

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2008

The History of English Furniture

David Embling came to speak about the History of English Furniture in January. He spoke from practical experience as a cabinet maker and furniture restorer, and illustrated his talk using examples of furniture he had worked on.

He had begun his apprenticeship in the 1950s - a time when timber was in short supply, and would use 'other bits of furniture' to restore pieces. Although now-a-days all sorts of timber can be bought, re-using old timber is best - in particular to obtain a matching colour.

David explained that in the 1200s people travelled either by horse or on foot - or occasionally by ox. Only the wealthy could afford furniture of any sort - people who ruled part of the realm under the king's discretion. They would travel from place to place - moving on when supplies ran short. They would carry their precious goods with them, and for this would use a large chest - such as that which became the parish chest at Harbledown church. Oak was used as it split easily along a straight line, was then dug out using an adze until hollow within, and finished off with iron chisels (not steel, as the craftsmen of the time would not have been able to afford such). By the time the log was dug out, the other splits in the timber would mean it would need extra support, and so it would be bound with iron straps, fixed with hand-made iron nails that would pass right through the wood, be bent over inside, and knocked back into the wood. The top was left round - to help the rain to run off. It was thought that the chest ended up in a church following a decree by the Pope that all churches should have such (although most parish chests are flat-topped).

The next design, from about 1400, was the 6 plank chest - made of planks nailed together. These had legs about 4 - 6 inches high to keep the chest off the damp earth floor. Larger chests of this type, with a flat top, could be used for 'guests' to sleep on - rather than the floor. Many chests were originally brightly painted, although most have since been stripped back to the natural wood.

A further ecclesiastical chest - from Crondall, dated from 1546 - was lined with leather, and between that and the timber was a layer of white plaster. This was added to ensure the contents were kept absolutely dry - the documents that had been kept inside for many centuries were found to be in perfect condition. Such chests were required to have 3 locks - as a security measure.

David next showed us a chest about 6ft long, with a sloped top and 18" long legs. This had a domestic use, as a flour container, large enough for a year's supply. The lady of the house would use a dipstick daily to see if any flour had been taken overnight - the sloped top was so that when opened it created a trough for the dough to be left before being put in the oven, whilst the long legs were a way to keep rodents out. The next development was to have proper joints to the timber, without needing nails. A stool from Shakespeare's time shows early mortice and tenon joints, secured by a wooden peg driven through the joint - the square end of the peg crimping into the round hole. The legs were 'turned' on a pole lathe - one of the first pieces of machinery for the cabinet maker to use.

A development of the pegged joint was seen in the large refectory table, with a 3 inch thick top. The timber would be cut, rubbed with sand and water and then polished with lumps of beeswax - a task done by the village men who's hands had hard and leathery skin. The table was so heavy it took 6 men to lift it. A rather more delicate, Tudor period, table had draw leaves and stretcher rails that were flat - for feet to rest on for 'comfort' - to keep them clear of draughts. The table had been made in the time when Catholicism was important in this country - the legs having a 'cup and cap' turning based on the chalice

and its cover. Linenfold panelling also had a religious significance, as it represented the linen found in Christ's tomb, and was again popular in the time of catholic teaching in England.

By the Stuart era, furniture had become more lightweight - so it could be easily moved - with lighter timber, cane backs, and upholstered seats of velvet stuffed with lambs wool. The carving had progressed to pierced work, making it light and decorative. However, during the Civil War, such things were hated by the Parliamentarians, who would smash and burn it if discovered. Fortunately many were hidden away and survived, but are now under attack from within, by woodworm, and needing careful restoration.

By the late 1600s, the Dutch had a strong influence on furniture design. Walnut veneers on an oak carcass would be decorated with inlaid boxwood, with holly used for the lighter parts of the design, and dyed sycamore for coloured portions. There would be 'secret drawers' - both in the main structure and also hidden away inside.

David ended with pictures of the first item he had as a full restoration - a corner cupboard with black sticky varnish on it. Having been asked to strip this off, he discovered a some sky blue paint below - created with earth colours in a 'white of egg' (not oil) paint. Painstakingly removing the varnish 2 square inches at a time, the picture was found to be virtually intact. The picture was thought to date from the time of Rembrandt, as it is in the same style - but parts of the structure that were hidden from view, such as the top, were quite crudely made.
