

Living
with
Early
Oak

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Seventeenth-Century English Furniture
Then and Now

John Fiske and Lisa Freeman

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To Matthew Fiske
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Too short a life, dammit.

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Timeline

All timelines risk implying a false precision to the beginnings and endings of cultural trends. This one is no exception. The dates in it should be taken as indicative of mainstream taste: examples of forms or of decoration will be found before and after the dates given, particularly after: trends begin and spread relatively quickly but peter out slowly and unevenly. The dates do not identify specific years but are the center of a roughly five-year span. This timeline should not be used to date specific pieces of furniture, though it may help to determine if a piece is early or late in its period.

TUDOR (Henry VIII 1491-1547, Edward IV 1547-1553, Mary 1553-1558)

- 1500 Linenfold and simple Parchemin panels become popular.
- 1520 Romaine panels appear.
- 1536 Dissolution of the Monasteries begins.
- 1540 Simple Parchemin panels become enriched.
- 1560 Linenfold, Romaine, Parchemin panels decline.

ELIZABETHAN (Elizabeth 1558-1603)

- 1560 The carving of turned legs and posts becomes popular.
Caryatids and Atlantes coming in.
Grotesques coming in.
Roseaces coming in.
- 1565 Bulbous melon or cup-and-cover leg on tables, court cupboards, and beds becoming fashionable.
- 1570 Architectural inlay appears on furniture.
Fluted pilasters appear.
Cabuchon bosses appear.
Strapwork carving appears.
Bible and writing boxes made from now until c. 1700.
- 1580 Guilloche and Roseace carving fashionable until c. 1640, but used to c. 1700.
Open court cupboards appear.
Walnut used for some high class furniture.
- 1595 Mahogany discovered by Sir Walter Raleigh.
- 1600 Lozenge carving appears.

Panel back chairs acquire cresting.
Scalloping the lower edge of seat rails on joint stools and wainscot chairs becomes popular.

JACOBEAN (James I 1603-1625, Charles I 1625-1648)

- 1610 Farthingale chairs appear.
1620 A few upholstered chairs and stools made for court and aristocracy.
1630 Caryatids and Atlantes decline.
Strapwork declines.
Inlay declines.
Scalloping on the lower side of joint stool rails and front seat rails of wainscot chairs declines.
1635 Enclosed chests of drawers appear.
Spiral turnings appear, become popular c. 1660.
Lozenge very fashionable.
1640 Guilloche and Roseace go out of fashion, but are still found until c. 1700 especially in the north.
Applied split-balusters and moldings appear.
Pearl and bone inlay appears.
Boarded ends replace paneled ends on coffers.
“Cromwellian” chairs appear.

COMMONWEALTH or CROMWELLIAN (1648-1659)

- 1650 Carving discouraged, figural carving disappears.
Backstools become popular, particularly in the north, until c. 1700.
Ball, or bobbin, and ball-and-ring turnings appear.
Leather-upholstered chairs appear.

RESTORATION or CAROLEAN (Charles II 1660-1685, James II 1685-1689)

- 1660 Draw tables no longer made.
Carving on bedsteads declining.
Gate-leg tables popular, long tables declining.
Spiral turnings popular.
Caning on chair seats and backs becomes fashionable.
Applied decorations (bosses, split balusters, moldings) in high fashion.
Turned wooden pulls on drawers .
Flat stretchers become fashionable, especially on small tables.
Bun feet appear.
1665 Cromwellian chairs replaced by high-backed caned chairs, usually in

- walnut, until c. 1700.
 Pendants replace turned supports on top tier of press cupboards.
- 1666 Great Fire of London destroyed 13,000 houses and their contents. Continental craftsmen were allowed in, and London became the furniture manufacturing center of the western world.
- 1670 Ball, and ball-and-ring turnings decline.
 Loop drop handles decline.
 “Restoration” chairs with crowns or crown and cupids in fashion.
 Chests of drawers become popular, replacing coffers, particularly in the south.
 Applied geometric moldings standard decoration for drawer-fronts, and some panels on chests and doors.
 Low dressers appear.
 S-scroll decoration popular until c. 1700.
- 1675 Double S-scroll leg appears.
 Marquetry appears.
- 1680 Serpentine stretchers, often of X-form, appear.
 Baluster-turned stiles on chair backs.
 Applied split-bobbin molding popular until 1700.
 Oyster veneering become popular.
 Candlestands appear.
- 1685 Upholstered wing chairs appear.
 Pearl and bone inlay declines.

WILLIAM & MARY (William and Mary 1689-1702; Mary died 1695, William III 1695-1702)

- 1690 Ebonized bosses declining.
 Octagonal legs appear.
 Flat stretchers decline.
 Bracket feet appear.
 Desks, or bureaus, appear.
 Seaweed pattern in marquetry becomes fashionable.
 Fiddle splats appear.
- 1695 Cabriole legs appear.
 Ball and claw feet appear.
 “Hoop back” or Queen Anne chair backs begin to replace tall-backs.
 Cupped legs fashionable.
 Hoof feet begin 10-year period of fashion.
- 1700 Caning declines.
 Bracket feet dominant on case pieces.
 Knee-hole desks appear.
 Hooded and broken pediments appear.

- 1700 Console tables appear.
Tall boys, chests on stands, appear.
Seventeenth-century carving disappears.
Daybeds, coffer, paneled-back chairs disappear.
Bible boxes and writing slopes decline.

Preface

Where this Book Comes From

This book has twin roots, one in our experience as dealers and the other in our previous lives in universities.

It has grown out of hundreds of conversations with our customers. It is a book about what people want to know about seventeenth century oak furniture:

- what it is and why it is the way that it is;
- how people lived with it then, and how they might use it today;
- what to look out for when buying it; and
- how to look after it in the home.

The fact that we deal in English furniture in America (and, incidentally, that John is English and Lisa American) has shaped these conversations and questions: Americans will, inevitably, ask some questions that the English won't. This transatlantic perspective is also an integral part of our own thinking, and we believe that it gives this book a different tone from most books on English furniture.

While we are dealers in early oak, we also live with it. Early oak furniture is part of our lives, and not merely a commodity in which we trade. We collected it, ate off it, and furnished with it long before we dealt in it. We have centered this book around what we might call "everyday oak," that is, the furniture with which "middling folk" furnished their homes, rather than the special pieces of the court and aristocracy. This honest, sturdy furniture is as appropriate to the people who use it now as it was to its original owners.

The second root was planted in the university world. Before becoming full-time antique dealers, we were both involved in the discipline of cultural studies and material culture, John as a professor and author, and Lisa as a publisher. Cultural studies is based upon a simple premise: every society produces things that enable its members to live comfortably. These objects are specific to that society, and can provide rich insights into the lives of the people who live with them. They are, literally, living things. Cultural studies teaches us that objects as ordinary as tables and chairs are as significant as Shakespeare.

In this book, then, we bring together the three essentials for getting the most pleasure from early oak furniture:

- We admire its beauty and strength and analyze the distinctiveness of both its appearance and its construction.
- We celebrate its usefulness, both then when it was new, and now when it is antique.
- We read it as documents written in oak that give us insights into where we came from.

Overall, then, we aim to show how form, function and history illuminate each other, and to encourage the reader to see all three dimensions simultaneously.

The Organization of the Book

Living with Early Oak is divided into three parts.

Part I: *When Antiques Were New* is an account of seventeenth-century domestic life as we can read it in its furniture. It treats furniture as historical documents that are simultaneously the products and the records of peoples' lifestyles.

Part II: *Forms and Functions* describes the main forms of seventeenth-century furniture that are available to today's collectors. It gives glimpses of how they were lived with then, when they were new, and how they can be lived with now, when they are antique.

Part III: *An Owners' Handbook* is a practical manual for today's collectors. It offers advice on what to look out for when buying early oak, and on how to look after it in the home.

At the back of the book readers will find a Glossary and References.

Language and Jargon

Language changes, but things do not. Therein lies a problem. The same piece of furniture has been called many different names over its lifetime, and still is. In each case we familiarize our readers with all the names they might meet, while preferring one as the most accurate and useful.

Technical processes and details have specialist names – jargon, as it is often called. When well used, jargon clarifies our understanding; when used badly it muddies it. We have tried to use it sparingly and well. We have explained it as we use it and have added a glossary at the end of the book. You can't understand anything properly without understanding the language that experts use when they talk about it.

There is one small group of jargon words that is so fundamental and elementary that you can't start reading the book if you don't understand them. They are joined (including joiner, joinery, joint), mortise-and-tenon, panel, and, finally, rail, stile, and muntin.

A joiner makes furniture by using a mortise-and-tenon joint to join two boards at right angles. All joined furniture depends upon one basic structure: a rectangular frame made of four boards mortise-and-tenoned together. In storage (or “case”) furniture, this frame encloses a panel, which is set in grooves in the inside of the frame. The frame takes the weight, so the panel can be thin. In tables and chairs (“support” furniture), these frames are open and support the tops and seats. Joined and paneled construction uses wood economically, it makes furniture light and easily moveable, and it looks good. It also allows the panel to move with changes in humidity, thus reducing the likelihood of it splitting.

In case furniture the horizontal boards are known as rails, the vertical ones as stiles and muntins. Stiles are load-bearing, usually extending downward as legs; muntins divide and support two adjacent panels. Often the distinction between stile and muntin is unnecessary, in which case we use the word stile to include both.

In support furniture (chairs, stools, tables), the same names apply, but with exceptions: rails are the horizontal boards joining the tops of the legs and supporting the chair seats or table tops (they are often called aprons or friezes.) The bottom rails of the frame, however, are called stretchers. The vertical, load-bearing sides of the frame are called legs, not stiles, except when they extend above the seat to form a chair back. A paneled chair back is formed by two vertical stiles joined by horizontal rails, of which the upper is the crest rail. Legs and stretchers may be turned, except at the joints, which are always left as square blocks for the mortises and tenons.

References and Illustrations

References to modern books are given with the author’s name followed by the date of publication and the page number in parentheses. Full details are given in the References at the end.

References to books published in the period are treated similarly. Other period sources, such as inventories or diaries, are often cited by a number of modern authorities. In this case, no modern reference is given. When a source is cited by one modern author only, the author is credited.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the research of the furniture historians who have preceded us. We add no new research material but instead recount their results in a different tone of voice for a different reader.

The culmination of this scholarship is Victor Chinnery’s definitive book *Oak Furniture: the British Tradition*, but he is the first to acknowledge the work of those who went before him. Most of them are also acknowledged in this book, and their works are listed in the References.

There is another form of scholarship on which we have relied extensively. It is less well documented, but is no less important. Dealers in early oak have handled thousands of pieces, turned them inside out and upside down, and have collectively accumulated an immense body of knowledge. We are grateful to our fellow dealers on both sides of the Atlantic for countless conversations, demonstrations, and cups of tea. If we have to single one out for special thanks, it must be Andrew Singleton of Suffolk House Antiques. Thank you, Andrew, for all your help with both the text and the illustrations.

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