

Shapland and Petter

This article was written by David Battle to celebrate the exhibition and book about the Barnstaple furniture manufacturers Shapland and Petter. It appeared in Furniture and Cabinet Making Magazine 2005.

SHAPLAND AND PETTER OF BARNSTAPLE

In the Summer of 2005 the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon mounted an exhibition of over one hundred pieces of Shapland and Petter furniture. As part of this lottery funded project, which also includes the digitisation of the firms archive and an oral history project, Daryl Bennett has produced an informative and superbly illustrated book documenting the history of the firm and its place in the Arts and Crafts movement. The fact that so much photographic and written evidence is available through the company archives, which includes design drawings and sales catalogues, has allowed the author to write an authoritative history.

The two large Victorian factory buildings on the south side of the the River Taw still dominate the centre of Barnstaple. After numerous changes of ownership they now produce doorsets, but for a period at the end of the Nineteenth century they employed over four hundred people and produced some of the most notable furniture of the period. In 1893 the company opened a shop in Berners Street, London, near Libertys and Morris and Co. An intelligent marketing programme, involving illustrated catalogues and travelling salesmen, meant that Shapland and Petter furniture was available nationwide through department stores and furniture retailers. From the company's documents it is evident that they were in the forefront of affordable artistic furniture. The range of goods encompasses simple domestic furniture of all styles to one off pieces of the highest quality art furniture. The company archives illustrate something like 10,000 designs.

This book concentrates on Shapland and Petter's golden period from 1895 to 1914 and clearly identifies Shapland and Petter's own distinctive style. What makes the firm so interesting is how it bridges the gap between the small scale craft workshop of famous arts and crafts practitioners such as Gimson and Bardsley, The Guild of Craftsmen and the Newlyn School and the mass-produced furniture factory. Despite its large scale Shapland and Petter was very much design led and featured much skilled hand work. It also operated at a profit, in contrast to Morris and Ashbee.

Daryl Bennett writes most interestingly on the Arts and Crafts movement and the tension between craft skill and industrialisation. However there is some room for fertile debate between furniture historians as to the relationship between a large company working in the arts and craft style and the actual Arts and Craft movement; especially a company also producing

unashamedly Art Nouveau products. There does not appear to be any evidence that Shapland and Petter ever considered itself part of the Arts and Crafts movement, it was operating some time after the movement's missionary peak, but, inspired by the designs of Vossey and Baillie Scott it rode the wave of popular demand for art furniture. If there is a philosophical basis behind Shapland and Petter it is the fact that both the founders, designers and many of the workers were Plymouth Bretheren and that they emanate from an area that has a long history of religious and political non conformity. Daryl Bennett concludes that what really links Shapland and Petter to the Arts and Crafts movement is the aspiration of moral virtue.

Henry Shapland was born in Barnstaple in 1823 and apprenticed to a local cabinetmaker. He visited America in 1847 and returned to North Devon where he established a small machine shop producing ornamental mouldings using a carving machine he had seen in America. Henry Petter, a salesman not a woodworker, became a partner in his growing business in 1865. By 1870 one hundred people were employed. Shapland loved labour saving woodwork machinery. He invested heavily in new machinery from America and when he moved to the present site in 1889 he was able to build the model factory. Next to the river, where timber was unloaded from all over the world this new factory boasted the first log cutting bandsaw in the country as well as its own drying kilns. It is recorded as having planers, tenoners and spindle moulders.

The pictures here go some way to illustrating the distinctive Shapland and Petter style. Most of the furniture we know of is in oak but the archive provides much evidence of the use of other timbers. The author first looks at the decorative and design elements.

Much of the distinctive Shapland and Petter look derives from the use of metalwork. In 1877 Barnstaple established the first municipally owned art school in the country. This included a metalwork and enamelling school and the factory had an in-house metalwork department.

Hand beaten copper repousse work panels feature on many pieces. Some of these show symbolic decorative devices. Looking towards art nouveau design there is much inspiration from the natural world, including a range of plant forms, birds and hearts. Symbols of peacocks and the lotus flower are common. These are linked to the Christian beliefs of life after death and the resurrection.



The copper work also features the use of lettering as ornamentation and there is a beautiful collection of furniture with mottoes. Some of these are didactic, some sentimental. Many are delightfully obscure; others emanate from a fascinating number of sources including Shakespeare, Byron, the bible and Longfellow.

Some of the finer pieces have pewter and silvered metal work and there is much use of hand beaten solid copper in hinges and handles, which elevate humble pieces to the spectacular. Decorative metalwork grilles are also used over glass.

Another decorative device is the use of hand painted stencilled panels. These depict landscapes, figurative portraits and interestingly a number of scenes of Dutch life.

We know from the records that enamelled panels and handles were used but these are a rarity. One sideboard has an enamelled lock plate which gives a jewel like effect.

Ceramic tiles are also much in evidence and there remain some examples of gessoed and painted panels as well as the use of leaded glass.



Many of the finer pieces feature inlay and marquetry executed to the highest standard. Often in stylised art nouveau design and many feature the use of mother of pearl inlay. There are also some superb examples of figurative marquetry featuring European scenes made by a German craftsman, William Deubler.

The above illustrates the diversity of the designs and the widespread use of mixed media. There is a distinctive house style in terms of the vocabulary of motifs and ornamentations.

The actual cabinet making is always of the highest standard and again the construction and design illustrate a distinctive Shapland and Petter shape and style. The legacy of Voysey is much in evidence here.

Certain design elements are typical



- The square tapered spindle is the Shapland and Petter signature. This tapers from both the top and bottom and fills many vertical spaces. Sometimes this evolves into a column with mouldings included. Made in one piece, the manufacture of these must have involved some special tooling.
- The geometric arch is very common and virtually exclusive. This is pointed at the top rather than curved constructed from mitred sections These reinforce the strong geometric presence of much of the work.

- Pierced splats are used in chair backs and galleries often with a heart motif
- In frame and panel construction the panels are invariably introduced from the back with pinned mouldings to secure them.
- Henry Shapland originally started in business producing wavy mouldings using a machine imported from America. Several pieces incorporate these mouldings.(see0372)
- Legs invariably finish with a spade foot or platform. This gives weight to the furniture and detracts from top heaviness.

Seeing a collection of Shapland and Petter pieces brought together was a revelation. One is struck by the boldness of the design, both in terms of the use of mixed media and also by the sheer structural presence. This is in opposition to the dominant styles at the time which are essentially derivative The late Victorian dark wood furniture often has not shaken off its rococo antecedents and manages to look both frilly and ponderous. Taste wise the dominant style was the Sheraton revival and a return to classicism While the Shapland and Petter has a sense of the gothic its structural geometric style gives it a strong sense of the new The use of ornament, the simplicity of line and the use of space sets Shapland and Petter apart.

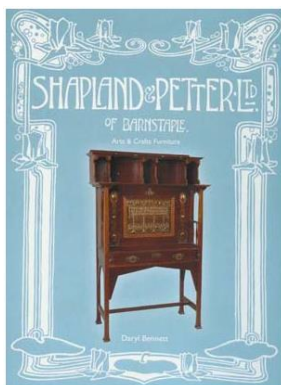
Always there is movement and the largest forms are lightened by the use of spindles and piercings.

Daryl Bennett describes the structural style very well.

"There is a powerful three dimensional presence for more decorative pieces which avoids for example the temptation to present a wardrobe as a box with decoration. Projecting cupboards, horizontal curved shelves or drawers break the flat plane, overhanging cornices with supporting brackets which continue to the sides take the eye round the structure A test of the quality of design is to view pieces from the side rather than the front and very often this shows the powerful structural features as well as the elegance in line and sense of proportion. The monotony of blank spaces and straight lines is carefully avoided with the addition of brackets, slatted rows, pierced shapes, curved and angled apertures."

If you are a restorer it is quite likely that you have worked on Shapland and Petter furniture without knowing it. However there are clues to identification. The pieces are not stamped. The author has identified only six pieces labelled with the firm's name. The most certain form of identification is the locks. These bare the impressed stamp of S&P B in a triangular shape. The other path to identification is the use of registration marks. These are numbers impressed into the back of the furniture. These numbers are sometimes preceded by the letter R. The best method is to have knowledge of the firm's style. The author is himself a keen collector of the furniture and is happy to hear from anyone who might have queries about identifiable pieces.

This book is of such great interest because it illustrates the history of a firm rather than a style or a period. By bringing together so much photographic evidence it will certainly enhance the reputation of Shapland and Petter and sets a standard for other furniture historians to follow.



Shapland and Petter of Barnstaple

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