

A VALE OF GLAMORGAN CHAIR

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Substantial oak armchairs with drawers beneath the seats are widely known, traditionally as the father-of-the-family's fireside seat, probably with a bible in the drawer. The example illustrated here is remarkable both because it exhibits a variety of early nineteenth-century vernacular 'fashion', and because an inscription on the stay-rail tells us everything about its provenance (Figs 1 and 2). The letters are deeply cut, and filled with a red stopping. They read: WEAGLETON C/1816/Lantrithyd' and on the top cross-splat: 'Gods intent none can prevent'

Stylistically it combines the form of a South Wales vernacular 'Sheraton' armchair with the heavy front legs and boldly raked back of the 'Chippendale' examples, plus an extended back with cross-splats and a shaped crest rail.¹ The decoration consists of a fine bead worked around all the elements of the back, and reeded mouldings (three- and four-reed) on all the straight rails, vertical splats and legs. Reeds were enthusiastically adopted by early nineteenth-century South Wales furniture makers, appearing commonly on case furniture as glazing bar astragals, mouldings around panels, and pilasters, as well as on chair backs.

The arms are boldly swept in the eighteenth-century manner, and the long tapered bases of the arm supports are fluted. The drawer compartment is formed by a second, lower set of rails below the seat, with grooved-in flush panels on three sides, the drawer opening to the front.

The drawer itself is of elm with an oak front. It is unusual, being entirely divided up to half its depth by cross-wise slips of pine, forming twelve narrow compartments 2.5 cm wide by 3.5 cm deep and 30.0 cm long (Fig. 3). These were originally concealed by a false bottom which slid through a slot in the back and grooves in the sides into a groove inside the front. The drawer's lock is missing, but the form of its recess indicates that the bolt shot downwards to lock the false bottom.

The possible positioning of the drawer-knobs and keyhole is indicated by discs of boxwood, which appear to be original, since there are no holes through the drawers where the knobs would have been; perhaps they served a purely conventional purpose, with the lock functioning on the inside. Another disc on the little panel to the right of the drawer shows that this too was once the front of a narrow, tapered drawer running within the angle of the seat, and an old drawer-stop still exists inside.

The purpose of the drawer compartments is obscure. It is unlikely that they were used for coinage, as the chair's ownership (see below) might indicate, because they are too narrow for the large pennies still in circulation in 1816. Silver cutlery seems possible, but whatever was kept in them was probably protected by a loose cloth lining, because the drawer bottom shows no signs of wear.

The ownership of the chair has proved easy to trace. Llantrithyd is a village in the south-eastern part of the Vale of Glamorgan, and was known as the seat of the Aubrey family from the seventeenth century until, early in the nineteenth century, a family tragedy caused the 6th Baronet, Sir John, to abandon the house, which still stands in ruins. This was



1-2. Two views of oak armchair dated 1816, Welsh



3. Detail of seat-drawer with partitions

partly the result too of the family's acquisition of estates in Buckinghamshire at Boarstall and Dorton; at the time that the chair was made, a John Eagleton was steward of the Dorton estate,² while his brother William held the same position at Llantrithyd. The parish registers show that William and Catherine Eagleton had seven children born between 1815 and 1824, but no marriages or deaths were recorded, so the family presumably kept to their English roots, only one son staying on to marry in the locality. William Eagleton earned a salary of £50 per annum.³

John Eagleton enjoyed a position of close trust and friendship with Sir John Aubrey;⁴ his brother William is more obscure, but comes briefly to life in a number of letters he wrote to Mr Forster of Carey Street, Lincoln's Inn (an executor of Sir John's estate) and in particular one to his brother John,⁵ all concerned with the collection of debts due to Sir John's estate after his death in 1826.

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REFERENCES

1. Luke Millar, 'Late Georgian Wooden-bottomed Chairs in South Wales', *Regional Furniture*, v (1991), pp. 1-15.
2. *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, Journal of the Cambrian Archaeological Society (July 1864).
3. Buckinghamshire Record Office: accounts for the Llantrithyd estate, 1826: ref. D/AF 122/164.
4. Sir John Aubrey Fletcher, personal correspondence.
5. Buckinghamshire Record Office: ref. D/AF 122/164.