

# Three Eighteenth-Century Windsor Chairs Possibly Made in Bristol

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Eighteenth-century Windsor chairs made in the Thames Valley can often be identified by several characteristic stylistic features. By contrast, establishing the regional origin of other contemporary Windsors is problematic unless there is a reliable provenance. This article, however, examines the likelihood that three eighteenth-century Thames Valley style stick-back armchairs with a long association with Bristol may actually have been made there.

The three Windsor comb-backs which are the subject of this report were noticed by the authors on a visit to Bristol Old Library during the 2006 Regional Furniture Society AGM (Figures 1 and 2). Subsequently, the chairs were removed and are now to be seen in the Bristol Room of the present-day Central Library. The original Bristol Library was founded in 1613 and housed in a lodge in King Street belonging to the merchant Robert Redwood. He donated the book collection to the Bristol Corporation and when the lodge fell into disrepair the library was accommodated in a fine new Palladian style building that was constructed on the same site between 1738 and 1740. In 1772 the building was taken over by the Bristol Library Society who ran the library on a subscription basis until 1856 when it became a free library, changing to the Central Library in 1876. Finally, the old King Street Library became redundant in 1906 when the new Central Library opened on College Green.



1 Bristol Old City Library, c. 1924, reproduced from Gordon Priest, *The Paty Family, makers of eighteenth century Bristol* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press Ltd, 2003).



2 Windsor chair in Bristol Old City Library (one of three).  
*John Boram*

The Bristol Old Library has a first floor panelled reading room where the chairs were seen in 2006. Interestingly, these three Windsors appear to have been there for a very long time, as noted by Anthony Beeson, a local historian. In his publication about the Bristol Central Library he states that ‘The eighteenth-century fan-back Windsor chairs are to be seen in Storer’s 1820s engraving and are believed to have been in the room since the previous century’.<sup>1</sup> This engraving (Figure 3), which seems to have been done for John Peace (1785–1861) the Keeper of the Library, does indeed show three comb-backs with similarities to the surviving Library chairs. Both those shown in the engraving, and the three library Windsors, are stick-backs with front cabriole and rear turned legs. Also, in both cases there are seven long spindles, three (?) short spindles, and curved front underarm supports. However, the library chairs differ from those in the engraving in the shapes of the stretchers and comb-rails and the presence of two rear bracing spindles. Nevertheless, allowing for artistic licence, the engraving is close enough to the extant Windsors to support the view that the chairs are one and the same.

<sup>1</sup> Beeson (2006), p. 6.



3 The Reading Room in Bristol Old Library, engraving by James Sargent Storer, c. 1820.

The three stick-backs are of very similar dimensions and are in reasonable condition with no major repairs.<sup>2</sup> They appear to have originally been stained all over a reddish brown but at some time later they were coated with a dark varnish. Unfortunately, this treatment, which was often carried out in the late nineteenth century, makes the identification of the woods used rather difficult. Most probably, like examples made in the Thames Valley, the chairs are constructed of fruitwood with beech spindles, walnut arm-bows and elm seats. One would expect Windsor chairs made or brought in as new for library use, like those in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, to be in their original state.<sup>3</sup> However, since these chairs seem to have been in the Old Library from the 1820s, and probably longer, it can only be assumed that they were refinished sometime before 1906 when the Library closed. Unfortunately, there are no surviving documents to indicate when, or from whom, the chairs were purchased.

Eighteenth-century comb-back Windsor chairs with rudimentary front cabriole legs are occasionally seen in the south-west of England, although chairs with 'egg and reel' or 'colt's foot' legs (baluster legs terminating in a ball and shaft) are often associated with this region.<sup>4</sup> However, Windsors with fully-developed cabriole legs ending in pad feet, and frequently also with attached corner brackets (spandrels), are thought to have

<sup>2</sup> Dimensions of the chairs are as follows: height 94.5, 94, 93 cms; seat height 45, 45, 44 cms; seat width all 47.5 cms; seat depth: 50, 50.5, 50 cms; comb-rail width: 48, 48.5, 47.5 cms.

<sup>3</sup> Harding-Hill (2003), illustrated pp. 12, 28, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Cotton (1989), pp. 21, 29.





4 Chair back view showing sprigged bracing spindles. *John Boram*

been made exclusively in the Thames Valley and London. Nevertheless, given its popularity, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Thames Valley style of Windsor may have been imitated in other parts of the country, particularly an important regional city such as Bristol. Notably also, the stagecoach route from London to Bath and Bristol passed through Slough, which was probably the centre of Windsor chair production in the early to mid-eighteenth century. Moreover, the existence of a chair made by John Pitt of Slough decorated with the arms of the city of Bath suggests that other Thames Valley chairs may well have reached Bath and Bristol.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the fact that the Bristol Library chairs have typical Thames Valley-type cabriole legs might be because they were transported by carrier from Slough or, that they were made locally in a Thames Valley style. Accordingly, it is the other stylistic features of these chairs which may provide some clues to their regionality.

Thames Valley comb-backs usually have a comb-rail with a circular 'ear' at either end. Between these ears the top of rail is often shaped with a curved or scrolled edge whereas the bottom edge of the comb-rail is nearly always straight. However, although the comb-rails of the Bristol Library chairs have ears, both the upper and the lower edges are decoratively shaped. Another rather unusual aspect of the Bristol chairs is the paired bracing spindles between the comb-rail and a rounded dovetail-shaped rear

<sup>5</sup> Parrott & Harding-Hill (2005), illustrated and discussed pp. 26 and 28–29.



5 View of arm-bow showing tops of through-mortised spindles. *John Boram*

extension to the seat which are also attached to the arm-bow with iron sprigs (Figure 4). These bracing spindles, which are found on Thames Valley comb-back side chairs, are uncommon on Thames Valley stick- or comb-back armchairs. However, Harding-Hill illustrates a Thames Valley cabriole leg comb-back armchair that does have these additional spindles.<sup>6</sup> The only other example the authors are aware of, although there may of course be others, is the green painted Windsor or Forest chair which belonged to Oliver Goldsmith. However, this chair is also very unusual in having a circular seat as well as a three piece sawn arm and colt's foot legs.<sup>7</sup>

The three Bristol chairs have walnut arm-bows, as found on many eighteenth-century Thames Valley comb-backs. However, a curious feature of these chairs not seen on Thames Valley Windsors is that the spindle next to the crook underarm support on both sides of the chair actually passes right through the arm-bow (Figure 5). In this context it is worth noting that the short and long spindles are sometimes mortised through the arm and back bow of eighteenth-century Windsors attributed to the southwest.<sup>8</sup> For example, on the Perceval-Compton low-back chairs, which are thought to have been made in Somerset, the ends of all the short spindles are clearly visible at the

<sup>6</sup> Harding-Hill (2003), illustrated p.38. This chair has a pair of outer ribbon slats supporting the comb-rail, a feature characteristic of Thames Valley comb-backs but usually absent on stick-backs.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., illustrated p.20.

<sup>8</sup> Cotton (1989), p.15.



6 View of transverse and side ball stretchers. *John Boram*

top of the arm-bow.<sup>9</sup> However, what is unusual about the Bristol chairs is that it is only the first pair of spindles that are through-mortised. It is also the case that all the spindles of the Bristol chairs pass right through the underside of the seat, as is sometimes also seen on Thames Valley comb-backs.

A characteristic of the majority of Thames Valley comb-backs is the presence of a deep groove running around the top edge of the seat, and sometimes another on the side edge, although on some chairs there are scribe lines instead of grooves. However, there are no grooves or scribe lines on the elm seats of the Bristol chairs. Nevertheless, the absence of grooves, on its own, cannot be conclusive of production outside the Thames Valley as there are always likely to be exceptions. For example, the Thames Valley chair referred to earlier with the bracing spindles is also without seat grooves.<sup>10</sup> The same caveats apply to shape of the comb-rail and the paired bracing spindles. However, there is one stylistic aspect of the Bristol chairs which, as far as the authors are aware, has never been recorded on Thames Valley Windsors. The feature in question is the atypical design of the stretchers (Figure 6).

<sup>9</sup> Harding-Hill (2003), illustrated p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., illustrated p. 38.





7 West-country stick-back Windsor chair in the Parker-Knoll collection, reproduced from M. Haworth-Booth, 'The dating of 18th century Windsor chairs', *The Antique Dealers' and Collectors' Guide* (January 1973, p. 65).

On eighteenth-century Thames Valley comb- and stick-backs the transverse stretchers are usually shaped in one or more of three ways. There are those which gently swell towards the centre (also true of many side stretchers), those shaped to resemble a shaft with 'arrowhead' ends and others with a central row of two or three small diameter ball turnings (mainly found on early chairs). However, straight transverse and side stretchers with a large central scribed ball, as seen on the Bristol chairs, have not previously been noted on Thames Valley chairs. Possibly, therefore, this feature, which involved a considerable amount of wood turning, might just be characteristic of a Bristol Windsor chair-maker. As an aside, it is interesting to note that the transverse stretchers of spindle and ladderback chairs from the north-west frequently have ball turnings.<sup>11</sup> However, this not to suggest that there is any connection between the two chair-making traditions.

Significantly, from time to time comb-back Windsors with similar ball-turned stretchers are exhibited or come up for sale at auction. A typical example is a chair from the original Parker-Knoll collection that was loaned to the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1970's (Figure 7). Furthermore, these chairs also have the version of

<sup>11</sup> Cotton (1990), pp. 310–419.

the three-part arm and waisted seat characteristic of chairs made in the south-west.<sup>12</sup> Thus it would seem that ball-turned stretchers are a West Country design feature, whether they occur on Windsors with turned, or in this case cabriole, legs. This, then, suggests that the Bristol chairs may well have been made locally.

A search of the *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* has found the following five makers of Windsor chairs who worked in Bristol in the eighteenth century:

GORTON, William, turner and chair maker (1793–1821). At Old King St (now Merchant St.), 1793–95, Penn St, 1799–1812. In 1793 supplied the Bristol merchant John Pinney, who lived in Gt George St, with 6 Windsor chairs and also painted 2 others. For this commission he charged £1 10s.

PARKER, John, cabinetmaker and chair maker (1799–1840). At Old King St (1799–1837). From 1799–1813 described as a Windsor & Fancy Chair Maker.

ROBBINS, —, 8 Bridge St, cabinetmaker (1785). Sale of stock, 24th Sept 1785, on leaving Bridge St included ‘Dressing Chairs, Windsor ditto, and every article in the Cabinet business, the whole of which is made in the best wood.’

SHEWRING, Luke Snr, Temple St, chair maker (1795–1822). His trade is indicated as a Windsor and Fancy chair maker (Windsor and portable cot maker in 1819).

WILLIAMS, —, St. James’ Churchyard, carver and gilder. In 1785 advertised ‘a general assortment of walnut and Windsor chairs’. May be John Williams, carver and gilder (1786–99) who insured his household goods on 14th June 1787 for £900 and whose trade card in 1788 gives his address as ‘opposite the Floating Dock, Hot Well Road.’<sup>13</sup>

It is not possible to say whether any of the above individuals supplied the Windsors to the Bristol Old Library. However it is likely that the chairs were acquired some time after 1772 when the Bristol Library Society took over the King Street premises. It is also interesting to note that, as outlined above, there actually were several makers/suppliers of Windsor chairs working in Bristol towards the end of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, on stylistic grounds, it is probable that the Library chairs were made around this time, i.e., 1785–1800.

In the absence of makers’ trade labels, details of purchase, or regionally specific features, the parts of the country where eighteenth-century English Windsor chairs were made are difficult to determine. In consequence, they are usually attributed on the basis of various design features to London (high quality mahogany or walnut examples), the Thames Valley (often mainly or partly of yew), the west of England, or are simply described as ‘country’. Rarely, though, can these chairs be linked to a particular place of production. However, in this report it is suggested that a group of comb-backs seemingly of Thames Valley design may actually have been made in Bristol. Significantly, they have a combination of unusual features, not least of which being a type of ball stretcher apparently only used on Windsors made in the south-west. In conclusion, it is conjectured that this hybrid design may reflect the fact that

<sup>12</sup> Cotton (1989), pp. 14, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Beard & Gilbert (1986), pp. 358, 674, 751, 810, 981.



the Library requested a local chair maker to supply Windsor chairs based on the fashionable Thames Valley model. In this connection, the authors would be interested to hear of any other eighteenth-century Windsors with ball-turned stretchers, especially if they appear not to have been made in the south-west.

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