

## Andrew A. Matthews Restoration

### *Restoration & Conservation Of Antique Furniture*

#### The Vigani Cabinet

I was recently fortunate to inspect the Vigani Cabinet courtesy of Dr. Adam Bowett & Queen's College, Cambridge. The oak cabinet, made in 1704, was by John Austin, for John Francis Vigani, first Professor of Chemistry at the University of Cambridge.

The Austin family, Cornelius Snr, Cornelius Jrn, & John were high quality carpenters & joiners in Cambridge & are known to have supplied furniture to other Cambridge colleges.

Cornelius Snr [1660 – 1704] produced pieces for Trinity, King's & Emmanuel, much of which is still in existence. His woodwork is also associated with some of the great names in English arts & architecture, Grinling Gibbons, & Sir Christopher Wren among them. Cornelius Jrn worked for his father before taking over in 1704. He made furniture for St. John's other Cambridge College's until his death in 1729. It is unclear as to the exact relationship between John & the other Austin joiners. Suffice to say John was also a joiner & the Vigani cabinet is the only extant piece of furniture known to be by him.

The historical & indeed unique significance of the cabinet derives mainly from its contents. Over 600 different substances are housed in 26 upper & 3 lower drawers, each specimen in its labelled compartment or glass jar. Seeds, minerals, gums, pigments, roots, bark, animal substances, fossils & many other items are accommodated in the cabinet. These contents are similar to those that the London College of Physicians requested apothecaries to keep as stock in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

John Francis Vigani was appointed professor in 1703, his first laboratory being located at Queens' College. In 1707 he moved to Trinity but the cabinet remained the property of Queens'. Fortunately many original invoices & bills survive relating to Vigani's time at Queens' College. Most of these are for the purchase of the contents of the cabinet, bought on Vigani's instructions but paid for by Poley Clopton, a Fellow of Queens'.

One invoice reads:

*` Augt. 8<sup>th</sup>. 1704. Recd yn of Mr. Clopton  
Tenn pounds for a cabinet for ye use  
Of Queens' College in Cambridge,  
by me, John Austin. `*

Provenance of the cabinet is satisfied by the above invoice, its long association with the college & by its examination in the 1720's by Richard Bradley, Professor of Botany. Many of the hand written specimen labels have also been identified as Vigani's.

#### The Cabinet

The construction throughout the cabinet is in quarter sawn oak & made in two parts. The upper carcass is dovetailed together, with a boarded back & two doors with fielded panels. The framing of the doors is joined with stopped mortise & tenons. Twenty-six graduated drawers are housed in the upper carcass. Each drawer is divided into compartments & lined with paper. Some of the lining papers are watermarked, most dating from 1698. Drawer knobs are of turned fruitwood, most probably plum.

The lower carcass is framed, panelled & contains three full width drawers with all joints pegged. The bun feet are in oak & fixed with dowels into the underside. The lower carcass drawers are dovetailed front & back with bottom boards nailed into rebates all around. Upon closer examination of the front dovetail joints it would appear that the maker, John Austin had employed the technique known as 'bishopsing'. This term refers to the spreading of wood fibres by hammer in order to tighten up a slack-fitting joint. [Ernest Joyce – *The Technique of Furniture Making*] [NB Joyce does not recommend this practice!]

Strips of oak act as drawer runners. The top & middle drawers are sub divided to hold glass stoppered jars, the third is left plain. Deal is used for divisions to the middle drawer suggesting a later alteration. The interior sides of the lower carcass are lined with oak, which support the dust boards & prevent any sideways play in the drawers.

All metal work is original. The upper door lock is brass with steel wards, & the original key! Handles & escutcheons are brass with most of the gilding still in place. The original oil or wax finish, now darkened, shows little evidence of subsequent `improving` with shellac.

Andrew A. Matthews

August 2009