

# A Remarkable Survival: A Set of Six Eighteenth-Century Forest Chairs Retaining Much of Their Original Paintwork

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'Forest' chairs (garden Windsors usually painted green) were highly popular throughout much of the eighteenth century amongst the gentry and aristocracy as a fashionable form of outdoor seating.<sup>1</sup> Unlike indoor Windsor chairs, they are frequently illustrated in contemporary 'conversation piece' paintings. However, Forest chairs seem to have gone out of fashion in the early nineteenth century and are scarce today, as many have doubtless suffered from neglect and decay. In fact, most that survive have either been repainted or adapted for indoor use by stripping off the paint then applying stain followed by a coat of varnish. In this context, it is always worth checking the simpler form of Windsor chair (i.e. without a splat and not made of yew) for traces of paint. Unsurprisingly therefore, Forest chairs with more than a vestige of original paintwork are seldom seen.

There are three sets of painted Forest chairs associated with grand country houses known to the author. The first consists of two comb-backs (there is another which has been stripped of paint) and eight bow-backs, dating from the second half of the eighteenth century, all of which have front cabriole legs, unusual columnar underarm supports and pierced back splats. These possibly locally-made chairs which still stand on the colonnade of West Wycombe Park, Buckinghamshire, are now painted light blue.<sup>2</sup> There is also a set of four similarly painted fan-back side chairs in an outbuilding, the Temple of the Winds, at West Wycombe Park. The third group is a set of five (originally six, painted green) fan-back side chairs made for the garden of Claremont, Surrey in 1772–73.<sup>3</sup> However, this report concerns an exceptionally rare set of six comb-back Forest armchairs retaining much of their original eighteenth-century green paint finish. Now locked away for safe keeping, they were until recently in a gallery, known as the East or Laird's loft, of a historic redundant church in the Black Isle, Scotland.<sup>4</sup> The building in question, East Church, Cromarty, has recently (2008–11) been the subject of an extensive conservation programme organised by the Scottish Redundant Churches Trust (SRCT) and it was during this period that the importance of these chairs was recognised by local historians. The aim of this article, therefore, is to make this rare survival known to a wider audience and to provide information which might be relevant to the previous history of the chairs.

The site record for Cromarty East Church includes 102 digital images, many of which were taken during the restoration.<sup>5</sup> Amongst these are three old black and white

<sup>1</sup> Parrott (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Harding-Hill (2003), frontispiece, pp. 13–14.

<sup>3</sup> Crispin (1992), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Wawdrey and Alston (2012), pp. 1–59.

<sup>5</sup> [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk).



1a Two unrestored chairs in the Laird's loft, c. 1968. RCAHMS SC881358

1b The set of six unrestored chairs in the Laird's loft, c. 1968. RCAHMS SC398671





2a A restored chair in the Laird's loft  
(c. 2010). *Lady Wemyss*



2b Four restored chairs in the Laird's loft  
(c. 2010). *Lady Wemyss*

photographs showing the chairs which were probably taken in 1968 when the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) recorded the church.<sup>6</sup> One image clearly shows two eighteenth century comb-back Windsor chairs in the loft (Figure 1a), another shows a back view of all six Windsors in the loft (Figure 1b) and in a third picture taken from the body of the church a row of comb-rails of all six chairs is just visible above the panelled front of the loft. In addition, colour photographs of a single and a group of four of the chairs in the loft (Figures 2a and 2b) taken by Lady Wemyss under difficult circumstances on a recent site visit show the rather poor condition of the chairs.

On close inspection the original green top coat of paint can be seen to have worn through in places on several of the chairs to reveal a pale grey or blue/grey undercoat. The undersides of the seats are also painted all-over grey. However, although an earlier condition report questioned whether this grey paint beneath the seats is original there seems little doubt that is the case because some of the green paint was accidentally brushed onto the surrounding undercoat when the legs were being painted.<sup>7</sup> An odd feature is the presence of a white powdery deposit encircling the spindles where they

<sup>6</sup> Information from Victoria Collinson-Owen, Director, SRCT.

<sup>7</sup> Pryke (2005).



pass through the arm-bow and seat. Similar deposits can be seen beneath the seat, in old woodworm holes, and especially where the legs are mortised into the underside of the seat. The possibility that this material is the remains of a white base coat or primer can be discounted as it also occurs on some of the new wood (see later) used in the chairs. Instead, this effect might be a consequence of long term storage in a moist and possibly salty atmosphere (i.e. mildew). Alternatively, the chairs may have been contaminated by building materials used during the recent restoration of the church.

The chairs are said to be made of ash and are sturdily constructed in 'stick-back' form, i.e. without a back splat or ribbon slats.<sup>8</sup> They have eleven spindles, seven of which support a typical Thames Valley type comb-rail with a circular 'ear' at either end. The arm bows (possibly walnut) swell at each end to form a hand-rest supported by a crook underarm support. The slightly saddled seats, presumably of elm, are somewhat bell-shaped and the legs are through-mortised and wedged from the top. The turned legs taper towards the seat and there is a characteristic Thames Valley style baluster detail above the feet of the front legs whereas the back legs are left plain.<sup>9</sup> The legs are linked by two side and one straight transverse stretcher, all of which swell boldly in the centre. Without documentary evidence it is difficult to be precise as to when and where these chairs were made although they are certainly not Scottish.<sup>10</sup> However, the distinctive comb-rail combined with the baluster-turned front legs strongly suggests a Thames Valley or London origin, and the crook underarm supports indicate probable production in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The Windsor chair authority Michael Harding-Hill has recently examined the chairs and is of a similar opinion as to their date and area of production.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted, though, that these chairs do not have the characteristic features, present on Thames Valley Windsor comb-backs, of outer ribbon slats supporting the comb-rail and a groove around the top edge of the seat. However, Thames Valley stick-back Windsors tend not to have ribbon slats and the seat groove may have been omitted on Forest chairs as it might have been obscured by the paint or, if deep, trapped rainwater.<sup>12</sup>

The chairs in the 1960s black and white photographs appear to be of uniform colouration and one has its underarm support missing (Figures 1a and b). By contrast, all the chairs in the colour photographs (Figures 2a, 2b, and 3) are complete but certain components are devoid of any paintwork. The explanation for this is that the chairs underwent extensive sympathetic repairs at the end of the last century and, following standard conservation practice, replacement parts were left as natural wood. The chairs were also treated for woodworm because, as is apparent from the 2005 condition report, they were clearly in a very poor state, the worst case being one chair which had considerable worm damage necessitating the replacement of all four legs, together with the right arm and its support.<sup>13</sup> Without this timely intervention this important group of chairs would almost certainly have been lost forever.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Harding-Hill (2003), pp. 44–45.

<sup>10</sup> For Scottish Windsor chairs see Cotton (2008), pp. 197–213.

<sup>11</sup> Harding-Hill — personal communication.

<sup>12</sup> For features typical of Thames Valley chairs see Stabler (1977) and Harding-Hill (2003), pp. 31–32.

<sup>13</sup> Pryke (2005).



3 Recent photograph of one of the chairs (2013). *The Author*

The obvious questions that arise are how, and why, a highly fashionable set of eighteenth-century Thames Valley, or London-made, Forest chairs should end up in a church loft in a remote part of Scotland. A propos carriage to Cromarty, a distance from London of nearly 600 miles, it is most unlikely that the chairs would have been transported by road. Instead, Cromarty being a busy trade port with a sheltered deep water anchorage in the adjoining Firth, they were most probably brought by ship, as was the case with six Windsors shipped from London to Gateshead sometime between 1779 and 1783.<sup>14</sup> There are, however, no extant shipping records for Cromarty port at

<sup>14</sup> Stabler (1973).



4 Portrait of George Ross. *Cromarty Courthouse Museum*

this time. Furthermore, concerning the presence of these garden chairs in the church, local tradition holds to the view that they originally came from a nearby mansion, Cromarty House, and have been in the church ever since. In fact, the present owners of the house believe the chairs were placed in the loft to provide seating for the Laird's family during services, although when this might have occurred is not known. Unfortunately, until 1927 the East loft was regarded as the Laird's private property and there was no requirement for its contents to be recorded in the inventory of church furnishings.

The Laird who lived in Cromarty House in the latter part of the eighteenth century and most probably purchased the chairs was one George Ross (1708/9–1786, Figure 4).<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, though, his ownership of the chairs cannot be proved as they are not referred to in his will and no separate probate inventory or accounts that might mention them have survived.<sup>16</sup> However, extensive biographical research by Dr David Alston, a local historian, reveals many interesting details about his life and provides insights into his character.<sup>17</sup> Briefly summarised below, this information illustrates why Ross, a commoner, may have wished to keep up with the mores of polite society by acquiring a set of fashionable garden chairs.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Date of birth as inscribed on his memorial stone once in Richmond church — information from Dr David Alston.

<sup>16</sup> Alston — personal communication.

<sup>17</sup> Alston (2004), pp. 810–12; (2006), pp. 143–51.

<sup>18</sup> Cotton (1990), frontispiece, shows similar green Forest chairs in a painting by Johann Zoffany, c. 1780, of Thomas Rosoman and his family on the Thames at Hampton.



5 Part of Ross's mansion house incorporated into Richmond Royal Hospital, Kew-foot Lane, c. 2008. *The author*

George Ross originated from a minor estate in Pitkerrie, Ross-shire. He trained as a lawyer in Edinburgh and subsequently moved to London where he made a considerable fortune as an army agent. He married Rachel Kellow of Golden Square, London, in 1738 and probably inherited land from her estate when she died four years later. At this time he befriended James Thompson, a much-admired Scottish poet and playwright (author of 'Rule Britannia') who lived in a cottage in Kew-foot lane, Richmond, Surrey, near to the Old Deer Park. When Thompson died in 1748 Ross bought the property and, in memory of his friend, spent £9000 building 'a capital mansion house' which, curiously, included part of the original cottage in the centre as its hallway. This edifice, which was originally called 'Rossdale' (later changed to 'Rosedale') became Richmond Infirmary in 1868 and survives today as part of Richmond Royal Hospital (Figure 5). In the 1760s Ross began to buy other properties in the West Indies, Surrey and Scotland. Amongst the latter was the Cromarty estate to which he had full legal title in 1772. Ross then set about using his wealth and influence to bring about a number of agricultural, commercial and social improvements. These were carried out with the objective of making Cromarty a place 'it would be worth an Englishman's while coming all the way from London to see'.<sup>19</sup>

The early 1770s saw Ross setting up a business importing hemp which was then made into sacks and bags for the West Indies by his 200–250 employees and 600 out-workers. Farms on his estate were also enclosed and amalgamated for greater efficiency

<sup>19</sup> Attributed to George Ross in Miller (1994), p. 451.



6 Cromarty House. *Flickr*

and, rather oddly, ploughmen were brought from Buckinghamshire to work land on his estate (could there be a Windsor chair connection here?). Another development was the creation of a large-scale pig breeding programme in which the animals were fattened by his tenants and the resulting salted pork was shipped in barrels to the East and West Indies. He also established a very large brewery (c. 1772), constructed a court-house (1772–73), became MP for Cromarty (1780), obtained Government funding for the construction of a proper harbour (1782–84) and built a church for Gaelic speakers (1784); he also started to remodel the town following his purchase of many houses on the old High Street. These achievements not only provided employment but also improved the quality of life in Cromarty and, in so doing, enhanced Ross's social status.

As befitting his role as Laird of Cromarty with a mansion near London, Ross clearly felt the need for a fine gentleman's country residence in Cromarty based on the English model. To do this he first demolished the ruinous Cromarty castle and then over the next two years (1772–74) built a stylish country house surrounded by landscaped grounds at a total cost of £50,000, a huge sum equivalent to more than three million pounds today.<sup>20</sup> This building still exists (Figure 6) and, assuming that the chairs did originally belong to Ross, they can probably be dated to around this time, i.e., between completion of the house in 1774 and Ross's death in 1786.

<sup>20</sup> [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/).



The remarkable survival of these Forest chairs is due to a number of factors. Firstly, there is the original purchase of this fashionable set of garden chairs, almost certainly by an ageing George Ross, perhaps as a consequence of his desire to be seen by society as a gentleman of taste with a fine house on a well-run estate. Secondly, there is the transfer of the chairs to the Laird's loft by George Ross or, more likely, by one of the subsequent inheritors or purchasers of the estate (there were no direct descendants). Thirdly, there is the restoration which saved the chairs; this may have occurred as a consequence of the RCAHMS survey of Cromarty East Church in 1968, although no details have emerged. Finally, there is the continuing protection provided by the SRCT following the restoration of the church in 2008–11.

Due to the above sequence of events it is likely that this important set of six Forest chairs is the only example of its kind in near original condition in existence. As such, it provides a valuable illustration of the purpose (i.e. as a portable garden seat) for which the Forest chair, the forerunner of the Windsor chair, was originally designed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Parrott (2010).

