BOOK REVIEW


One of the vivid memories of my childhood is of a particular stool which my grandmother used for all sorts of things at her house in Cross Gates, Leeds. When not being used for standing on to reach high shelves in the pantry, it was brought out as a fireside seat for my younger brother. It was the only old thing my grandparents had kept in the otherwise totally modern house to which they had moved in 1947. To us, this stool was a special, but anonymous, object; only later was I to find out that it had been bought originally from William Brear’s of Addingham, near Ilkley, and now, after reading *English Vernacular Furniture*, I have a complete picture of the firm of country joiners who made it. It is fascinating to discover that the products of this small rural firm included everything from farm implements to factory and shop furniture — from a hay rake to a turned chair for Timothy White’s.

Christopher Gilbert quotes the example of William Brear and Sons to illustrate the point that there has never been a strict line of demarcation between the ordinary or ‘common’ furniture of the countryside and city, and that rural and urban traditions are sometimes closely related. He emphasises also the interesting task involved in assessing domestic and institutional furniture, when much of the latter ‘although straightforward and practical ... can hardly be described as vernacular’. To make sense of such a wayward subject as this is a complex task indeed. Unlike fashionable furniture, the vernacular tradition cannot be studied as a straightforward chronology, and the material it contains is so diverse that an attempt to summarise and interpret it by type could so easily result in nothing but a rather disparate clutch of case studies. The result of Christopher Gilbert’s careful researches is a book which brims full of diverse information, but which has been conceived and laid out with characteristic clarity and sureness. *English Vernacular Furniture* makes sense of a sprawling discipline and will, I am sure, appeal to the interested non-specialist as well as the furniture historian.

Part of the success of the author’s approach must be due to his choice of themes. These can be seen, in embryo form, in the catalogue to the exhibition *Common Furniture*, held at the Stable Court Exhibition Galleries, Temple Newsam, in 1982. This pioneering show featured an anthology of items which is vastly increased in *English Vernacular Furniture* but it is greatly rewarding to find, here, amplified discussion of such familiar objects as the alehouse furniture from Spout House on the North York Moors and colour photographs of such pieces as the grained doll’s cradle from Gunthorpe, Lincolnshire, which were given very concise coverage in *Common Furniture*.

After a necessary introduction in which the boundaries of the vernacular tradition are candidly explored, the new book offers chapters on three ‘underpinning’ subjects; the woodworking crafts and native timbers, the wide-ranging nature of the country joiner’s job and lastly, the importance of provincial price books. The discussion of native timbers betrays a long experience in the identification of cabinet- and chair-making woods and the fruits of presumably enjoyable hours spent collecting, from a wide variety of sources, nuggets of information about their use. Price books have yielded especially enlightening and reliable facts here. For illustration of the various woods as executed pieces of furniture, the