings became even more magnificent.

Restoration and reproductions of pieces from such early times requires cognisance of the technology, decoration and timber used in such pieces. Many items have not survived through to the 21st century, and where they have, they are nearly always oak. Most are frame construction panelled chests, which are rebuilt, in the original fashion, using the same materials. Usually the panels are quite warped and split, and in such instances they are sympathetically restored to maintain the value of the piece.

There is very little other furniture from this era in the public domain. Most pieces have been bought into private collections where they are very well maintained. Occasionally, as they moved from one owner to another they can be damaged through transportation and climatic changes.

There is no reason why the same style and quality of furniture cannot be reproduced today. Sourcing timber can be difficult, but it is not impossible. Identical construction methods and hand-made joints can be done, even today. Even though most of the furniture from the Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean times has not survived the passage of time, the skills have been religiously passed on from one master craftsman to the next ■

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