

Going with THE GRAIN

From the simplest stick stool to the grandest Windsor chair, British country or 'vernacular' furniture of the 18th and 19th centuries was built for comfort and practicality, allowing the natural beauty of the native wood to shine through, says **CAROLINE WHEATER**

PHOTOGRAPHS **BRENT DARBY**
STYLING **SALLY DENNING**



Mix striking greys with beautifully rich browns furniture and dark flooring for the perfect colour combination



HOMES
& Antiques

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here's something wonderful about sitting in a Windsor chair that has been used by people for 200 years and noticing

the marks of life, such as a candle burn, and the rich colour and patina that only develops with time. That's the charm of simple country furniture – it was made to be used: these aren't museum pieces.'

So says Tim Bowen who, with his wife Betsan, runs a gallery in Carmarthenshire offering mostly 18th and 19th-century handmade pieces, including honey-toned Welsh oak dressers, the simplest ladderback and stick chairs, cosy fireside settles and foldaway gateleg tables – functional pieces for domestic use, largely without ornate or painted decoration.

Dr Bernard 'Bill' Cotton, the leading authority on British country and vernacular furniture (sometimes referred to as primitive furniture), is as inspired now as he was when he began his research more than 35 years ago. 'Vernacular furniture is a huge tribute to the people who survived in times of hard labour and low wages, and what they could make so beautifully and skilfully from native woods,' he says. 'Such furniture may appear to be less svelte than finer pieces but it is just as ergonomically well-adapted to its environment.'

As Cotton notes, the makers knew their wood, and understood the properties of oak, ash, elm, beech, yew, sycamore and the orchard fruitwoods of apple, pear and plum. 'Craftsmen knew how long it took each wood to oxidise and change colour. They knew that the heartwood of plum contains rich streaks of colour, and that yew has beautiful striations, and that all these elements could be used in a decorative way.'

In the 18th and 19th centuries, there was an enormous number of tradesmen working in villages and country market towns, offering everything from coffins to



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cartwheels to fireside chairs. 'Craftsmen tried to diversify as much as possible to stay financially viable,' says Cotton. 'In Cornwall, Windsor chairs were made by coopers – barrel makers – whose main employment was making barrels for storing pilchards. In the far north of Scotland, the ingenious wrights of Caithness used driftwood to make chairs and other furniture for crofters.'

Made to measure

Through his own research, William Sergeant, a collector of 18th and early 19th-century Lincolnshire ladderback chairs (see Where to See box overleaf for more information), has discovered local joinery and cabinet-making businesses, in places that include Grantham and Sleaford, advertising for journeymen to make both ladderback and Windsor

chairs. 'Journeymen were happy to move about from county to county and work in a piecemeal way in a successful workshop where a weekly wage was guaranteed. I found one period advert appealing for journeymen from London to come up to Lincolnshire to work,' says Sergeant.

Items were bought ready-made from workshops or could be ordered. 'You sometimes find chairs that are larger than normal,' says Cotton, 'so that piece would have been made to measure for somebody. With Welsh dressers, craftsmen went to people's homes and measured up the room dimensions before the dresser was made so it fitted well. Other furniture such as tables, food cupboards and corner shelves didn't require a bespoke approach.'

'Country furniture was functional but not unfashionable. In the 18th and >

THIS IMAGE A dark blue wall will set off the rich tones of the furniture and create a wonderful mood in the dining room. Team with fabric in checks and plaids to add interest to the scheme
FACING PAGE Use coloured glass in warm tones to add lively touches



Chair and table coordinator: Kevyn Jones. Styling assistant: Nikki Rowley



ABOVE When you have large pieces of plain furniture, don't be afraid to use busy pattern for extra interest. Keep cushions and throws in plain, checks and small prints for a more contemporary edge. BELOW A rare George II yew, elm and ash Gothic Windsor armchair, Thames Valley, c1750 that sold as one of a pair for £22,500 at Bonhams in September. FACING PAGE Antique copper teamed with a deep olive green combine to create a wonderfully inviting bathroom. Add dark wooden furniture and patterns at the window to make the scheme come to life.

THE WINDSOR CHAIR

The Windsor is an umbrella term for robust chair designs, with or without arms, made in the same way. They have turned rod or spindle legs inserted into holes in the underside of the seat, and a turned rod or spindle backrest and arms inserted into holes in the top rail of the seat, plus a hickory back rail. They date back to the early 1700s and continued to be made throughout the 1800s in huge numbers in the Thames Valley, thanks to the abundance of ash, elm and beech there. By the 19th century it is estimated that 4,500 Windsor chairs were made each day in the epicentre of production, High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire – still a centre of furniture production today.

A typical 19th-century Windsor chair from this area has a carved saddle-shaped seat of elm, a hump-back of ash, turned ash or beech

spindles for the back rest, and turned legs of ash or beech. Men called bodgers worked in woodland to turn freshly felled green wood on pale lathes, and they supplied small workshops and factories that made up the chairs.

In the eyes of John Bly of the Antiques Roadshow, an 18th-century Windsor chair made from yew and elm with cabriole legs is about as valuable as you can get. Just to prove it, a pair from c1750 sold at Bonhams last September for £22,500 – one is pictured here. Traditional Windsor chairs are still handmade by craftsmen today.



produced in the Midlands and the West Country, where they tended to be painted blue or green. In Suffolk, a version evolved that is now called the Mendlesham chair. Experts tell them apart by the wood used, design and construction methods, maker's stamps or labels and, for West Country chairs, traces of paint. In the 1700s craftsmen of the north-west and Lincolnshire specialised in rush-seated ladderback chairs of ash. 'Joyn' chairs are a feature of Scottish vernacular furniture, where joints such as mortise-and-tenon and dovetail were used, rather than the Windsor chair technique of slotting components into holes.

Prized sculptural quality

Perhaps none are more charming than the so-called 'primitive' stick chairs and stools from Wales that fetch strong prices today – you won't get much change from £3,000 for a good example. Typically made of ash and sycamore wood, originally they were sold cheaply to humble cottage households, says John Bly. 'Primitive form stick furniture wasn't made of expensive timber such as oak. It was a cottage industry for a cottage life – a case of a village craftsman supplying a fireside chair, or a stool from which to eat. That's why there's so little of it left: a lot fell to pieces with wear and tear.'

Cotton dislikes the word 'primitive' being used for stick furniture as it implies the design is simple. Rather, he sees these pieces as ingenious. They have a sculptural quality that top dealers at companies such as Tim Bowen Antiques and Robert Hirschhorn rate highly. 'They're quirky, one-off pieces. There's a purity to them that makes them very collectable,' says John Hall of Robert Hirschhorn.

Prices vary widely, depending on rarity and desirability. A standard mid 19th-century hoop-back Windsor chair from the Thames Valley might set you back £300 but a rare early 18th-century comb-back Windsor could command up to £5,000. A plain oak or pine three-legged cricket table would cost £400, while a rare version in elm could rise to £4,500. Whatever their price, these simple and charming heirloom pieces of furniture deserve to be cherished. ■

Bonhams Antiques



They're quirky, one-off pieces. There's a purity to them that makes them very collectable



THIS IMAGE: Mix warm berry walls with dark wooden floors and lots of layers and textures. Use fabrics in velvet, rich wool, tweed and thick weave linen. Combine these with dark wooden furniture for a warm and welcoming feel. FACING PAGE: Use the same color on the fireplace as the walls for a more modern look.



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early-to-mid 19th centuries it was as near to the time's current city fashions as possible,' says *Antiques Roadshow* expert John Bly. 'As wealth started to spread, the middle classes became aware of the fashions of the day and had pieces copied by the local joiner.' It was not uncommon for a provincial cabinetmaker to invest

in a pattern book featuring designs of the day – such as Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Directory of 1754*, or Sheraton's *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, published from 1791 to 1794 – but to make the items in oak or yew. Typical country furniture to look out for today

includes gateleg and trestle dining tables, dressers, wall racks, stools, chests or coffers, tripod tables, candle stands, buffets and court cupboards.

Regional character is seen most strongly in chairs. For example, Windsor chairs were made in huge numbers in the Thames Valley but were also >

Find out more

WHERE TO BUY

- Adams Antiques, Church Wansley, 150 Hospital Street, Newark, Lincoln, 01270 825643; adams-antiques.com
- Beebams holds three Oak Interior sales a year. 020 7447 7447; beebams.com
- Robert Hirschhorn, London, by appointment. 020 7703 7443; hirschhornantiques.com
- Robert Young Antiques, 68 Rattiner Bridge Road, London. 020 7226 7947; robertyoungantiques.com
- The Seven Antiques, Ivy House, Ferrygate, Carmarthenhire, 01267 267322; sevenantiques.co.uk
- Find dealers: British Antique Dealers' Association (bada.org); Lapada (lapada.org); sellingantiques.co.uk

WHERE TO SEE

- The Goffrys Museum, London, has the Cotton Collection of English Regional Chairs. See a selection online. 020 7720 9832; goffrys-museum.org.uk
- Highland Folk Museum, North Queensferry, Scotland, holds an important collection (opens 24th March). 01549 673151; highlandfolk.com/
- The Ulsterweaver Chair Museum has 150 historic chairs collected by William Jergant. See a selection online at rock.com/ulster/; 720002679093.aspx
- Sally Mason Museum, Birmingham, has the Leamington Cadbury Collection. 0121 672 0199; sallymasonmuseum.org.uk
- Temple Newsam House, Leeds, home to the Christopher Gilbert collection. 0113 336 7441; leeds.gov.uk/templenewsamgallery
- Wycombe Museum in High Wycombe has 18th to 20th-century windows. 01494 421850; wycombe.gov.uk

BOOKS AND WEBSITES

- The English Regional Chair by Bernard Cotton (ACC Art Books)
- English Windsor Chairs by Ivan Sparks (Olive Library)
- Old Furniture: The British Tradition by Victor Chisney (Antique Collectors' Club)
- Selected Holdings of an Antiques Dealer Furniture 1586-88 by Christopher Gilbert (Regional Furniture Society)
- Join the Regional Furniture Society for visits to collections, a twice yearly newsletter and an annual conference. regionalfurniture.society.org

STYLIST'S NOTEBOOK

1 From left: Polygonal country steel in ash and elm, £390, Robert Hirschhorn. Cooklike made in 'Meady' print, £96 per m, Fermoie. Lambwood Apple Check' memo throw, £30, Bronie by Moon. Low stool, £556, Tim Brown. Child's Windsor chair, £3,500, Robert Young. Black mug, £21, Dove St Pottery. 'Yakhi' bowl (on floor) by Akiko Hirai, £340, Maud and Mabel. Painted spumone circular stool, £380, Robert Hirschhorn. Large low bowl (on stool) by Kaori Takahashi, £240, Maud and Mabel. Glass bottles, find similar at Briggs & Oliver. Medium tall stool, £400, Tim Brown. 'Sand' vessel by Nobuo Itaraki, £85, Maud and Mabel. Antique beaks, find similar at Briggs & Oliver. Three-legged cotter's stool or table, £1,250, Robert Young. Black mug, as before. 1940s 'Lover's' green jug, £80, Briggs & Oliver. 'Aoda Photophone' hurricane lamp, £41, I & J. Brown. 'Georgian' tongue and groove panels, £69, Scumble Goods. Painted in 'Downpipe' 'Estate Emulsion' paint, £38 per 2.5 l, Farrow & Ball

2 William and Mary side table, £3,800, Robert Young. On table, from left: 'Clay' table lamp in magenta with straight 'Empire' shade in 'Temple Blue', £180, Pooky. English North Country mahogany middle board, £430, Swedish dipping spoon, £120, both Robert Hirschhorn. 'Wickwater' pistol wine glass, £5 each, John Lewis. Blue and pink spongeware bowl, £130, large 18th-century neat spice container, £850, small early 19th-century Welsh turned tean bowl, £295, wash spumone oval spoon, £40, large English pearlware decorative jug, £790, small child's ribb spongeware mug, £90, all Robert Hirschhorn. Wall painted in 'Wicks Blue' 206 'Intelligent Emulsion' paint, £43.50 per 2.5l, Little Greene



3 English rectangular elm tawern table (on left), £2,400, Robert Hirschhorn. Georgian farmhouse dining table, £4,200, Windsor chairs, £7,200 for set of six, all Robert Young. Unusual country steel in mixed woods, £850, Robert Hirschhorn. Wooden kay lek, £95, I & J. Brown. Tripod candleholder with bird finial, £2,800, Robert Young. On small table, from left: wooden cheese wedge, £225, round vintage wooden breadboard, £95, both I & J. Brown. Large 'Heritage Orchard' jug, £35, Dewby at John Lewis. On dining table, from left: Smoke 'Hussy' tumblers, £3.50 each, John Lewis. Glass bottles, as before. 'Fish Grog' jug, £20, John Lewis. Black ceramic serving bowl, £54, Dove St Pottery. Wooden water carrier jug, £65, I & J. Brown. Brass candlesticks, 1760, £595, Robert Hirschhorn. Black dinner plates, £20, side plate, £21, bowl £21, all Dove St Pottery. English elm cutlery tray, 1900, £185, Robert Hirschhorn. Vintage Bees, from a selection, Annie Wharton Designs. Tablecloth made in 'Heritage' fabric in 'Kendras/Heather', £49.95 per m, Moon. Green velvet cushion (on stool), £40, floral cushion, £40, both Annie Wharton Designs. Wall in 'Wicks Blue' paint, as before. Black finish curtaine pale kit, £115, John Lewis. Curtaine made in 'Elemental' fabric in 'Crimson/Alexandria', £49.95 per m, Moon. 'Huss' pendant lights, £62 each, Pooky

4 Polygonal country steel in ash and elm, £390; 18th-century country cricket table in ash, £4,200; 19th-century comb-back Windsor armchair, £5,200, all Robert Hirschhorn. Coffee table, £1,390, I & J. Brown. 'Descartes' safe in 'Fig Belgian' linen, £1,880; 'Betty' archedb in olive matt velvet, £460, both Sofa.com. Cooklike on sofa, from left: 'Wicker' fabric, £117, £95 per m, Fermoie. 'ink' plain weave linen, £32 per m, Volga Liven. 'Rabanas', £271,



£96 per m, Fermoie. Green 'Wolton Woods' cushion in 'Lark/Yew', £119, £49.95 per m; purple 'Heritage' wool cushion in 'Kendras/Heather', £1100/6, £48.95 per m, both Moon. 'Tulu' fabric in 'Artichoke/Gold' DMSP224461, £55 per m, Morris & Co. Check throw made in 'Eyon' fabric in 'Carmel/Burgundy', DBR222244, £81 per m, Sanderson. Cooklike (on armchair) made in 'Claret' fabric in 'Autumn Bark', U1257/04, £48.95 per m; 'Buster' patchwork check throw, £30, both Moon. On coffee table, from left: 1940s green 'Lover's' jug, £80, Briggs & Oliver. 19th-century English spumone dairy bowl, £550, Robert Hirschhorn. Wooden ale hen, £3,500, Robert Young. Decoy bird, £850, Robert Young. Small spongeware bowl (just seen), £95, Robert Hirschhorn. Leather tankard, £450, Robert Young. Ceramic milk jug, £34, Dove St Pottery. Beaks, find similar at Briggs & Oliver. Large 'Autumn' mug (on stool) by Senni Bayn, £85, Maud and Mabel. On side table: 'Clay' table lamp in olive with straight 'Empire' shade in 'Natural Linen', £145, Pooky. Black ceramic water jug, £60, Dove St Pottery. 'Woolies' hand, find similar at Phipps and Partners. Dining ball; beaks, all as before. Wall in 'Briqol' 'Estate Emulsion' paint, £38 per 2.5 l, Farrow & Ball. Soft Pink Divines oil painting, £65, Vintage Flower Paintings. Curtaine pale kit, as before. 'Indulgent Aubergier' wool runner, IN07, with linen ball 'Weather' bumper, £348.96, Crystal Trading. Curtaine in 'Irene Mustard' wool, £42, per m, Volage Decoration



I & J. Brown. Grey Jug by Nicola Toschi, £125, Maud and Mabel. Black beaks, as before. 'Flour' copper desk lamp, £155, Pooky. Walls, painted in 'Briqol'; wooden panels, all as before

6 Small late 18th-century elm settle, £4,800; Judgional country steel in ash and elm, £390, both Robert Hirschhorn. On settle, from left: green mohair throw, £89.95, Bronie by Moon. Cooklike in 'Flour' plain weave, £32, per m, Volga Liven. Beaks, as before. Check 'Sherland Dales' cushion in 'Settle Linen', £48.95, Bronie by Moon. Cushion in 'Children' 000 print, £96 per m, Fermoie. Large copper watering can, £550; small copper watering can, £450, both Robert Young. Large collated bowl (on stool) by Senni Bayn, £300, Maud and Mabel. Dewby 'Linden Heritage' Bear runner, £195, Roger Gates. Archive Tracis' collection 'Vine' wallpaper in 'Roug', £71 per roll, Little Greene

7 English 17th-century boarded oak chest, £2,200; country steel in ash, £390, both Robert Hirschhorn. Lederback chair, find similar at Briggs & Oliver. Antique copper bath, from £6,500; standpipe, £800, both Siffkey Bathrooms. 'Supreme' bath towel in 'Woolies', £20, Christy Towels. Antique Beams on

steel, from a selection, Annie Wharton Designs. Shell, from a selection, Briggs & Oliver. Cooklike in 'Fare Green' plain weave linen, £32 per m, Volga Liven. On chest: washboards, £3,500 for set of nine, Robert Young. Antique gafferling iron, £75, Briggs & Oliver. 19th-century candle pot, £190; candle in stone vase, £29, both I & J. Brown. On wall: apothecary drawers, £4,800, Robert Young. 'Sand' vessel, as before. Root wood domestic bowl, £650, Robert Young. Wall in 'Oliver' T2 'Intelligent' matt emulsion paint, £43.50 per 2.5l, Little Greene. Curtaine pale kit, as before. Curtaine made in 'The Brook' fabric from 'Scribe Prints II' collection, £244.98, £75 per m, Morris & Co