

# MR BOWEN'S SECRETAIRE AND BOOKCASE: A LABELLED CARMARTHEN PIECE c. 1795

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Although it has long been known that eighteenth-century Carmarthen was a centre of fashionable cabinet making, this has not been reflected by the existence of reliably provenanced pieces. It is particularly gratifying, therefore, to be able to record the discovery of a mahogany secretaire and bookcase bearing a label which reads: 'Bowen / Cabinet Maker & UPHOLSTERER / Lamas Street / CARMARTHEN', (Figure 1).

Until now Bowen has been obscure, and is unrecorded in trade directories. Our sole reference to date is a one-line obituary in *The Cambrian* newspaper recording his death on 10 January 1807; this is repeated in the Cawdor family papers, with the information that he was also 'late sergeant in the Carmarthenshire Militia'.<sup>1</sup> His designation as 'Mr.' suggests a proprietor, and this piece of plain but fashionable furniture establishes him as a master cabinet maker. The form of the piece is virtually a standard for the period, although the criss-cross pattern of glazing bars at the top and bottom of the bookcase doors is common in South Wales chair backs, and can perhaps be seen as a local feature. It is constructed of pine, veneered in plain straight-grained mahogany: the only use of decorative wood is the curl veneer on the bookcase frieze and on the flat surface beneath the top of the cornice (Figure 3) and on the fronts of the small secretaire drawers. Also, there is a tiny chevron string edge on the cornice. The quality of the piece indicates that the use of mainly plain veneer was probably a stylistic choice rather than an economy measure. The top edges of the secretaire and the drawer edges are square, and finished with an ebony corner. The drawers are lined with an original blue paper, and the label is glued on to this on the first long drawer muntin (Figure 2). It is an engraving, containing an oval picture of a lady seated by a dressing-chest, with other articles of furniture, above the text. The whole is framed by draped husks. The impress of the plate is 80 mm × 62 mm, on paper 90 mm × 70 mm. The printer's inscription reads: 'Hobday & Co. Birm fit'.<sup>2</sup> The handsome contemporary handles (Figure 4) have oval repoussé back-plates, featuring a reclining classical female, possibly the Roman goddess Fortuna. She holds a branch, while in front is a cornucopia of fruit, and behind, a ship at sea.

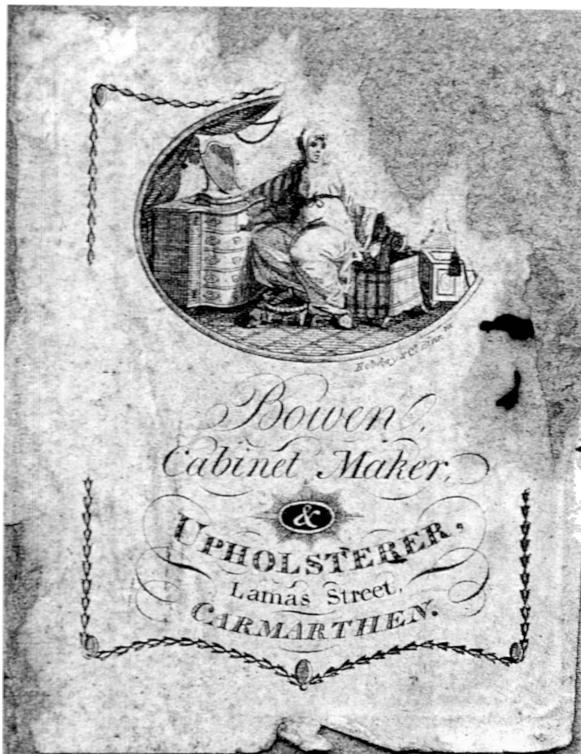
The whole piece, despite minor damage and a degree of neglect, is in near-original condition. The surface revealed by light cleaning is a hard shine, resistant to spirit, and seems likely to be an original oil finish.<sup>3</sup> The handles have their original lacquer intact, the drawer linings are complete, and items found in the drawers include a hand-bill of 1815, locks of hair cut from a child's head in 1869, and knitting patterns of the 1950s. Long ownership on a substantial farm near Lampeter has given it almost the status of a time capsule.

The construction follows the standard best methods of the time, and is described in detail in the Appendix. It displays good craftsmanship with an almost obsessive

2 MR BOWEN'S SECRETAIRE AND BOOKCASE



i. Mahogany secretaire and bookcase by Bowen, Lammas Street, Carmarthen, c. 1795  
*Photograph by Catherine Rivers*



2. Bowen's label, 90 mm × 70 mm  
Photograph by Catherine Rivers

attention to detail in parts which are not normally visible: thus, the bracket feet glue-blocks are neatly chamfered: the drawer runners are mitred into the drawer fronts, and the grooves in the drawer muntins are splayed to fit the panel chamfers. Also, the bottoms of the small secretaire drawers run in dovetailed grooves, as recommended by Sheraton (Figure 6).<sup>4</sup> As in the best work, the carcasses are lap-dovetailed, and both carcass and drawer dovetails are unusually numerous (Figure 5): the bookcase back is framed and panelled, and the cornice is solid with the mouldings worked on the mahogany surface.

Entirely because of the enthusiastic efforts of people in the area, this piece of landmark furniture is being acquired for the Carmarthenshire County Museum, where it will soon be publicly displayed in the area of its origin.

#### DETAILS OF CONSTRUCTION

Readers familiar with cabinet construction will recognise the standard best constructional methods of the time in the following detailed description. It does contain some features considered unusual, which are given in italics.

##### 1. Secretaire

Dimensions: Height overall: 108.5 cm  
,, of plinth moulding: 18.5 cm

„ of trunk: 89.4 cm  
 „ of writing surface: 82.0 cm  
 Length: 107 cm  
 Depth: 51.5 cm

**Ends:** Pine boards, 19 mm thick, veneered with straight-grain mahogany, 2.5 mm on the ends and 1 mm on the front edge.

**Top:** pine board, 17 mm thick, thickened to 34 mm in front by a board glued on beneath, 74 mm wide, and at the ends inside by cross-grain strips 53 mm wide, all lap-dovetailed into the ends.

Veneered on top with 2 mm mahogany, and a 3 mm square ebony corner on three sides. The veneer extends back a little beyond the lengthwise strip which contains the bookcase, 39 mm wide, with mitred returns 16 mm wide across the ends: edges moulded, 14 mm bead, fillet and cove. Strips of veneer run the length of the ends, and one across the middle, to keep the bookcase level.

**Bottom:** pine boards, 15 mm thick, presumably lap-dovetailed into the ends: thickened beneath the front and ends with pine boards 19 mm thick and 51 mm wide, mitred round. The mahogany plinth is mitred round on three sides, 13 mm thick and 35 mm wide, with an 8 mm cavetto moulding; the mahogany corner brackets are mitred round at the front and butt-jointed on to pine supports at the back, with vertical corner blocks and *chamfered* glue-blocks to strengthen them.

**Drawer rails:** pine, 20 mm thick, veneered with 1 mm mahogany with the front sides: butt-jointed flush with the dust boards, all grooved into the carcase sides with 64 mm wide cross-grain strips to make up the thickness beneath the dust boards.

**Back:** Framed, with two pine panels with chamfered edges, rebated into the sides and grooved into a central vertical muntin.

## 2. Drawers

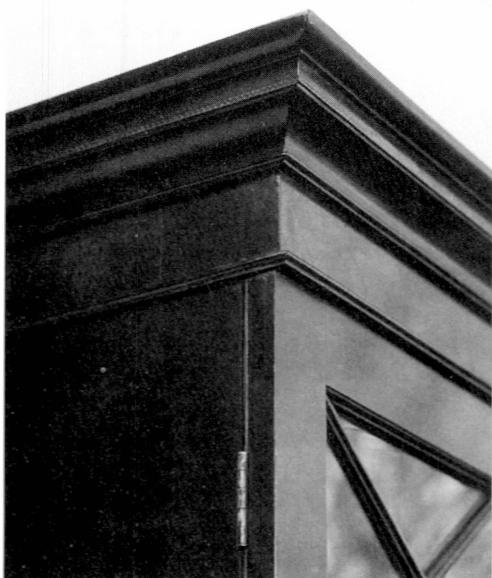
**Secretaire:** Base-board of pine, 19 mm thick, with an oak front edge butt-jointed on, 54 mm wide with a 30 mm rebated lap, hinged to the fall front, which is of oak, without clamps: veneered with plain mahogany on the front and 2 mm mahogany on the top edge and ends, covering the brass quadrant fixings. The outside is edged with 2.5 mm square ebony stringing.

The ends are of 19 mm mahogany, rebated over the base-board ends and the runners, which are of oak, 28 mm wide and 9 mm thick.

The top is a pine board 12 mm thick with a 19 mm front edging of mahogany, nailed into rebates in the ends, dovetailed at the front.

The interior structure is built up on a boase-board of pine 7 mm thick with a front edging of mahogany, finished with a 6 mm quirk ogee moulding. The divisions are of pine with 28 mm front edgings of mahogany, all 3.5 mm thick.

The mahogany drawers are made with through dovetails at back *and front*, the fronts veneered with cross-grain curl mahogany *up to 3 mm thick*, giving the effect of a lap.

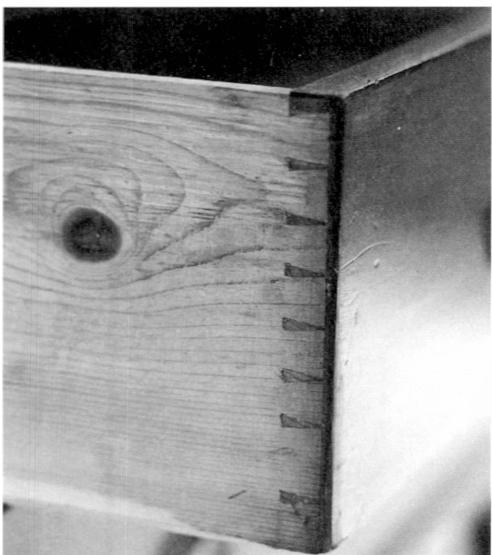


3. The cornice and frieze, showing the cross-grain curl and chevron string

*Photograph by Catherine Rivers*

4. One of the oval repoussé back-plate handles

*Photograph by Catherine Rivers*

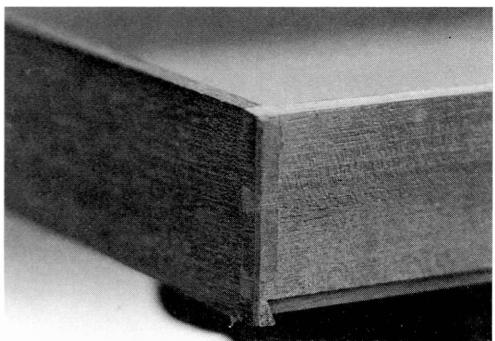


5. Second long drawer detail, showing front lap-dovetails

*Photograph by Catherine Rivers*

6. Small drawer detail, showing dovetailed groove for the bottom

*Photograph by Catherine Rivers*



The back tops (pins) *run out at the sides*, the back corners being square. The bottoms, running from side to side, are grooved into the fronts and run in *dovetailed grooves* in the sides.

The bottom right drawer is made short, and conceals an inner, secret drawer, which pulls out by a wooden bar projecting across the slightly hollowed back of the front drawer. The top line of drawers is 44 mm high, and the bottom ones 49 mm: the fronts are all 13.5 mm thick, without the veneer: the sides 6 mm, backs 7 mm, and bottoms 5 mm. The drawers are in three pairs of short drawers (135 mm) alternating with two pairs of long drawers (280 mm).

The interior writing surface is edged with cross-banded mahogany, 2 mm thick and 36 mm wide on the fall-front, mitred round. It is lined with a later oilcloth.

**Three drawers:** Fronts of 19 mm pine, veneered on the front and top on plain mahogany, the corners finished with a 2.5 mm square ebony string. All sides of pine, 10.5 mm, and all backs the same, 11.5 mm. As for the interior drawers, the *backs run out* (pins at the top) with square corners.

The bottoms are of 10.5 mm pine in two panels, running crosswise, grooved into the fronts. The ends are chamfered, glued into rebates at the sides with planted pine runners, *mitred into the fronts*. In the centre, they are grooved into central muntins with grooves *splayed beneath to fit the panel chamfers*. The muntins are dovetailed into the fronts and lapped over the backs.

The sides are lap-dovetailed into the fronts, the tails being *exceptionally numerous*. The depths of the drawers are 152 mm at the top, with 7 tails: 178 mm in the middle, with 8 tails: and 204 mm at the bottom, with 9 tails (6 in., 7 in., and 8 in. respectively). The sizes of the tails are slightly irregular, tending to wider spacing nearer the bottoms.

The drawer bottoms are lined inside with an original blue paper, glued down. Bowen's label is glued on to the muntin of the first drawer.

The handles have oval repoussé plates, 86 mm × 69 mm.

### 3. Bookcase Top

Dimensions: Height of trunk (doors): 104.5 cm  
               ,, of frieze and cornice: 11.4 cm

Length of bookcase: 103.7 cm  
  Depth   ,,   : 34.0 cm

**Ends:** pine, 27 mm thick with a front edge of mahogany 21 mm wide: the inside slotted for shelves with 22 mm grooves and spaces, 6 mm deep, the front edge cut back and worked with a 6 mm *quirk ogee* moulding: the outside veneered in straight grained mahogany.

**Top and Bottom:** of pine 19 mm thick, lap-dovetailed into the ends, with *closely spaced tails* (8 tails to a width of 320 mm), slightly uneven. A pine board 20 mm thick, the depth of the cornice and frieze, is planted on the top front, covering the door projection.

**Frieze and Cornice:** The frieze moulding, an 8 mm bead and fillet, is grooved across the ends and rebated into the front edge, mitred round: the 56 mm frieze is

veneered in cross-grain curl mahogany in front, and left plain at the ends. The 58 mm cornice is solid, a core of pine with a planted mahogany front, into which all the mouldings are stuck. The flat close to the top is veneered in cross-grain curl, and edged with a tiny (3 mm) chevron stringing of box and a dark wood.

**Back:** Pine, framed with four vertical panels, chamfered at the back. The frame of 15 mm pine, joined with haunched tenons, the whole screwed into rebates in the ends, and on to the bottom and top.

**Doors:** Framed in solid mahogany, all rails and stiles 50 mm wide and 20 mm thick, moulded on the inside with 4.5 mm coves and fillets, and rebated inside for glazing; the window-bar astragals are 9.5 mm. The meeting stiles are joined with a three-reed, 9.5 mm brass T-bar.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Thomas Lloyd, for providing the Cawdor information; Nigel Hodgson of John Francis & Co., Carmarthen, for enthusiastic help with the origins of the secretaire; Maria Twist of Birmingham Central Library for supplying the details of Hobday and Co., and to Catherine Rivers for taking the photographs.

A debt of gratitude in general is due to Chris Delaney and Ann Dorset, of the Carmarthen Museum, and to Richard Bebb, who bought the piece in at auction and held it while the museum raised the purchase money; enabling me, also, to undertake conservation and study. The principal debt of thanks, however, is due to Carmarthen County Council, who responded promptly to the request for funding, and to the MGC/V & A purchase Grant Fund, who contributed generously to this important acquisition.

#### REFERENCES

1. Carmarthen Record Office, Cawdor Letters, Box 130.
2. Trade Directories record Samuel Hobday, 'engraver and chaser', at 17 Catherine Street, Birmingham from 1770; at St Mary's Row, in 1780; as 'engraver and stamper', 4 Waeman's Row, in 1785; 'engraver, stamper and spoon-maker', 1791–1803. Thereafter, also 'Samuel Hobday, jun as 'engraver & typographical letter cutter. 2 Digby Street': S. H. sen. still at Weaman's Row. He appears to have died in 1816. The firm(s) thus span the period of the secretaire.
3. See for example, Thomas Sheraton, *The Cabinet Dictionary* 1803, under 'Polish', describes the oil and brick-dust method.
4. *Ibid.* Under 'Drawers': '... Small drawers for secretaries and bureaus are best made by ploughing a dove-tail groove in their sides to receive the bottom; there being an objection or two against rabbeting them in . . . the bottom is secured against falling down, and is kept about the thickness of a shilling clear of the partition.'