



Fig 1. A 17th Century Oak Chest, Sold for £130 hammer. Batemans Auctions, Stamford, June 2013. ABP £150.



Fig 2. A Late 17th Century Oak Coffin, Sold for £300 hammer. T.W. Gaze, June 2013. ABP £360.



Fig 3. A Late 17th Century Oak Bible Box, Sold for £100 hammer. T.W. Gaze, June 2013. ABP £120.



Figure 4. A Restoration oak side table, c1680, Sold for £60 hammer. Batemans, Stamford in June 2013. ABP £72.



Fig 5. A Pair of William and Mary Oak Side Chairs, Sold for £260 hammer. Halls Auctioneers, Shrewsbury in March 2013. ABP £312.



Fig 6. A Charles II Oak Chest of Drawers, Sold for £250 hammer. Halls Auctioneers, Shrewsbury, July 2013. ABP £300.

Invest in Seventeenth Century Furniture!

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When people talk about old seventeenth century furniture, most believe they can only really find it in museums and that it is out of their reach financially. Actually, this isn't the case. A piece of furniture from this period can be purchased for less than £500 and a good piece for less than £1,000. This is apparent in auction houses across the country. An old oak chest can be bought for as little as £300, an oak side chair could be bought for £200 if you're lucky at auction. What can be said however, is that the furniture is available, it's just a case of knowing what you wish to buy.

Perhaps before we look at actual examples of furniture from this period, we need to understand the origins and a brief history of the subject. The seventeenth century can be broken up into two main sections, the first half, in this case 1600-1660, and the second half, 1660-1700.

General Overview of Seventeenth Century Furniture Design

The last few years of the sixteenth century saw a surge in furniture design. Queen Elizabeth I was still on the throne and England had grown in prosperity, which meant there was more money for luxuries and this included furniture. Construction techniques had evolved by this time and this enabled furniture design to develop, thus setting the path for furniture design for the following centuries. At this time oak was the most popular timber for furniture, with fashionable tapestries and wool-works decorating the pieces. In fact, throughout the early seventeenth century especially, the fabrics were as important as the constructed furniture, which was often reflected through the use of carving. Carving and tracery, especially depicting foliage was the main type of decoration employed on pieces at this date, with inlays of holly, sycamore, bog oak, various fruitwoods and other indigenous woods being used.

The second quarter of the century saw a greater emphasis on carving and turning as opposed to inlay. The cup and cover support was popular, carving of grape vine and foliage was often incorporated into a piece and Gothic tracery was also found. Wainscot chairs and settles were being made often with turned legs and stretchers and upholstery, usually in the form of loose seat cushions were growing in popularity.

The middle part of the century saw the Cromwellian period and a slowing down of furniture development. The country was suffering from civil war and the social unrest caused interior furnishings to take a back step. Furniture was still being made, but simplified with little decoration. Perhaps one of the most commonly associated pieces is the back stool or the 'Farthingale'. These were invariably of oak, with a padded back rest, padded seat and turned legs to front. The open backs allowed the fashionable farthingale to be worn without compromise. These were made during and after Cromwells time, but nevertheless, they are still associated with the period.

The second half of the seventeenth century saw furniture design change enormously, especially in London, where a new style was encouraged by the Great Fire of 1666. This coincided with the reign of Charles II and saw the start of the 'Walnut Period', which continued until the second quarter of the eighteenth century. From around 1670 walnut was in use and fine furniture was decorated with marquetry, parquetry and highly figured veneers. In London, new techniques and a new style had been adapted by the Huguenot craftsmen, who worked in the continental style. In wealthy homes black lacquered cabinets from China were being imported and cabinet makers in England made ornate gilt stands on which these lacquered cabinets could sit. Although ornament was still an important element in interiors, it was the method and application of decoration which had changed.

Although the second half of the seventeenth century had seen a major development in furniture design, craftsmen and carpenters in regional areas continued to work in the earlier style; in fact in some parts of the country the seventeenth century style continued until well into the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

Examples of Available Seventeenth Century Furniture

Most of the furniture available today dates from the latter half of the seventeenth century and can be bought at auction at a fairly reasonable price. Here, we will look at examples, which have recently sold at auction.

The chest in **Figure 1** is seventeenth century, is of boarded construction and is of the type usually made in oak in the London area from around the late fifteenth century. These continued to be made until the early eighteenth century in the primitive regional areas by joiners and carpenters. This sold for £130 at auction and represents the type of piece which can be bought for a nominal amount of money. This is small enough to fit into an alcove by the fire, in a country cottage, or maybe in a contemporary barn conversion, where a piece like this may help to combine the old and new.

The piece in **Figure 2** is the more common and better made version of a chest. This dates from the latter half of the seventeenth century and is of frame and panel construction. This makes it slightly sturdier and less prone to splitting. It's simply carved with intertwined rosettes and a repeated pattern to frieze. These were often found at the end of a tester bed and used for the storage of linen and household fabrics. It sold for £300 earlier this year



Fig 7. A Charles I Oak Joined Refectory Dining Table, Sold for £1,700 hammer. Hansons Auctioneers, Etwell, January 2013. ABP £2,038.



Fig 8. An Oak Gate-leg Table, late 17th century, Sold for £200 hammer. Hartleys, Ilkley, Yorkshire, March 2013. ABP £240.

and though it isn't as cheap as the previous example, this is still good value for money, considering the level of craftsmanship involved. Having one made to order today would cost into four figures.

The next example is **Figure 3**, a bible box in oak. This also is late seventeenth century and is a very typical example of the type made during this time, essentially to keep the family bible in. The bible in the English home was a highly prized item and this is exemplified in this piece by the use of a lock. The slope front provided support for the bible from which it could be read. This sold for £100 and though this would have to rest on another piece of furniture and does have limited usage, it could be used for storing an household documents, but is another example of the type of historical piece of furniture you can buy for a relatively nominal amount.

The oak table in **Figure 4** dates to the reign of Charles II and is of simple form, with a rectangular top, plain frieze, raised on simple turned legs and joined by square stretchers. The top of this piece has been machine carved at a later date, probably during the nineteenth century, but has been done in the style contemporary to the table. This is a bargain for £60 and is just as useful today as it was 300 years ago.

The pair of oak side chairs in **Figure 5**, date to around the time of the William and Mary period (1689-1702) and are probably regional derivatives of the Farthingales or Back Stool, which were popular during the middle part of the seventeenth century. These examples have solid seats and backs although would accommodate loose seat cushions which could be tired around the uprights. These sold for £260 and could fit nicely in an old cottage or maybe in a kitchen which could add a sense of age and history to a room.

Figure 6 shows a chest of drawers from the Charles II period and these can be found up and down the country. The geometrically applied moulded drawer fronts were very fashionable at this date and though this has four long drawers, some had two short drawers at the top with three long graduated drawers below. This is a very good example of the type of piece which can still serve its function. It is still a chest of drawers and can be used in any part of the house. However, these are often far more robust than modern furniture and would no doubt last much longer than anything made today. This sold for £250. A few years ago it would have fetched four figures making this excellent value.

The item in **Figure 7** is an oak refectory table, or 'long table' as they were often referred to in the inventories. This was a common piece of furniture found in the larger farm house and anything above. These were used for dining when people used to eat in the hall instead of in the dining room. This piece sold for £1,700. Though this maybe out of reach of a lot of people's budget and rather large (two metres long), this is early seventeenth century and much rarer than furniture from the latter half of the century. It is still a bargain for what it is as they used to command close to five figures at auction.

The refectory table in **Figure 7** is a forerunner of this next piece in **Figure 8**. This is a gate-leg table and is the type which was made from middle of the seventeenth century and onwards. These were perfect for most homes as the leaves could be folded down and the table moved to the side of the room. These were found in large and small houses but were particularly suited to the small intimate dining rooms which were now more desirable and warmer than the great hall. Rooms in small houses had to be multi-functional and so the gate-leg table was a welcome invention. This table is a small example of its type and sold earlier this year for £200. Considering its sturdiness and practicality, it would be suited to many uses in the modern home and yet a modern reproduction may well cost more to make.

Here we can see that most furniture of this period is affordable. It is robust, well made, decorative and provides a tangible link to England's history. It was a time which saw some major historical events from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to Oliver Cromwell, the Fire of London and through to William and Mary. This provided much scope in furniture design. Currently the prices are so low, that the timber from which the pieces are made may be more valuable. The cost of buying fresh timber and employing a cabinet maker to craft a piece of furniture would probably cost more than to buy an old piece. Also buying old pieces of furniture is a form of recycling. However, it is the present market for early furniture and consistently the low prices which makes seventeenth century furniture such a bargain. Certainly it is a worthwhile investment.



17thC oak joined press cupboard with canopy, probably North Wales, inscribed TD, dated 1678, with additional tiered pediment, approx 123cm wide, 62cm deep, 200cm high. *Hansons, Etwall. Jan 13. HP: £5,500. ABP: £6,592.*



17thC oak joined open arm chair, South Yorkshire, approx 64cm wide and 116cm high. *Hansons, Etwall. Jan 13. HP: £1,400. ABP: £1,678.*



Late 17thC chest of drawers, veneered in walnut and inset with marquetry panels of decorated flowers, foliage and birds, 2 short, 3 graduated long drawers, 97cm wide *Charterhouse, Sherborne. Apr 13. HP: £4,600. ABP: £5,513.*



Oak six plank coffer, 17thC, hinged lid with iron strap hinges, gouged ends and gadrooned edging, fascia possibly later, 61.5 x 24in. *Hartleys, Ilkley. Jun 13. HP: £950. ABP: £1,138.*



17thC joined oak press, probably Welsh, approx 130cm wide, 153cm high and 54cm deep. *Hansons, Etwall. Jan 13. HP: £2,950. ABP: £3,535.*



17thC and later oak bible box on stand, channel moulded lid over stylised flower inlaid front and boarded sides, central iron lock plate, over moulded apron on a separate stand with turned, tapering front supports, 74cm wide, 82cm high, 56cm deep. *Halls, Shrewsbury. Mar 13. HP: £850. ABP: £1,018.*



17thC oak joined box settle, planked hinged back, folding over to form rectangular table top, approx 161cm wide, 110cm high, 63cm deep. *Hansons, Etwall. Jan 13. HP: £1,900. ABP: £2,277.*



Matched set of six South Yorkshire style joined oak back stools, elements 17thC and later, incl. five double crescent cross-splat chairs, one arcade back. (6) *Halls, Shrewsbury. Feb 13. HP: £750. ABP: £898.*



17thC oak joined refectory dining table, planked top with grooved frieze, approx 75cm high, 221cm long and 74cm wide. *Hansons, Etwall. Jan 13. HP: £1,750. ABP: £2,097.*



Oak chest of drawers, 17thC, 2 short over 3 long drawers with geometric moulded panels, brass drop handles, 92cm high, 100cm wide. *Richard Winterton, Lichfield. May 13. HP: £700. ABP: £839.*