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Oak and Country Furniture

The ACC Indices and the Market

by John Andrews

OAK AND COUNTRY FURNITURE BOTH make emphatic statements about domestic lifestyle. Their vernacular character has an enduring period appeal. In recent years a special popularity seemed to insulate them from the decline that affected other periods. People who live in the country, some of whom furnish in response to a period house, might claim to be more consistent in their taste than city and suburban dwellers concerned with keeping up appearances. A look of age and possible continuity suggests resistance to transient fashions and modernism. However, oak and country pieces are not entirely immune to market forces. Fortunately, for the lifetime of the ACC Antique Furniture Price Index, which started in 1968, oak and country furniture comprised two of the seven categories from which the Index is composed, so

there is a record of their performance. Figure 1 illustrates their superior but parallel pattern in comparison with the overall ACC Antique Furniture Index, which includes later periods and styles. The Mars Bar graph is there to provide a record of comparative retail inflation.

Although there is some overlap, the major difference between the two categories is that the pieces chosen for the oak index are mainly taken from the mid-to-late 17th century and are classic examples of the output of its joiners and craftsmen, such as wainscot chairs, the side chairs often called backstools, moulded front chests, coffers, court cupboards, refectory tables, side tables and very early dressers. The country index, on the other hand, uses mainly 18th century and later pieces made by rural craftsmen in emulation of cabinet-

makers' town styles, as well as gateleg tables, chests, corner cupboards, bureaux and fruitwood pieces. Oak comprises a mainstream period of its own that preceded the advent of walnut. Country is a category of longer duration embracing different styles derived from town originals and vernacular furniture of uniquely rural output, like the Windsor and the Mendlesham, using country woods including oak and walnut.

For quite a long time country furniture, which was very undervalued when the Index was started, outperformed the longer-established and higher-value oak in terms of increased price index. Oak, which had started well, and had a long history of attention from period furniture connoisseurs, fell behind the country figures in growth terms for most of the 1990s decade, but has caught up again recently. Both categories were well ahead of the overall figures at the end of 2012, probably due to the collapse of the market for routine Georgian mahogany, Regency and later Victorian output. There is a particular strength about the liking for vernacular and early furniture that maintains a sturdy demand for it, even if on a diminished scale. Although the graphs in the Figure 1 chart clearly show that in the last four or five years both types have suffered from a similar falling-off that brought down the main Index, it

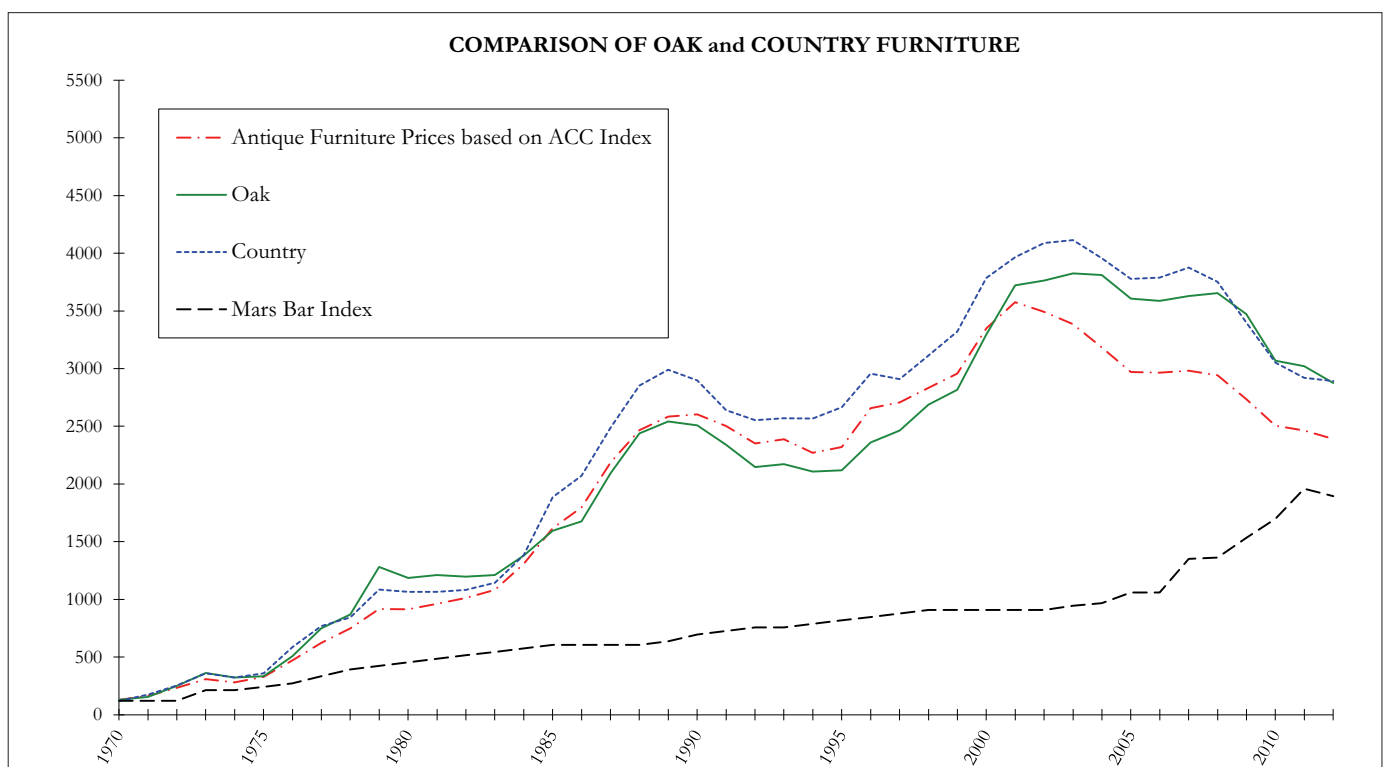


Figure 1. Graph of ACC Antique Furniture Price Index 1970-2013 with comparison of Oak and Country Indices.

has not been to the same extent.

The reasons for the falling-off are quite complex. We all know that apart from the work of top designers and cabinet-makers, most antique furniture has been in the doldrums since 2001. The ACC Index graph illustrates that all too clearly. But for a few years oak and country furniture was thought to be unaffected by the vogue changes adumbrated by lifestyle magazines and the smaller interior's addiction to bare modernism. After all, some rustic painted furniture of scuffed appearance has been fashionably expensive for some time, even when not particularly old. Scuffing has become a skill comparable to traditional surface finishing. One might therefore think that a charming fruitwood table of 18th century date, getting more and more difficult to find, would maintain and even improve on its high point of the early 21st century, but this is not guaranteed. One can understand why the decline applies to plain oak wainscot chairs, which languish at many specialist auction sales: they are big, chunky chairs needing a lot of room to provide not very comfortable seating. Unless possessed of exceptional regional carving they do not generate much domestic enthusiasm; they are of academic historical interest. Country side tables and lowboys of lively colour do not need the same kind of space and are useful incidental pieces. Yet many are just as hard to move at auction; why should this be?

The demand for oak and country furniture is associated with the furnishing of country house and cottage interiors, but the prosperous housing market of London and the South East is dominated by town, rather than country dwellings. Estate agents have written that although there are attractive and spacious country properties for sale, they are not moving quickly. Additionally, a move away from traditional historicism in furnishing has been a feature of the last decade or more, remarked on by younger social observers. This and restricted space have reduced the demand for antiques, particularly bulky oak buffets and cupboards, quite apart from the large refectory dining tables no longer needed for daily consumption of meals. A single example of antique furniture may be used for interior decorative effect but the modern approach is eclectic, mixing old with new, so that consistency of period style throughout is no longer the case. The decline of the formal dining room in favour of kitchen or sitting room consumption of food



Figure 2. A Charles II small oak court cupboard, Westmorland. 119 wide x 54.5 deep x 140cm high, (46½ wide x 21 deep x 55in. high). This is an unusually small example of a Westmorland court/press cupboard. Traditionally the decoration is confined to the upper panels and frame, invariably including initials and dates. Its abundant carving and small size put it outside the normal price frame of plain larger examples, which are not popular at present. Sold for £8,125 inc. premium. Courtesy Bonhams Chester.

has reduced the demand for sets of dining chairs and tables of any period. There has been a shift in the furnishing of interiors that has caused the long-held desire to present a traditional view of taste and enhanced social standing to be dropped unceremoniously. These changes require much more analysis than can be effected here.

Before this becomes a dirge of unrelieved gloom, however, there are reasons for adopting a good deal of optimism about recent moves in the market for selected kinds of oak and country furniture. One of them is the fact that any piece of merit in terms of quality of craftsmanship and attraction of appearance is snapped up rapidly at prices indicating little restraint on the part of buyers. There are pieces and types that still spark off demand. It is the dull bulk of routine, lacklustre furniture that drags down the statistics and depresses trade and auctioneers by remaining unsold. The market is much

more discriminating than it was a decade or two ago. Following the withdrawal of some top auctioneers from this field, opportunities are less frequent. But there are still some special auction sales, and Wilkinson's of Doncaster, in which excellent pieces feature. There is a strong group of very good dealers specialising in this furniture. The dedication of a smaller band of enthusiasts is undimmed – this issue of the magazine is always a popular one. It may therefore be useful to look at particular categories of furniture from oak and country stables to see which of them are runners, which are merely strolling along, and their prospects in the form of the following list:

– The court cupboard, the buffet and the refectory table, all three now associated with the dining room rather than the original hall location of the cupboard, have been affected by the change in approach to domestic life and available

space. High grade examples with notable carved decoration are the exceptions because they satisfy the interest of specialist collectors and curators. Regional motifs can spark avid enthusiasm. But for routine examples early recovery is unlikely. Many refectory tables were made in the 19th and 20th centuries to meet the popular demand for a style now out of fashion. These have lost their attraction.

- The same appreciation of decorative and regional carving applies to wainscot chairs and to sets of 17th century chairs, whether backstool, Derbyshire, or moulded-back side chairs. Again, full recovery will take a radical change in attitude but some Lancashire backstools with carved panels are holding up very well.

- Joint stools need to be decorated with fluted legs and carving to achieve high prices, or at least feature bold turning and not have legs made up from staircase balusters. Victorian copies are common. Stools of the boarded type are rare and expensive. But stools are versatile domestically, doubling as occasional tables, so genuine period joint stools have recovery potential.



- The presence of fruitwood, yew, sycamore, elm, walnut and other country woods has a marked upward effect on prices, as do inlays and attractive mouldings. These features are to be cherished as they make for good investment.

- The dining room of country furnishing, with high dresser, gateleg table and sets of country chairs, whether spindle or ladder backs with rush seats, is in abeyance at present. Low dressers are more valued than high dressers with racks. Early Windsor chairs of 18th century date, particularly yew comb backs with cabriole legs, are an exception. If attributable to a maker like Pitt or Hewett, or of similar design, no limits apply. The dining room is likely to continue to lose importance, affecting its furniture, but the dresser is a perennial favourite not necessarily confined to the dining room and is likely to recover quite quickly.

- Chests of the coffer type have established a niche for the retention of duvets and bedclothes at the end of a bed. Carving is important, but look out for Victorian 'improvements'. Chests of drawers with geometrically moulded fronts are being undersold at gift auction



Figure 4. A Charles II oak dresser, late 17th century, with eight geometrically-moulded drawers around a central cupboard door between vertical panels. An early low dresser and as such very desirable. £15,000. Courtesy Christie's South Kensington.



Figure 5. A George III ash and elm high back Windsor armchair, c.1770, with cabriole front legs and simple shaped splat to the comb back. £700 at Dreweatt Neate, Donnington. If it were made of yew with elm seat, had a more sophisticated splat and had cabriole rear legs the price would escalate – see figure 6.



Figure 6. A George III yew and fruitwood Windsor armchair, with elm seat, Thames Valley, c.1800. The yew wood and the more sophisticated design, especially the pierced splat, should be compared with the previous example, figure 5, illustrating the reasons for the difference in price. £3,750 inc. premium. Courtesy Bonhams Chester.

Opposite above. Figure 3. A Charles II oak 'wainscot' armchair, late 17th century, probably Derbyshire, the scrolled top rail with initials ISI below a coronet and with side ears, the panel with stylised tree and leaf design, with down-swept arms and baluster legs. The carving and regional attribution add significantly to value. Again, plain examples are not popular. £4,375. Courtesy Christie's South Kensington.

Figure 7. Bonhams lot 962 Fruitwood moulded front chest. A rare William & Mary fruitwood chest of drawers, c.1700. Having a boarded top with moulded edge, above three mitre-moulded long drawers, on extended stile supports, pine sides, 91 wide x 55 deep x 80cm high, (3½ wide x 21½ deep x 31in. high). Its small size and the fruitwood made it much more desirable than a larger plain oak one. £2,250 inc. premium. Courtesy Bonhams Chester.





Left. Figure 8. A George III barrel-back pine floor-standing corner cupboard. The upper-section having an open arch headed by a key-stone and flanked by stop-fluted pilasters enclosing three shaped shelves, the lower-section with a slide above a single paneled cupboard door, restorations, a handsome prospect needing some attention but dirt cheap – at £562 inc. premium. Courtesy Bonhams Chester.

Below. Figure 9. A mid-18th century oak cricket table. English. Having a circular top above ogee-shaped friezes, raised on turned tapering legs, joined by plain stretchers, 54 diameter x 65cm high. (21¼ diameter x 25½in. high) Good cricket tables are doing well. £2,375 inc. premium. Courtesy Bonhams Chester.



prices and have room for recovery. Chests on stands requiring space are difficult to sell. Some room for improvement in all chests, though.

- The plain oak slope-front bureau is as difficult to sell as the mahogany one; it needs an exceptional interior of stepped drawers and pigeon holes to attract bidding. Not a good prospect even though it should be.

- Corner cupboards, whether hanging 'mural' or freestanding are not avidly

pursued. Open or glazed types with shelves for display are better than plain wood doors, even if curved. Not part of the uncluttered modernist approach to interiors.

- The cricket table of country provenance has been doing well at auction if its construction and proportion are robust. Woods like elm, sycamore, yew and even pine are highly valued. Bigger rather than smaller versions are to be preferred. A good prospect.

- Side tables are down to prices well below those of a decade ago. The single drawer side table, if of 17th-century oak, should have a moulded-panel drawer to improve its attraction. It is usually less expensive than the three-drawer lowboy type. Turned legs need to be of robust bobbin and/or baluster forms; cabrioles must not be thin, bandy or their feet badly damaged. The lowboy is essentially an early 18th-century table used with a mirror, either hung on the wall against which it stood, or a dressing mirror on



Left. Figure 10. A side table c.1680 of the oak period that has the double merit of being made of walnut and its single drawer has a moulded two-panel front. The boldly-turned baluster legs are joined by stretchers. A good example, sold for £1,573 in 2012, which was a bargain. Courtesy Cheffins.

Right. Figure 11. An early George III oak lowboy. The rectangular top with rounded front corners, above an ogee-shaped frieze, enclosing one short and two small deep drawers, raised on cabriole front legs, and turned tapering back legs, terminating in pad feet, 78.5 wide x 52.5 deep x 67cm high, (30½ wide x 20½ deep x 26in. high). Sold for a bargain £400 inc. premium. Courtesy Bonhams Chester.



swivels, which stood on the table. Oak versions are going cheaply at auction and have potential; fruitwood versions are rare. This is a good sector to trawl for bargains.

When a recovery in antique furniture prices starts to take place – if, some

pessimists might say – smaller oak and country pieces of the types identified are likely to be amongst the leaders. Prices are more accessible than those of fine 18th century walnut and mahogany, the vernacular nature of construction sympathetic as well as easier to understand, and the tradition

in appearance culturally undemanding. Charm and lightness of surface have always and will always be valued. The return in popularity is likely to come about more rapidly than that of other periods. Enthusiasts will already know this; therefore, action should not be delayed for much longer.