

# A GROUP OF SEAT FURNITURE STAMPED RE

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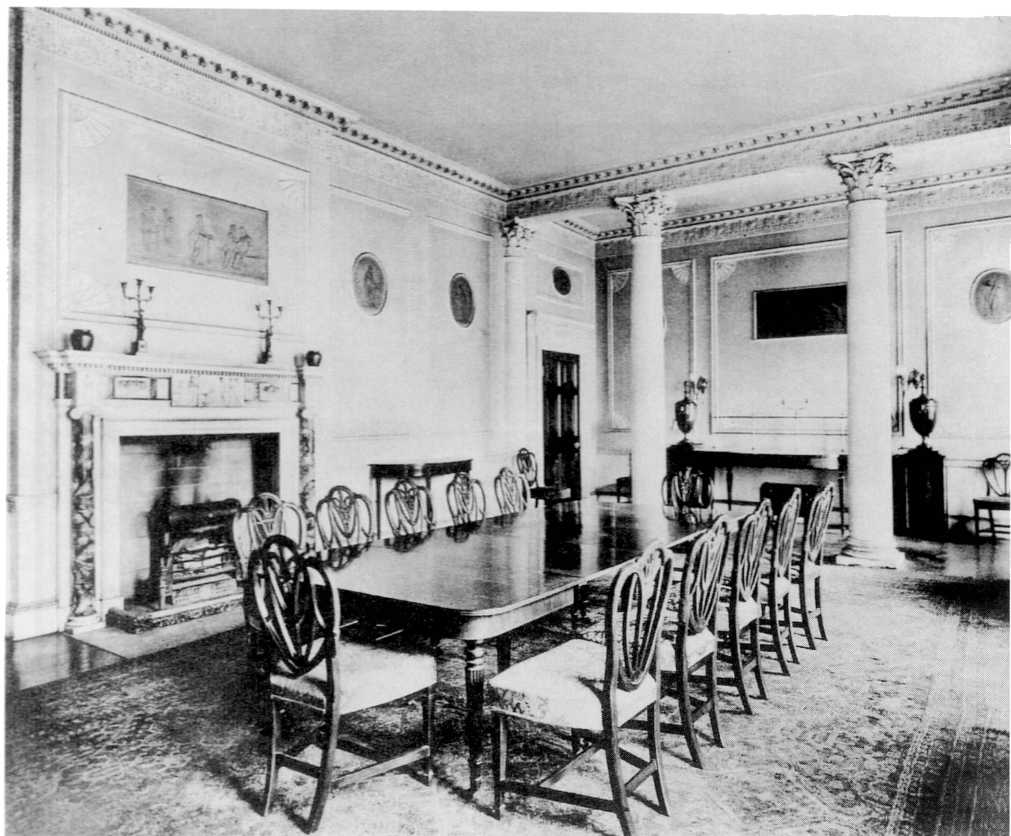


1. Rubbing of RE stamp from inside back rail of armchair

Perhaps the best-designed and highest quality of all varieties of shield-back chair is a group linked, not only by elements of design, but also by the presence on many of them of stamped initials RE (Figure 1). A possible connection with Gillows arises from a large set of side chairs, corresponding to one of the heart-back models in the group, which appears in an old photograph of the dining room of Workington Hall, Cumberland, a major Gillow commission for the Curwen family (Figure 2). These chairs have since found their way to the American Embassy in Vienna. The Gillow Estimate Sketch Books duly include a design for an armchair and a side chair of this type, known as 'feather back' chairs dated 19 January 1788 and intended for N. Crompton, Esq., Manchester.<sup>1</sup> This is recorded as being made by John Kilner and carved by H. Gibson. The model seems to have been copied out again exactly for Crompton in 1797, showing that it was still popular at this date (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> It is also of interest that a related but simpler heart-back chair, with wheatears instead of Prince of Wales feathers and drapery swags, is included in the Estimate Sketch Books, dated 9 October 1788 and intended for the dining room of Workington Hall.<sup>3</sup> A chair of this model is visible on the extreme right of Figure 2.

There is no doubt that the basic form of shield back, incorporating the ostrich plume badge of the Prince of Wales, was a popular one at the time, particularly after its inclusion in a plate (1b) dated 1787 in Hepplewhite's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, and it even found its way into Windsor chair splat design.<sup>4</sup> However the chairs in the group under consideration are of the greatest sophistication, lacking even the H-stretchers that are present in the known Gillow examples and designs. Indeed, since all the examples known to me are armchairs, it is likely that they were intended for drawing rooms rather than dining rooms. Figure 4 shows one example, stamped inside the back rail RE, which has recently been on the market.<sup>5</sup> The quality of the carving of the ribbon-tied feathers and the naturalistic flow of the drapery in and out of the interlaced sections of the back are quite clear.

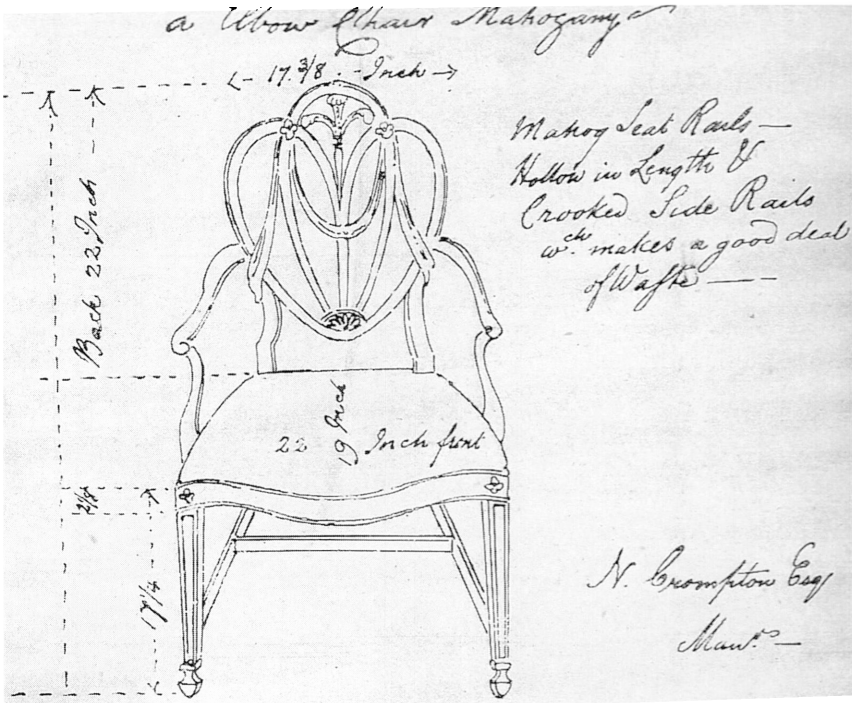
Another related model is shown in Figure 5.<sup>6</sup> Within its flat-channelled frame, this displays a number of motifs used by Gillows at this period, including wheatears, already mentioned, leaf tips and the tiered foliage in the centre. The profile of the back and sweep of the back legs show remarkable profligacy of timber. This fact recalls the note appended to the Gillow design in Figure 3, relating to the seat rails, 'Hollow in Length & Crooked Side Rails which make a good deal of waste'. The type is known



2. The Dining Room of Workington Hall, Cumberland, early twentieth century

with two different arm forms and with both upholstered and caned seats,<sup>7</sup> and where examples known to me have been stamped with initials, these have always been RE beneath the back rail. This includes a large set of which eleven armchairs, including that shown in Figure 5, and two window seats with heart-shaped ends are recorded.<sup>8</sup> They formed part of the furnishings of the home of the Harvey family at Ickwell Bury, Bedfordshire and are mentioned in an inventory of the house in 1819.<sup>9</sup>

The identification of the initials RE is by no means conclusive. Where craftsmen's names appear on Gillow furniture at this period, they are generally inscribed in chalk, pencil or ink. However, a set of twelve bar-back chairs at Tatton Park, Cheshire, whose estimate is dated 1800, are each stamped WE underneath.<sup>10</sup> Like most large firms of furniture makers, Gillows employed many journeymen who were paid either by the hour or by the piece, thereby saving the necessity of guaranteeing regular employment. For example thirty-two journeymen gave their agreement in 1785 to a detailed list of piece rates drawn up by the firm. Generally these seem to have specialised in one aspect of production or trade.

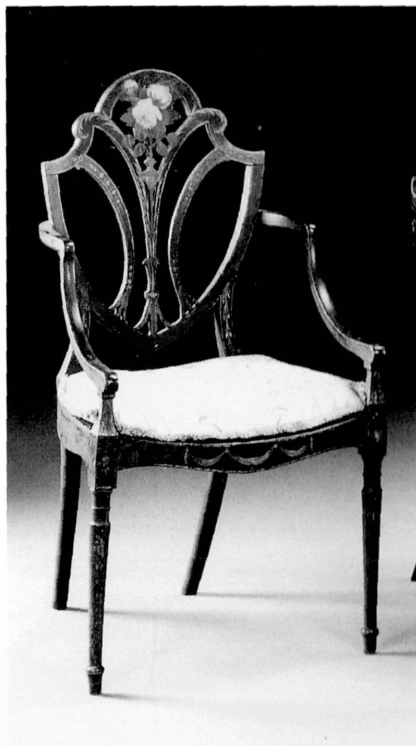


3. Gillow Estimate Sketch Book design for 'feather-back' armchair, 1797

4. Carved mahogany 'feather back' armchair, c. 1785  
Courtesy of Norman Adams Ltd



5. Carved mahogany heart-back armchair, c. 1785  
*Courtesy of Norman Adams Ltd*



6. Painted beech shield-back armchair,  
c. 1790  
*Courtesy of Christie's, New York*

Among the recorded mentions of workmen for Gillows, the family of Richard and Robert Edmundson or Edmondson occurs on a number of occasions during the 1780s and later. Both Richard and Robert are recorded as freemen of Lancaster and a having set up a business in Liverpool by 1781.<sup>11</sup> They were general cabinet makers, but announced the addition of an upholstery branch to the business in 1788 and thus could well have been sub-contracted chair makers for Gillows. The firm continued in various forms well through the nineteenth century and, amongst other things, supplied a lot of furniture for Liverpool Town Hall.

There is one further shield-back armchair which has come to light, bearing an identical stamp RE (Figure 6).<sup>12</sup> This is a caned beech chair painted in black and polychrome with swags, flowers and paterae. It is very similar to several other painted chairs, including a well-known set of eighteen painted satinwood chairs supplied by George Seddon, Sons and Shackleton to D. Tupper for Hautville House, Guernsey in 1790,<sup>13</sup> and also nineteenth-century copies by Wright and Mansfield and others. The initials may be coincidental and it is difficult to draw any other evidence of Gillow involvement here, apart from drawings in the Estimate Sketch Books and mention in letters<sup>14</sup> which show that the firm was producing quite a quantity of painted furniture.

It might be noted that a painted armchair of the 'feather-back' model is recorded<sup>15</sup> and, at a slightly later date, at Tatton Park in 1812, a quantity of the celebrated X-framed 'Grecian' dressing stools were supplied in both mahogany and slightly cheaper in satinwood with painted decoration.<sup>16</sup>

#### REFERENCES

1. 94/212, reproduced in L. Boynton, *Gillow Furniture Designs 1760–1800*, Royston, 1995, no. 273.
2. Reproduced in H. Cescinsky, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1911, vol. III, fig. 383.
3. 94/416, reproduced in Boynton, op. cit., no. 272.
4. The use of the emblem of a single feather can be traced back to pewter and possibly a food cupboard, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, connected with Arthur, Prince of Wales (1486–1502). The triple plumes, as a political motif of the Whig party, are found on mirror crestings of the time of the future George II and his son Prince Frederick. Although there was strong Whig loyalty to the future Prince Regent against his father George III towards the end of the century, it is unlikely that the emblem was consciously used thus at all universally by this period.
5. Now in the National Museum, Stockholm. This chair also retains what I believe to be the original red oil finish on the surface of its back. An identical pair of armchairs, also stamped RE, are illustrated in C. Claxton Stevens and R. Whittington, *18th Century English Furniture — The Norman Adams Collection*, Woodbridge, 1983, pp. 73–79. Other very similar examples have been recorded with different stamped initials, including one in the Victoria and Albert Museum (W.27–1962), with slightly different arms, initialled HI. Another, apparently identical to Figure 4, is shown in P. Macquoid, *English Furniture — The Age of Satinwood*, London, 1908, fig. 168, the property of Alfred Davis, Esq.
6. Illustrated in Claxton Stevens and Whittington, op. cit., p. 82; one of a set of six sold at Christie's, 29 October 1959, lot 124, the property of Lt-Col. J. L. Harvey MBE.
7. Including one (Sotheby's, 11 July 1997, lot 91) where a back rail drilled for caning was used for an upholstered seat. Another pair is illustrated in L. Synge, *Mallett's Great English Furniture*, London, 1991, p. 126.
8. Some, including the window seats, are included in Norman Adams' annual catalogue, 1985, pls 18 and 19.
9. Some chairs are branded B.A.H. The house was burned down in 1937.
10. N. Goodison and J. Hardy, 'Gillows at Tatton Park', in *Furniture History*, 1970, p. 8 and pl. 5A and B.
11. *The Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, Leeds, 1986, pp. 267–68.
12. Christie's New York, 20 January 1995, lot 319; one of a pair of chairs.
13. See, *inter alia*, M. Harris, *Old English Furniture*, London, 1947, pp. 87–89. WR and IP stamps have been recorded on this set.
14. For example, in 1789, recommending that dining chairs should generally be of mahogany, although saloon chairs might be painted unless they are to be moved from one room to the other.
15. C. Musgrave, *Adam and Hepplewhite Furniture*, London, 1966, fig. 76, courtesy of H. Blairman & Sons.
16. Goodison and Hardy, op. cit., p. 15 and pl. 22.