

# "FOR TODAY WE HAVE NAMING OF PARTS."

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In one sense this is a variation on Christopher Claxton Stevens' A glossary of terms relating to English Furniture in the 2004 edition of the Antique Furniture Restoration/Conservation Guide.

I expect that there may be some who recognise the line used in the title to this article – there may even be a few who remember the phrase from National Service. The quote comes from a World War II poem by Henry Reed called Lessons of the War of which Part I is entitled Naming of Parts. The poem deals with the dismantling and cleaning of a rifle, what to do, or not to do for the novice soldier so that he may learn thoroughly what may be a matter of life or death to him. Furniture history may not be quite so crucial but it is still important to know the small details of one's chosen subject.

In this short article I should like to try and cover some of the misnomers that have been used over the years, and also to look at some of the odd spellings and terminology from old inventories; words that, once understood, can go a long way to understanding the original context.

Various terms that we use today differ considerably from those used in the 18th century; a handle of whatever shape was a handle and may have only been known by its catalogue number, #3501, or whatever number it may have been. Rarely were they named as such and it was only with increased competition in Victorian that some manufacturers saw the need to identify their goods with a name.



Many of the misnomers for furniture are Victorian in origin. The mid-19th century was an era that saw a burgeoning interest in the past, but due to an imperfect understanding of the past, a great many myths came into circulation. Probably the most famous, or infamous, is 'grandfather clock' popularly 6ft or more in height, - or its close, smaller relation, the 'grandmother clock' which is rare and less than 6ft – for what is properly known as a longcase clock. It can take some time to train oneself out of such long established and well understood terminology.

A surprisingly large number of misnomers relate to oak furniture, rather than the more polite walnut and mahogany pieces. Quite possibly these were descriptions from antique dealers, rather than collectors, who, when selling items were trying to conjure up a romantic past – also, incidentally, often giving pieces an earlier date than they really merited. For example wide, cabriole legged, Windsor chairs were called 'Drunkards Chairs'; though not particularly romantic, the term was used in print well into the 1960's.



Joint stools are sometimes encountered in old, early 20th century journals as 'Coffin Stools'. This may have come from Samuel Pepys' diary which was first published in a complete edition in the 1890's. In one entry Pepys visits his family in the country and describes a coffin, laid out in the parlour, resting on stools. Undoubtedly this was not

an unusual use for a set of joint stools, but that was not their name; they were always listed as stools in contemporary inventories while simple chairs were listed as 'backstools'.



As an aside, in old documents odd spellings are endemic, and so, for example, one may find joint spelt as 'joyn'd', but for all that it is an accurate explanation of how such stools were made. Oak boxes are usually described as 'Bible Boxes'; once again they may well have held the family bible but that was far from their sole use. My mother used a 'Bible Box' as her work box for needles, thread, buttons and wooden darning 'mushroom'.



A 'Gate-leg Table' is an excellent descriptive term, it is what it says, but here again the phrase is of fairly modern usage. Drop leaf or falling leaf are more correct period expressions. For example in the 1641 Inventory of Tart Hall one finds "an oval Table of wanscote with falling sides." Note the spelling here; sometimes this can be phonetic and an indication of which part of the country the author may have come from.

Occasionally one comes across terms such as 'Glastonbury Chair', and 'Savonarola Chair' for two types of ancient folding chair. The 'Glastonbury Chair' was so named because there is a famous example at Glastonbury which caused much academic research and discussion in Victorian times, and later. In



Florence, at San Marco, is the x-framed chair that belonged to the rebellious monk, Savonarola, before his death in 1498.



Likewise 'Refectory Table' and 'Monks Bench' are words for large oak dining tables and for benches that have a back folding down to convert into a table; all are terms that promote the romantic past. I still use the term refectory table but dislike the wholly spurious term 'monk's bench'.

In Georgian documents, spellings may be a problem as is the total absence of accurate terminology. One of my favourite spellings is 'Buroe' for bureau. 'Cloathes Cupboard' is what we might call today a linen press. Tallboys and highboys weren't used in 18th century England but chest-on-chest was.



There is a difficulty surrounding the terms 'bureau', 'bookcase', 'bureau-cabinet', or even just plain 'cabinet', let alone if it has a 'swan's neck pediment' (above left) or has a 'double-bonnet top' (above right); all terms that are found today but quite unlikely to have been found in contemporary Georgian documents. We may all know what 'seaweed marquetry' is but I doubt whether anyone in the 18th century would.



However cabinet-makers would have known the terms 'pembroke table', and 'davenport desk' in 1800.



What is the importance of terminology? Well to lose words impoverishes the language – not many of these old terms exist in a 'spell-check'. Historical accuracy helps us understand the past and the social context of how furniture was used at the time that it was made