

CHAIRMAKING AT LOW CRINGLES IN YORKSHIRE

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I am very glad to dedicate this article to my fellow furniture historian and good friend, Bill Cotton, who has made such an inspiring contribution to regional chair studies. Having myself explored the subject in a rather desultory way over the past twenty five years, I responded eagerly to a letter received in 1992 from Mary Laycock, formerly of Silsden in West Yorkshire, saying that she wished to find a suitable home for a chairmaker's pocket account book she had inherited. The volume, which had belonged to William Laycock, owner of a chair mill at Low Cringles on Silsden Moor, spanned the years 1814–1845, a period that coincides with the heyday of small workshops producing traditional turned chairs. Miss Laycock has kindly given this document to the Temple Newsam furniture archive, thus making it available for leisurely study.¹

The octavo volume has board covers bound in hide. Six of the prefatory index pages (A–L) are missing, leaving only M–Y, followed by 24 unnumbered double spreads naming 73 customers and the sums owed by each. The remaining 135 pages record cash accounts, details of transactions, list the destination of chair consignments and contain various memoranda, notes of agreements with workmen and random jottings. Although sometimes scrappy and sporadic, the entries provide rewarding insights into the old country chairmaking business.

Silsden is a small town in Airedale, four miles north of Keighley on the fringes of industrial West Yorkshire, with a population in 1822 of 1,900. Low Cringles was one of the scattered settlements on Silsden Moor, an upland tract in the Pennine foothills separating Airedale from Wharfedale. The 1850 six inch Ordnance Survey map shows Low Cringles as a cluster of farm buildings about a mile out of Silsden on the Addingham Road, with a nearby wood mill beside Great Gill Beck (Fig. 1). The long low house where the Laycock family lived was happily photographed before being pulled down in 1971 (Fig. 2). The chair mill no longer survives either, having been submerged when the Silsden Moor reservoir was constructed in 1854 to compensate for water taken from the River Aire; it covers, when full, an area of twenty-five acres (Fig. 3). During the hot Summer of 1959, the lake dried up and a photograph looking south shows the beck, mill ruins and outline of the mill pond on the valley floor (Fig. 4). The photograph of Low Cringles farm (Fig. 2) shows a large sycamore behind the house, which, according to Mary Laycock, marks the site of the new chair shop. Until the 1920s, there was a second house attached at the bottom end and a stable at the road end with stalls for five horses.

By combining evidence from Trade Directories, census returns, the manuscript account book and local sources, it is possible to chart the history of the Cringles workshop. When the ledger opens in 1814, an unidentified proprietor was operating the mill as a sawyer and timber merchant. His customers all lived within a ten-mile radius of Cringles, the majority being, unsurprisingly, involved in woodworking trades. Local

A black and white photograph of a long, single-story stone building, likely a farmhouse or barn, with a steep, tiled roof. The building shows signs of age and disrepair, with several windows missing or boarded up. A large, bare tree stands behind the building. In the foreground, there is a stone wall and a wooden fence. The background is hazy, suggesting a rural landscape.



3. Silsden Moor reservoir



4. Silsden Moor reservoir dried up in 1959, revealing the mill ruins and outline of the mill pond

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farmers also owed the firm money, suggesting that out work on farms was a regular branch of the business. The following list indicates the range and geographical spread of customers to whom timber was supplied:

Joseph Curtis,	Otley,	cabinetmaker, joiner timber merchant
Joseph Dawson,	Otley,	joiner and cabinetmaker
William Fozard,	Ilkley,	wheelwright
Barret Hartley,	Otley,	timber merchant (round wood)
John Inman,	Otley,	Windsor chairmaker
William Dawson,	Farnley,	wheelwright, carpenter and woodsman
Jonathan Simpson,	Draughton,	wheelwright
Christopher Stevenson,	Guiseley,	wheelwright
William Wharton,	Denton,	wheelwright
William Laycock,	Silsden,	chairmaker

Details of transactions involving the felling and sale of timber are recorded between 1814 and 1816. On 7 March 1815, John Carter purchased for Dawson & Co, Low Moor Foundry '9 Oak trees In Denton East park at 3s. 8d. per ft and felling wages to be paid and to pay for the wood at May first and to have discount allowed for half a year'. Beech, elm and ash trees were also felled at Denton, Sir Henry Carr Ibbetson's estate in Wharfedale and delivered to William Butterfield of Keighley.

Entries relating to the timber trade cease during the 1816, the book was then laid aside until 1824, when William Laycock, chairmaker, started to enter details of his affairs. He first used it to log cash advances to and the absenteeism of one of his men. The account usefully highlights problems which the widespread culture of alcoholism amongst manual workers caused their employers.²

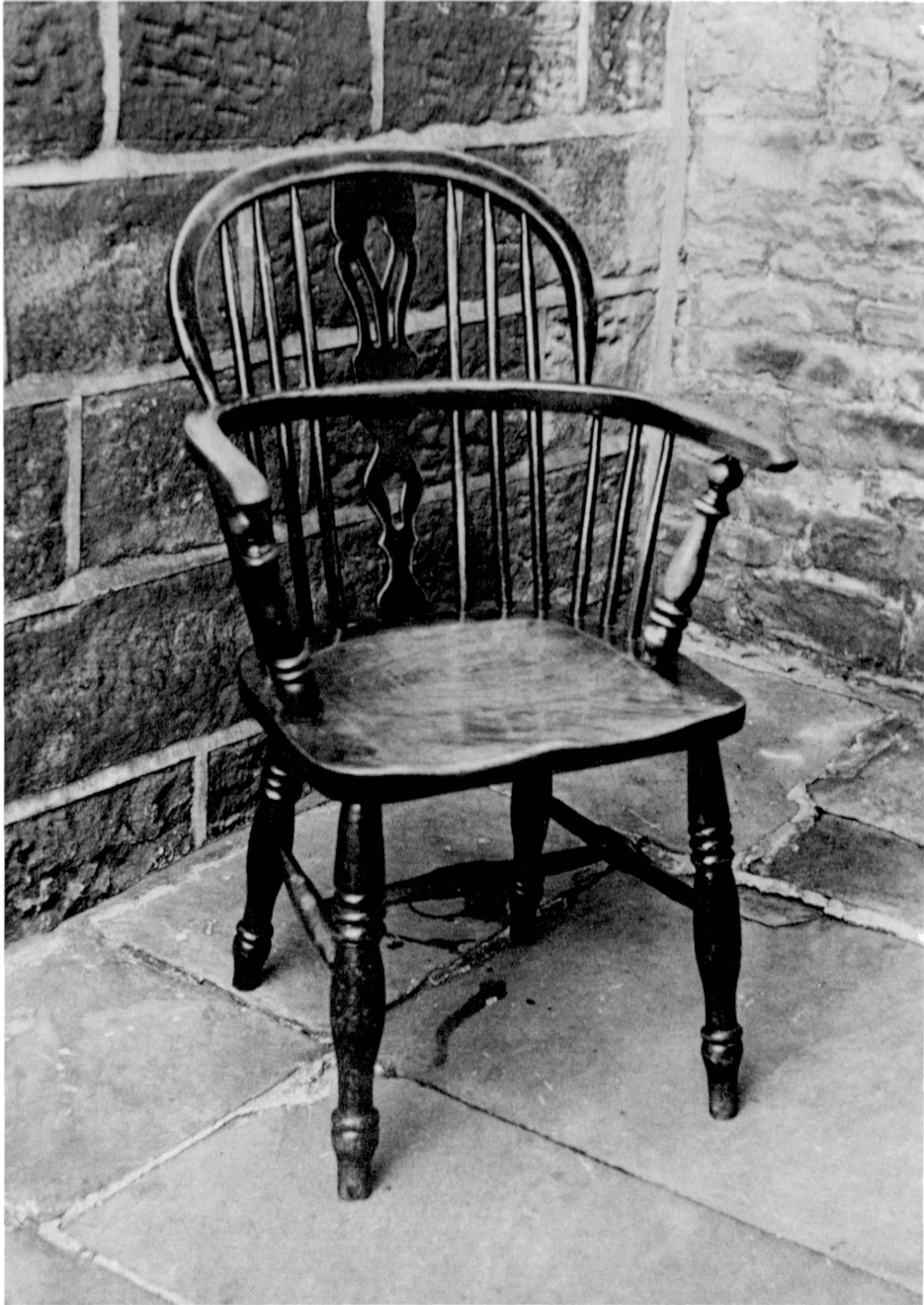
1824		Wm Wards Cash Acct	£	s.	d.
April	18	Cash	1	0	0
	20	Do.		4	0
	21	Do.		6	0
May	8	Paid to Wife	2	0	0
June	7	Paid to Self at Jas Gills	1	10	0
April	20	1 Day Drinking		4	0
May	21	1 Day from Work		1	9
		Absent at Brother in Law's funeral 1/4 Day			10 1/4
		Whitsuntide Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday Drinking		12	0
June	22	Planks		2	0
		2 Chairs		10	0
	23	Drinking 1 Day		4	0
	26	Obtained for furniture club	1	0	0
		Working for self 1 day			
		4 yards of Inch boards		4	1
		Addingham feast Drinking 3 days		0	0
		Lent for Joseph Walton		2	0
		Sending to Leeds for neglecting 2 Days Bated		3	6
July	21	2 Day Drinking		4	0
	22	1 Day Do.		4	0
	23	1/4 Day		2	0
		1 1/4 Day Do. Absent			
	26	Absent without leave		4	0
	27	Absent Do. Do.		4	0
		Paid in Whole	9	2	2 1/4



5. A stall at Colne Market selling girl's rocking chairs and dollies, probably made by Brears of Addingham, c. 1900



6. High back Windsor chair reputed to have been made at the Low Cringles workshop



7. Bow back Windsor chair, reputed to have been made at the Low Cringles workshop



8. Methodist Sunday School, Silsden, furnished with chairs, apparently made by Brears of Addingham, c. 1900-10

The following year, another workman was taken on, the terms of his employment being noted in the pocket book:

May 14 1825 Abm Atkinson Hired with Wm Laycock for 1 year and Recd 2s. 6d. God's penny.
You Remov'd me to Silsden Monday June 6th 1825. Commenced the year on Tuseday 7th June
1825. Conditions: You give me 12s. per week and meat 6 Days in the week and £3 10s. Towards
Rent for the above year.

Later memoranda mention other forms of contract offered to workmen:

24 Nov 1834 James began to work by the week £1.
16 Ap 1835 James left off working by the week.
25 Ap 1835 James began to work by the piece.
24 Nov 1835 James began to work by the day.

A further undated note details piece work rates paid to two craftsmen who may well have been casual itinerant workers:

Sawing 465 Bottoms	19s.	4 1/2d.
L Allen Fettling 100 Bottoms	4s.	2d.
London Tom Fettling Bottoms	1s.	3 1/2d.
Do. Do. Do.	1s.	9d.
	£1	6s. 7d.

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The elm chair seats at only $\frac{1}{2}$ d. each were presumably sawn at the mill, while 'fettling' — a dialect word meaning 'preparing, trimming or finishing off' was also charged at $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per bottom.

The most intriguing bargain in the book, made between two members of the Laycock family, involved a complicated arrangement for payment in cash, kind and labour, plus a reward for good behaviour.

1845 April 2

Agreements between William Laycock of Cringles Chair Maker on the one part and James Laycock of Adingham, Chair Maker on the other part that if Wm Laycock does not get drunk before the 7th of July next the said James Laycock will give him 50 feet of wood.

Agreed that the said William Laycock leads all the wood belonging to the said James Laycock at Denton and Farnley at 3d. per foot likewise that the said William lead all the wood at the Farfield Hall Fall belonging to the said James and give to the said James £1 10 0 for the 5 pieces of Ash wood.

Agreed upon likewise that the said William Laycock have 94 feet of wood out of the Farfield lot at 1/6d. per foot on the ground and the said William Choose out of all the wood except 15 Ash Trees and all that the said James thinks will make Bows the amount will be £7 1 0. 1 large Ash and 4 plane Trees for £3 0 0 and that the said James Laycock take the above sums in work as hereafter mentioned. Likewise that the said William turn large Chair feet and stritch Rails at 18s per 1000 and dolly feet, buffitt feet [stools], little chair feet, fore feet and Arms at 9s. per 1000 as many as will amount to the sum of £10 0 0. By the first of July 1845 signed this 2nd day of April.

John Ingleby
witness

James Laycock
William Laycock
his X mark

The pocket book was regularly used between 1828 and 1835 to record the destination of batches of chairs, washing dollies and hay rakes. These entries indicate the scale of William Laycock's output, provide valuable information about his distribution network and include stray references to chair patterns and prices. The following transcript is taken at random from one of the fifty pages that make up this section of the ledger.

1832

Bradford Dec 11th		
36 large Chairs	48 little Chair	6 Doz Dolleys
Leeds Dec 19th		
48 large Chairs	12 little Chair	
Thos Hoyle Dec 24th		
50 large chairs	20 little Chair	
Halifax Jan 5th 1833		
29 large chairs	12 little chair	7 Doz Dolleys
Laycock		2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Doz Dolleys
Bradford Jan 12th		
36 large chairs	12 little chairs	
Otley Jan 20th		
26 large chair	10 little chair	
Silsden Jan 27th		5 $\frac{1}{2}$ Doz Dolleys
Halifax Feb 2nd		
24 large Chairs	6 little chair	4 Doz Dolleys
Bradford Feb 9th		
25 large chair	54 little chair	1 Doz Dolleys
Silsden Feb 9th		
14 large chair	11 little chair	1 Doz Dolleys

Halifax Feb 23rd		
36 large chairs	12 little chair	1 Doz Dolleys
Colne Feb 27th		
24 large Chair	24 little chair	

During this span of 70 working days, the Cringles shop despatched 338 large chairs, 221 little chairs and 336 dollies, which suggests a weekly output of approximately 28 large, 18 little chairs and two dozen dollies. Chairs and dollies were regularly consigned to some thirty West Riding destinations, and a trio just over the border into Lancashire — Colne, Bolton and Burnley. Many loads went to major industrial centres such as Leeds, Halifax, Bradford, Keighley and Hebden Bridge, while local towns and villages, including Draughton, Skipton, Otley, Howarth, Silsden, Addingham, Askwith and Bingley, were also supplied. There is no mention of Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster, Huddersfield, Wakefield or other places in South Yorkshire suggesting those markets had been captured by the thriving north Nottinghamshire chair trade.³ References occur to selling chairs at Addingham, Burnley, Keighley, Colne and Howarth fairs or 'feasts' as they are called in Yorkshire. An interesting late Victorian photograph, traced by Bill Cotton, shows a market at Colne with a stall selling girls' rocking chairs and dollies, almost certainly made by Brears of Addingham (Fig. 5).⁴

Personal names that feature in the despatch lists, notably Thos Hoyle (Peckitwell): William Robinson (Addingham); John Clarkson (Silsden) and John Roper (Howarth) evidently belong to agents who sold the chairs or maybe on occasion to carriers. There is a long history of chairmakers carting their wares to local markets.⁵ Thos Hoyle of Peckitwell, between Hebden Bridge and Halifax, was a particularly active agent, who, in 1831, handled a total of 346 large chairs, 244 little chairs and 12 dozen dollies. James Laycock of Silsden, referred to once as 'waggoner James' received regular payments. Various notes, of which the following, dated 6th Feb 1829 is typical, refer to prices. Although it is not clear how the figures should be interpreted, they may apply to the commission which agents were paid for sales:

Large Chairs 366 at 9d.	13	14	6
Round Top Chairs 266 at 9d.	9	19	6
Little Chairs 407 at 4½d.	7	12	7½
Dollies 102 ½ Doz at 2½d. each	14	1	10½
	£45	8	6

Hay rakes were reckoned at 1s. 6d. per dozen.

Descriptions of chair types made at the Cringles workshop are disappointingly bare. In addition to the not very helpful references to 'Large chairs' and 'Little chairs', there are allusions to 'Square Top', 'Round Top' and (less often) 'Red' chairs, also 'turned' chairs, 'rocking' chairs, 'Childers' chairs and 'buffits' (stools). We also know that workmen were paid for sawing and 'fettling' wooden seats. Although this does not amount to much, it is fairly obvious that William Laycock produced Windsor type chairs.

In 1971, the staff of Cliffe Castle Museum, Keighley, undertook a fieldwork project which identified a low and a high back Windsor chair which had descended in Silsden

families with a tradition of having been made at Low Cringles wood mill. (Figs 6 and 7). A similar appeal made by the Author in 1994 through a local newspaper generated a dozen responses but led to no new discoveries, although one contact mentioned that the Methodist Church Sunday School still contains many Windsor chairs visible in an illustration in *Silsden Primitive Methodism*, published in 1910 (Fig. 8).⁶ They appear however to date from about 1900 and are likely to have been made by William Brear and Sons, sawyer, timber merchant and chair manufacturer of nearby Addingham, a commercially highly successful firm, which issued two well illustrated catalogues of *Chairs, Stools, Peggy Sticks and Hay Rakes &C.*⁷ Their late Victorian trade catalogue, featuring many Windsor chair types, probably offers our best clue to the range of patterns made at Cringles, since both workshops are likely to have reflected the same local design traditions (Fig. 9).

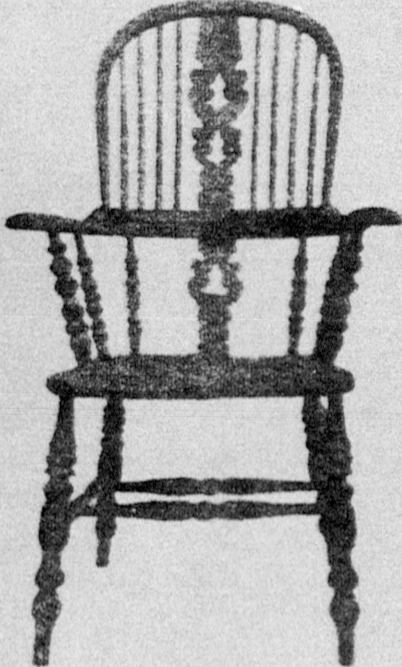
Census returns and Trade Directories offer additional snapshots of the Laycock family.⁸ William Laycock, who kept the account book, was born in 1774 and lived his whole life at Low Cringles, a large double house with out buildings, a yard, garden and land. He last appears in the 1851 schedule as 'annuitant' aged 77. In 1841, a relative, James Laycock (b. 1808) chairmaker and farmer, was living next door with his wife Elizabeth, three daughters and a son, also named James (b. 1833). At first, James Snr worked for his elderly kinsman, but by 1851 he had taken over the business. The census of that year records he and his son-in-law, William Vickers, were both chairmakers; by 1861, the farm and workshop was employing six men. Ten years later, the 1871 census describes William Vickers, his wife Mary and their daughter, another Mary, (aged 20 — the paternal grandmother of Mary Laycock, donor of the account book) as chairmakers by trade; James Snr had evidently died and they were striving to keep the business alive. The chair shop eventually closed down some time between 1875 and 1877.

The Laycocks were by no means the only chairmakers in the district. In 1814-16, the saw mill at Low Cringles supplied timber to John Inman, Windsor chairmaker of Kirkgate, Otley, some 10 miles away. Much nearer at hand was Cowburn-beck Farm where, according to H. J. Dixon, author of *Chronicles and Stories of Craven Dales*, 1881 '... the family combine farming with the crafts of mason, joiner, black and whitesmith, turner and mechanic. The mill with all its mechanical appliances for making chairs, music stools, fancy turning, etc, speaks well for the ingenuity and perseverance of the Silsden Moorers'. Another chair workshop was established opposite the Bridge Inn in Silsden by Joshua Longbottom, described in the 1851 census as 'farmer and wood turner employing 2 men'. However, the largest and most successful chairmakers in the neighbourhood were Brears of Addingham in Wharfedale, a village about half the size and three miles distant from Silsden.⁹

The business was started by Timothy Brear of Haghead, a small farm now called Highfield on the moor about a mile out of Addingham on the Skipton road. He is first referred to in the 1851 census returns as 'Chair Maker (Master) and Farmer of 20 acres', born Silsden, aged 38. The early history of the firm, which combined farming and wood turning, is thus not unlike that of the Laycock family, but it developed along far more ambitious lines. By 1861, the eldest son, William, then aged 21, had moved the workshop to a former water-powered cotton mill in Addingham, hired a wood turner named William Duckett and taken on Edward Cooper as an apprentice. Ten years later,

Wm. BREAR & SONS
Addingham via Leeds

Best High-back Smoker



No. 6

Best High-back Smoker

Polished either Walnut, Mahogany, or any other Colour

An Excellent Chair for a moderate price

13 6 each

9. Trade catalogue issued by William Brear & Sons Addingham, c. 1890

he was head of a sawmill and chair shop employing six men, while, by 1881, the work force had increased to 12 men and boys. The firm, trading as Sawyers, Timber Merchants and Chair Manufacturers also performed wheel wrighting, supplied ash, oak and elm planks, made larch and oak field gates, fencing posts and rails.

About this time, Brears issued their first illustrated *Catalogue of Chairs, Stools, Peggy Sticks, Hay Rakes & C.* which includes views of the premises. The chairmaking side of the business survived until the 1930s and the firm still operates from the same mill yard as sawyers and timber merchants. They seldom marked their furniture, but many Brear chairs, identifiable from photographs in their catalogues, have descended in local families or institutions (Fig. 9). They are remembered for giving to friends and employees as wedding presents sets of kitchen implements consisting of a rolling pin, potato masher, chopping board, bread board and stool.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Photo credits: Leeds Reference Library, 1, 8; Bradford Museums, and Art Galleries, 6, 7; Mary Laycock, 2; Bill Cotton, 5; Edna Throup, 4; author (Fig. 9).

REFERENCES

1. It has been awarded the inventory no. 29/1992.
2. The prevalence of drink in workshops is well described by J. B. Goodman (ed.), *Victorian Cabinetmaker: Memoirs of James Hopkinson 1819-1894*, 1968.
3. B. D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, 1990, p. 191 (footnote).
4. *Ibid* p. 208.
5. C. Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture*, 1991, p. 109 (James Crofts of Wellow), p. 107 (J. Owen of Clun) and J. L. Mayes, *The History of Chairmaking in High Wycombe*, 1960, pp. 30-2 (Benjamin North).
6. W. J. Robson, *Silsden Primitive Methodism*, 1910, p. 369. The book contains brief biographies of prominent local Methodists, including an account (pp. 318-19) of Jonathan Laycock of Cringles, son of William Laycock, chairmaker, who 'in February 1822 having gone out about five miles on business and returning late with a horse and cart' contracted a debilitating illness which eventually terminated in death in 1840. Payments to Jonathan in 1824 are recorded at the end of the pocket account book.
7. A unique copy of the earlier 32 pp. catalogue was lent by the Brear family to an exhibition *Town and Country Furniture* held at Temple Newsam, Leeds in 1972, but following its return has been mislaid. A rather poor wet photocopy was made during the exhibition and these images (subsequently photographed) are now the only record of the illustrations in this publication. Copies of their second 16 pp. trade catalogue, issued about 1920, can be found at Cliffe Castle Museum, Keighley, and at Temple Newsam House.
8. Baines, 1822; Pigot, 1834, 1842, 1843; Slater, 1848; White, 1837, 1853, 1870, 1875; Kelly, 1867, 1871, 1881; P.O., 1857, 1861, 1877. Martin Laycock (b. 1822) and Charles Laycock (fl. 1871) are both named in records as chairmakers of Cringles but it is not clear exactly how they fit into the picture.
9. C. Gilbert, *Town and Country Furniture* (exh. cat.) Temple Newsam, Leeds, 1972. C. Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture*, 1991, pp. 15, 18-20, 165. B. D. Cotton, *op cit.*, pp. 206-9. Dr Cotton has custody of a long run of the firm's ledgers.



10. Jobe Brear (1880–1982) chairmaker of Addingham in 1972