

The bedchamber

More than a resting place for the night



The bedroom is the most important and private room of the house. Technological intrusions are invited into some homes by way of entertainment, climate control, or the mini-office for the small, wee hours of the night. Respite is often sought from the more demanding times of work and family roles, and the design of the room can make it a pleasure to remain in the boudoir.

Conventionally, the bed has dominance, sometimes with a tester, and a comfortable bedroom chair to relax in and take off shoes. There is also the ottoman or blanket box to store designer pillows, cushions, quilts and blankets. There are also the necessary chests of drawers and wardrobes to neatly hold all manner of clothing and accessories.

In larger rooms, personal additions are incorporated such as the reading chair, a

little bookcase of favourites, perhaps a collectables cabinet, and often a small writing or work (craft) table, even a davenport. To aid in the dressing and nurturing rituals there may be a cheval mirror and for some a dressing table with its myriad of drawers containing a multitude of modern toiletries.

For the most personal of items there are the bedside tables to store glasses, medications, a diary and pen, a good book perhaps and the remote controls. Our needs are similar to those of past years; it is only how we service these needs that have changed.

During the 1380s, beds were commonly bequeathed, as found in the will of Edmond, Earl of March who left 'One large bed of black satin embroidered with white lions and gold roses, with escutcheons of the arms of Mortimer and Ulster.' People were accustomed to giving beds names. Favourite cups and swords were given the same high honour. Percy MacQuoid in *A History of English Furniture* (1988) gives details of

Richard, Earl of Arundel's 1932 will in which he bequeaths to his second wife '... a blue bed marked with my arms and the arms of my late wife, to my son, Richard, a standing bed called Clove.'

Elaborate beds were considered precious property and the bequeathing of them showered upon the recipient a mark of high esteem. Although it seems that Shakespeare's only bequest to his wife was to '... give unto my wife my second best bed with the furniture.'

Feather beds favoured by royalty gave the tame swans on the Thames protection. As Frederic, Duke of Wirtemberg wrote in 1591, 'Upon the River Thames there are many swans; these are so tame that you can almost touch them but it is forbidden on pain of corporal punishment in any way to injure a swan, for Royalty has them plucked every year in order to have their down for feather beds.'

State beds found in important houses around 1560 were heavily carved and made on a very large scale. Testers and their ceilings weighed up to a quarter of a ton,

and typically had the family crest carved into panels on the bed head. The large posts supporting the tester were often huge and pillar-like, set further out than the two bed foot legs. This was to create a canopy effect which fully encompassed the bed inside. Because of the close association with marriage, birth and death, beds were readily invested in.

The earliest English bedroom chairs date to the Byzantine period, having been introduced into Scandinavia by the Varangian Guard, and then most likely brought by the Normans to England. These chairs were light in form and of simple turned work, often triangular in the base and seat.

Heavily carved furniture favoured during the Medieval period was replaced towards the end of the 16th century with lesser carved, yet elaborately upholstered bedsteads, chairs and benches. Daybeds emerged as society became more indulged in luxury, and these in turn developed into early styles of sofa by the end of the 1600s.

Reckless extravagance was displayed in the





1600s. A 1612 letter from John Chamberlaine to Mrs Alice Carter states, 'About this day ... the Countess of Salisbury was brought a bed of a daughter and lyes in very richly, for the hangings of her chambering being white satin, embroidered with silver and pearl, is valued at fourteen thousand pounds.' Percy MacQuoid reminds us that in 1988 this represents £50,000, which would be considerably more again today.

Ordinary bedrooms were scantily furnished until about 1630 when new forms of oak furniture, including cupboards and chests with drawers, were introduced. Free standing wardrobes replaced earlier simpler versions which were built into the wall panelling in the early 17th century.

Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) during his time as Lord Protector had, to the disappointment of his followers, a great deal of the finest state furniture reserved for his own private use, including tapestries in his bedroom which were of subjects not in accordance with his austere views.

The restoration of the monarchy in 1660

saw the introduction of new forms of thought, heavily influenced by events in France and Flanders. By Charles II (1630-1685) era, bedrooms of the nobility included furnishings such as luxuriously upholstered bedroom chairs and veneer and marquetry embellished chests of drawers, which commonly were of walnut or japanned.

Towards the end of the 16th century plain dressing tables were quite common. Double chests of drawers were favourites in the early 18th century and early looking glasses were placed upon chests of drawers, some of which had trinket drawers in their bases.

At GN Olsson Mastercraftsmen we enjoy undertaking research, design, restoration and conservation of bedroom antiques. We also custom design free-standing and built-in furniture, mainly in classic styles, but also contemporary pieces. This may involve making an additional piece to match the existing suite, a whole suite, or an item of furniture to accommodate the many types of technology and climate control which are introduced into our 21st century lives.

Anything that can be imagined can be made. The cycle continues as we make 'antiques and heirlooms of the future' ■

Gary Olsson
GN OLSSON Mastercraftsmen
 07 3888 1549
www.workin4u.com/gnolsson

