

The Tudor Room

England, Suffolk, about 1600

Presented by Mrs. Elisabeth Washburn and her daughters, Mrs. Sidney Washburn Young, Mrs. Margaret W. Hunt, and Mrs. Elisabeth Washburn King in memory of John Washburn 23.67

Background

The Tudor Room dates from 1558–1603 during the reign of Elizabeth I. It is believed that the oak paneling in the room comes from a manor house in the County of Suffolk, England. This was the period of the English Renaissance when great writers like Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare were at work. It was also a time of great international expansion and prosperity in England.

During this period, agricultural prices were high. Therefore, the income of the landed aristocracy was also high, enabling families to spend money on building. In fact, tangible evidence exists that living standards for all classes were better than before. This increase in wealth was accompanied by a competitive desire to show off one's new wealth and social standing. As a result, between 1550 and 1690, more country houses of this type were built than at any other time in England's history.

With the growth of a strong central government under the Tudors, the need for fortified houses and castles declined. The wide use of gunpowder and cannon also made thick walls and towers less useful. Changing socio-economic patterns and the greater availability of land resulting from the dissolution of the monasteries broke down the feudal, or manorial, system. The great hall of the medieval country house was, for the most part, obsolete, due largely to the decline in communal living patterns. Private apartments and more intimate spaces were preferred, and these homes were built with better sanitation and more windows. Up until this time, country houses had been constructed with heavy oak timbers joined with mortar, referred to as half-timber construction. Local materials were still the most commonly used, but by 1570, many houses were built of brick.

The Room

This room once served as a withdrawing chamber or parlor. A parlor was used as a private sitting, eating, and reception chamber, and "as a room to retire into after meals and a room for private meals."¹ Although the withdrawing chamber dates back to the 15th century, it only became important in the 16th century, when it gradually began to take over some of the functions that had previously belonged to the "great chamber."²

¹ Mark, Girouard. *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven, 1978), p. 99.

² The "great chamber" had become fashionable as the breakdown of feudalism resulted in the demise of the "great hall" where the landowning family had formerly dined with all of its retainers.

We surmise that the family that built the manor house was quite well-to-do. Their wealth would probably be based on rents from tenant farmers and, perhaps, income from a small mill or industry.

Since we cannot be sure of the exact house from which the room came, we cannot state definitively that this is the entire room. However, we do know that certain changes have been made to the room at different times to fit museum installation. Specifically, the following changes have been made:

- Originally, the windows were opposite the fireplace
- Two of doors were originally on the remaining two walls. All other doors are museum additions. For example, the doors on either side of the large window were added to gain access to the radiator controls.
- The small window next to the fireplace was originally on the other side of the fireplace.

The Fireplace

During the Middle Ages, the hall had been heated and, to a great extent, lit by an open fire known as the "down hearth." This was placed in the center of the room where it exposed its occupants to continual smoke and dangerous sparks. During the Elizabethan Age, enclosed fireplaces such as we see here became the rule rather than the exception. Because the fireplace for a manor like this still supplied vital heat and light, it was the center of family life and, therefore, the most important area in the room. Most rooms contained one.

This fireplace is in the form of a simple Tudor arch, a low, wide, flattened interpretation of the Gothic pointed arch. The overmantel, however, is elaborately carved with three panels with cartouche borders, each separated by a female-form column (caryatid), or male-form column (atlas). The caryatids and atlantes (plural of atlas) appear to be royal warriors with lion's head shields. The use of caryatids, atlantes and other classical details like the pilasters and the dentils that fringe the cornice moldings reflect the influence of the Italian Renaissance. This is not a pure application of Italian motifs; instead, what we see is a Germanic interpretation of the Italian Renaissance, learned from German and Flemish pattern books imported into England and often executed by the many wood and textile workers who immigrated to England from the Netherlands to escape persecution by the Spanish Catholic authorities who ruled there. The central panel of the fireplace bears the coat-of-arms of Charles Bowen, a London silk merchant, who is believed to have been an owner of the house at one time. This has not been verified.

Paneling

The paneling dates from between 1580 and 1610. In earlier homes and palaces, the timbers and mortar of the walls had been left exposed. Here panels, which are a single board wide, with carved frames, cover the rough masonry and timber walls. These oak panels are held in place between pegged oak stiles.

Oak was most popular for paneling because it was inexpensive, tough, and easily available. This wainscoting kept out the drafts and added an air of warmth and richness. It therefore illustrates the increase in luxury and craftsmanship during the period.

Windows

Until the time of Henry VIII (who reigned from 1509 to 1547), glass in windows was quite rare except in churches and in the homes of the wealthy. Window panes were small, square or diamond-shaped, and set in lead and wooden frames. Colored panes like these were common, but glass was also painted with iron and copper oxides mixed with water and gum arabic. Much of the technology for glassmaking was French and Venetian, and at this time much of the best window glass came from Normandy and Burgundy. These particular windows are not original to this room but are English, of the correct Tudor Gothic type. They were made in about 1543, probably for a residence of Henry VIII because the center coat-of-arms is that of Edward VI, son of Henry VIII.³ During this period, windows became larger and more numerous because England was at peace; defense, therefore, became less important. At night, light was provided by the fire and beeswax or tallow candles.

Ceiling

This ceiling is not the original but is a recreation appropriate for the period. In Tudor times, these ceilings were modeled of plaster by hand on the spot. According to correspondence at the time the room was purchased, we were advised that "the ornament should be somewhat irregular, not mechanically correct." The pattern of interwoven ribs, acanthus leaves, and palmettes is typical and similar to German, Netherlandish, and Italian types. Ceilings of this type might have been gilt and painted.

Elizabethan and Jacobean Furniture Styles

The furniture pieces in this room are not from this particular manor house, but they are contemporary and typical. As such, they are in either the Elizabethan (roughly 1558-1603) or the Jacobean furniture style (1603-1660). Both of these styles reflect the influence of the Renaissance, which reached England during the 16th century by way of Germany and the Netherlands. What we see in this room is, therefore, a Northern interpretation of Italian Renaissance forms and ornament.

Furniture makers often decorated pieces with Renaissance motifs without an understanding of the correct use of the motifs. For example, there are Ionic capitals at the top of the legs of the main table in this room. The furniture is very robust and heavy. The three most distinctive types of ornament found on Elizabethan furniture are all seen in the furniture in this room. They are the following:

- strapwork (an intricate arabesque ornament carved in low relief usually in repeated patterns)
- bulbs on the legs and supports of furniture like tables and court cupboards
- inlay of colored woods in floral and chequer patterns.

³ Less prosperous homes would use greased paper or polished horn windows.

After 1603, Jacobean furniture decoration became less exuberant and more stylized. Bulbs became flatter; baluster-shaped legs replaced the wide Elizabethan bulbous legs. There was more emphasis on carved lozenges, and fluting, arcading, and guilloches continued to be popular. We see a continuation in the attempt to make the home more comfortable. Upholstered furniture became more common. Furniture forms continued to develop, and for the first time carpenters made chairs without arms and furniture forms and decoration became lighter. At the same time, the heavier, earlier furniture also continued to be made throughout this period.

In both styles, the forms are functional and simple. The chief craftsman was the joiner. The wood used for furniture in Tudor times was usually oak; however, native woods, such as walnut, ash, or elm, were also used, somewhat in the earlier style and increasingly in Jacobean furniture. During the early part of the period, following medieval custom, furniture was often gilt or painted to protect the wood and brighten the house. By the end of the period, painted furniture was going out of fashion; instead, surfaces would be left plain, waxed, or varnished.

The museum has chosen to show several different types of pieces that were in use, but an actual room would have had much less furniture than this one. Even in wealthy homes, the principal sitting rooms would contain only a large table, a chair for the owner of the house, and a bench or stools for the other members of the household.

**Table, English, 1580-1620, Oak
Washburn Fund 23.55**

The table comes from Overcourt Manor in Gloucestershire, which is in the west of England. During the later 16th century, as people increasingly sought privacy from the great hall for activities such as dining, a demand arose for smaller tables from six to ten feet long for use in the most intimate private rooms. This general type, with four or six legs tied together by stretcher rails, was used throughout the 16th century and continued with few modifications until about 1660. The lower rail or stretcher, bound the table legs together and was used as a footrest. These stretchers were often notched to hold benches and stools on their sides beneath the table when they were not in use.

Just beneath the tabletop, a frieze is carved on all sides with a broad mulled band. The heavy bulbous legs were very popular in the Elizabethan period and demonstrate the skill of post turning which developed in the 16th century in England. The bulbous cup-and-cover legs are topped with Ionic capitals. These motifs exemplify the application of classical ornament onto typically English furniture types.

**Octagonal Folding Side Table, English, about 1600, Oak
Washburn Fund 23.24**

Unlike the other table in this room, this could be moved quite easily to serve a variety of purposes. As a result, there were many of these tables by the end of the Elizabethan period. The type originated in the 16th century with the use of "gatelegs." The bulbous turnings are pure embellishments here.

Used for the service of light refreshments, these tables were set against the wall until needed, often with a covering of Turkey work, tapestry, or colored leather.

Seating

This room has examples of all the basic types of seating current at this time—the stool, the bench (called a *form*), the armchair, and the side chair.

Stool, English, possibly late 16th century, Oak Washburn Fund 23.27

The stool evolved from the chest and made up the greater part of seat furniture until around 1660. When the medieval habit of using only one side of the dining table ended, late in the reign of Elizabeth, joint stools like this one, not chairs, were placed around the table. The women's huge skirts (with wooden hoops) and the puffed breeches of the men made stools convenient and kept the stool in favor as a seat throughout the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. But fashion alone was not responsible for the comparative rarity of chairs. Ladies and gentlemen of the day did not loll, but sat upright, for they believed that dignity of appearance was as essential as courtesy. Frequently, a pillow might be placed on these seats to make them more comfortable.

This piece is carved on all sides with channeling which resembles a half-filled arcade. Notice how the earlier heavy bulbous legs have been replaced by flatter baluster-shaped legs.

Bench, English, early 17th century, Oak Gift of Mrs. John Washburn and daughters 23.73

Benches were also a popular type of seating. "Form" is an English term for bench. The benches were often placed against a wall.

Armchair, English, late 16th century, oak, Gift of Mrs. John Washburn and daughters 23.77

This chair is important because it represents the earliest, basic armchair, a type that was more generally used than those that were inlaid and carved. The box-like square created by its four straight legs recalls the chest, which was its forerunner. It dates from a time when chairs were more often functional than decorative pieces. For example, this chair's paneled back would help to ward off draughts.

The outward rake of the back is the only concession made to comfort. As this rake is uncompensated for in the straight rigid legs, a slight thickening of the wood at the bottom of the back legs insures against tipping. In the best houses, a cushion called a "banker" might have been added to the seat for additional comfort, as shown here.

This type of armchair is called a Wainscot chair. Notice how similar its panel is to the panel on the walls. Often only one chair was to be found in the hall or parlor. This was regarded as a symbol of authority and was, therefore, reserved as a seat of honor for the principal person. The term "chairperson" developed from this custom. Even in important

houses, chairs were supplied exclusively for the master, mistress, and distinguished guests; the rest of the seating was provided by stools and benches.

The armchair developed first from chests to which a back and arms were added. The backs were usually straight and solid because this was easier to make and kept off cold drafts; however, they were uncomfortable and their size and weight made them difficult to move.

Pair of Yorkshire Chairs, English, Cheshire or Lancaster areas, 1650-1700, Oak Washburn Fund 23.26.1,2

Solid-backed chairs that were heavy and difficult to move led to the gradual evolution of the side chair. Known originally as "back stools" because they were constructed by the addition of a movable back to a stool, sets of side chairs were made from the early 17th century on. They are light in weight and more convenient for full skirts. The front stretcher of each chair is midway up the legs and has been turned on a lathe instead of being left plain, another example of the development of this furniture form. Between 1625 and 1650, this lighter, armless pattern of chair was often found in Northern England and eventually came to be known by early 20th-century collectors as the Yorkshire or Derbyshire chair. Such chairs reached the height of their popularity during the Commonwealth.

Court Cupboard, English, about 1580-90, Oak Washburn Fund 23.23

This piece of furniture is said to have gotten its name from its low height, as it was usually no more than four feet high (the French word for short is *court*). The court cupboard became popular in the latter part of the 16th century for use in the small parlors, which were beginning to be preferred for meals. It was an open, three-tiered side table that was used to show off the family's collections of precious metals, ceramics, or pewter and as a service table. The top shelf held cups and other objects of value; the lower shelves held dishes and platters. Each of three tiers illustrates a different type of Tudor carving: the upper, rosette and strapwork; the middle, a broad gadrooned band; the lower, channelled carving.

Portrait of Robert Devereaux, unknown artist, English, 1599, Oil on panel Washburn Fund 24.24

Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex, was one of Queen Elizabeth's favorite courtiers. He was a soldier in her service in foreign wars. She subsequently appointed him Foreign Secretary, Earl Marshall, and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Essex failed in Ireland and fell from favor with the Queen. Essex's involvement in an unsuccessful uprising against Elizabeth led to his execution by beheading in 1601.

This portrait was painted in 1599 when Essex was in Ireland. Other portraits of him exist but show him unbearded. This painting is unusual for an Elizabethan portrait as it shows only the head and shoulders. At this time it was fashionable to have one's portrait painted. These portraits were meant to display the gorgeous clothing and jewels that conveyed the status of the subject. They were therefore often full or three-quarter length.

Conclusion

This withdrawing chamber or parlor comes from the period of England's Renaissance, a time of peace and prosperity. Increased trade brought new ideas and new wealth to Englishmen. They used this new money to make their homes more comfortable. Many new types of furniture were developed to meet the increased demand. One result of England's trade with Germany and the Netherlands was the importation of a Germanic interpretation of the Italian Renaissance into England. This is evident in many of the ornaments on both the architecture and the furniture in this room.

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