

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FANCY CHAIRS FROM HIGH WYCOMBE

John Boram

This article addresses itself to the connection between vernacular chair-making traditions and that genteel object the 'fancy' chair, so often found in fashionable interiors during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such painted or 'dyed' chairs¹ with rush seats were supplied by outfits such as Stubbs Manufactory of City Road and Brick Lane, London, during the latter part of the eighteenth century but they were also made in High Wycombe.

Much visual evidence of this sort of chair comes from prints such as the stipple engraving of a domestic interior taken from a painting by George Morland 'The Farmer's Visit to his Married Daughter in Town',² illustrated in figure 1. This image raises many questions; about the authenticity of the painted ladder-back or 'cross splat back' chairs depicted, the reason for their use in expressing the message of the particular affecting moment in the print, whether or not they are exactly contemporary with the date of this stipple, which was published in May 1789, and about the identity of the makers.

The date of publication of a first edition stipple engraving or mezzotint, derived from one of Morland's original paintings, is likely to be almost immediately after the completion of the painting. Martin Hardie's article in the *Connoisseur* of August 1904, largely based upon the book of G. Dawe, published in 1807,³ considers that much of Morland's work was executed on the 'While you wait' system to meet the demands of picture dealers or bailiffs. Canvases were carried apparently from his studio while still wet to be instantly translated into stipple or mezzotints. George Morland was a Londoner by birth and inclination. He was born in Haymarket in 1763, to parents who were both distinguished artists, and died aged 42 in 1804. In the early 1780s he lived in lodgings in Martlett Row, Bow Street, followed by a move to Camden and by 1790 he was living opposite the cattle drovers inn, called the White Lion in the village of Paddington. Reference in the title of the engraving in figure 1 to 'Town' is understood to mean London. Cautionary notes forming part of a set of stipple engravings, published a year earlier (1788), confirm that his use of the word 'Town' was synonymous with 'City';⁴ in this case London, where he lived during much of the 1780s. The London domestic interior scene, illustrated in figure 1, portrays the living room of a prosperous but not a wealthy household by comparison with the numerous other engravings of interiors derived from Morland's works. The ladder-back chairs in the scene appear to use rushes 'plated' with coloured or dyed straws, a method of matting used by specialist workers in the High Wycombe chair-making trade. L. J. Mayes⁵ refers to the relatively expensive practice of straw matting to bring colour, pattern and longevity to seating, 'By selecting straws in predetermined orders regular patterns could be produced and repeated for sets of chairs, ...' An alternative, but consistent



1. George Morland, *The Farmer's Visit to his Married Daughter in Town*, stipple engraving, 1789

explanation would involve the use of oil paint to protect or possibly revive the patterns of 'plaited' rushwork which fade after a while to a dull monochrome. Such a technique appears to have been applied to the eighteenth-century rush-seated chair, figure 4 belonging to David Garrick, which is displayed in the V & A Museum; a treatment still advocated by Thomas Webster in his *Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy* (1844).

Figures 2 and 3 show a chair that corresponds pretty much exactly with the form of those in the stipple engraving discussed here. The basic configuration of the painted chair shown is as follows. Above the woven willow seat level, the back posts are shaped backwards in a distinct curve or 'sweep back'.⁶ The upper part of the posts are tapered into 'thumb tops' similar to those described in the 1808 *Supplement* to the *London*



2. Fancy chair of cross splat-back design,
eighteenth century



3. Detail from figure 2

Chair-Markers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship. Below seat level, the back legs are turned and bent outwards in the form of a splay to increase stability. The back posts are set at a distinct angle to create a rake which in essence, Morland has achieved in the illustration figure 1. The difference between the widths of the top and bottom ladders amounts to one inch which in itself emphasises the degree of divergence. The original paintwork comprises a yellow groundwork over a white base coat. Decorative features or 'novelties' include blue/green stripes or ribbons circumscribed by narrow black lines. However, decorative embellishment is concentrated on the front and side profiles of such chairs, but absent, except for the yellow groundwork on the back of the chairs which suggests that these chairs, although constructed in a typical vernacular style of the eighteenth century, were intended for a special use in perhaps the parlour of a middle income household as already suggested in Morland's interior.



4. Fancy chair that once belonged to David Garrick, eighteenth century
Victoria and Albert Museum

Except for the paintwork and exact fretted details to the ladders, the chair in figure 2 is identical to the painted ladder-back chairs owned by the Sitwell family of Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire.⁷ Within this context it had been suggested that such chairs also fulfilled a purpose in servant's quarters.

The decorative treatment of the chair in figures 2 and 3 is also very reminiscent of the paintwork used on certain American slat-back Windsors made in the first half of the nineteenth century. Numerous provenanced nineteenth century examples have been recorded with trade labels and makers stamp marks.⁸ Although there is evidence in trade directories of the longevity of a decorative tradition of vernacular rush-seated chair making in England during the first part of the nineteenth century, the products of the various workshops remains anonymous.

An illustration of a fretted ladder-back chair, similar to figure 2, is recorded on the top left hand corner of William Treacher's billhead (figures 5 and 6) dating from the 1790s. The exaggeration to the shape of the chair back posts can be explained by the relatively complicated three dimensional configuration of these thumb-top posts, as previously discussed. The range of vernacular-inspired chairs made by William Treacher, Chair-Manufacturer, are listed on his billhead as 'Windsor, Dyed and Fancy chairs'. William Treacher is recorded as a chair-maker between 1768–92⁹ and worked opposite the Woolpack in Oxford Street, High Wycombe. Sun Insurance records¹⁰ of



5. William Treacher's billhead



6. Detail from figure 5

1792 refer to his warehouse and shop premises at this address. The firm of Thomas Treacher & Co. (1798–1844) and other members of the family are recorded as chairmakers in High Wycombe until the late 1840s. Despite our lack of knowledge about the output from the Wycombe workshops during the eighteenth century, the pioneering study by L. J. Mayes published in 1960,¹¹ notes important demographic information which suggests the scale and significance of the chair-making trade in a relatively remote part of Buckinghamshire. The listing of potential military recruits in the Stowe manuscripts covering the year 1798, records fifty-eight chair makers (mastermen and workmen) out of a male population of 970 between the ages of 15 and 70 years in the Wycombe area. Mayes notes the implications of these statistics in his comment that the chair makers are ‘by far the largest single trade group, other than servants and farm labourers, in the town and far too numerous to be engaged in a strictly local consumption industry’. Although the commercial outlets for the Wycombe and other Chiltern chairmakers, during the nineteenth century, included London and various towns throughout England,¹² it is interesting to discover that this type of trading, especially with London, appears to have been already established in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The scale and significance of this trading pattern has still to be ascertained.

The term ‘fancy’ was used by chair makers from the last quarter of the eighteenth century onwards, to refer to decorative or novelty embellishment of different categories of chair maker’s work, using paintwork or layered pigments between multiple layers of varnish, otherwise known as Japanned work. James Kellet of Lambeth, described himself in 1797 as a ‘Dyed, Fancy and Japanned’ chair maker.¹³ Perhaps he wished to differentiate between ordinary paintwork and the more sophisticated japanned work, often involving considerable artistic skill. Another London chair maker, William Osborne of Wardour Street, Soho, also described himself as a fancy chair maker in 1803.¹⁴ Pat Kirkham sheds light on the way in which the term ‘fancy’ was broadly used in the late eighteenth century with reference to chair making.¹⁵ Reference is made to the supply of fourteen fancy back chairs to the Royal household by the chairmaker John Russell in 1786. These cane-seated chairs were ‘very neatly japanned green and white and drawn into spriggs of flowers’. Another chair maker, Alexander Thoms of Exeter,¹⁶ advertised in the *Exeter Flying Post* of June 1794, that he made and sold ‘All sorts of rush-bottomed fancy chairs of yew-tree and mahogany’ . . . A further advertisement in 1808 informs us that the firm had moved to new premises and was making ‘chairs in the newest patterns, drawing room chairs, sofas, settees, and couches and in gold or colours’. An announcement in 1810 refers to the further movement of the ‘fancy chair manufacturers’ to new premises in Exeter. This is an important provincial example of a distinct category of fancy chair making (1786–1816) which not only utilised traditional cabinet makers skills but in combination with painted and possibly japanned work reflects the contemporary ‘new and very elegant fashion’ intended to produce ‘a rich and splendid appearance to the minuter parts of the ornaments, which are generally thrown in by the painter’ according to *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterers Guide*.¹⁷ This type of chair making is in distinct contrast to the ‘vernacular’ traditions employed by William Treacher to make fancy chairs alongside the more extensive range of chairs listed on his billhead.

The prevalence of vernacular inspired fancy rush-seated chair making traditions, in other cities, is suggested by trade directory references for example to at least twelve 'Windsor and Fancy' chairmaker's workshops in Bristol between 1799 and 1840. The conjunction of 'Windsor' and 'Fancy' chair making to describe the output of these individual workshops suggests similar 'vernacular' chair making traditions to those used by William Treacher. *The Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* lists the following 'Windsor and Fancy' chairmakers in the city of Bristol:

William Dinning	1817-18
George Evans	1832-34
Joseph Gifford	1818-19
John Gillet	1819-20
John Gillet Jnr	1833
J. Ivey	1836-37
John Parker	1799-1813
Luke Shewring Snr	1799-1800
Luke Shewring Jnr	1815-22 (Also recorded as a dealer in Dutch and English rushes in 1820)
Filia Smith	1836
William Smith	1823-35
Thomas Vaughan	1801-40

A recent study of vernacular chairs to be found in the Eskdale area of Cumbria,¹⁸ identified part of a set of early nineteenth century rush seated fancy chairs, incorporating simulated bamboo features, lent by an elderly Eskdale resident to the Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry at Abbot Hall, Kendal. Although there was some conjecture about their workshop origins, it was considered very likely that their surface embellishment was influenced by knowledge and experience gained from the Lancaster trade. Furthermore although there was undoubted sophistication in the surface treatment and configuration of these finely turned chairs, the basic construction was clearly based on well established vernacular traditions employed in Eskdale and throughout north-west England.

Vernacular rush-seated spindle-back chairs with a stained finish, from the fancy chair warehouse of John and David Bancroft in Salford¹⁹ are typical to north-west England but the types of fancy chairs sold in 1808 by their warehouse at 126 Chapel Street remains uncertain. Could the fancy chairs supplied by this Salford chairmaker's warehouse resemble the set of early nineteenth-century japanned chairs which still remain at Dunham Massey, Cheshire? These japanned rush-seated Empire chairs are constructed in one of the typical vernacular designs used in the North West during the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Interestingly, they are of a type often depicted by Charles Spencelayh (1865-1958) in his paintings of Manchester interiors during the early twentieth century, when he lived in Didsbury, south Manchester. Returning to Dunham Massey, black japanned chairs, housed in the Summer Parlour incorporate a tablet feature painted with flowers on a black background, which is fixed between the turned top rail and one of the cross rails. Four decorative spindles or columns are set



7. Two examples of unprovenanced fancy chairs

between lower cross rails. Edging strips to the rush seats are also japanned and the back legs are slightly chamfered below seat level in a similar way to certain kitchen rush-seated Empire chairs. There still remains a significant gap in our knowledge of the range of fancy vernacular chairs made during the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. Fancy chairs made in the second half of the nineteenth century are more thoroughly documented in chair maker's catalogues such as those by Amos Catton and Glenister and Gibbons.²¹

Our knowledge of customers or client groups is likewise limited. An exhibition at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia in 1973 provided a useful example of the way in which a series of Vermont portraits, painted by Asahel Powers in the 1830s inadvertently gave social indicators about his client groups who are portrayed at ease seated in highly

decorative American Windsor chairs of that period and locality.²² Future research needs to be aware of the inconsistencies in the use of the term 'fancy' to describe the painted or japanned products of an English chair-maker's workshop. For example in 1794, Pratt, chair maker of Kingston, is recorded as supplying a Mrs Garrick with 'six neat cottage chairs with rush seats and moulded japanned bamboo'.²³ In another instance, Charles Skull of High Wycombe (1813–40) is referred to in trade directories as a chair maker and japanner.²⁴ The fancy chairs on which our attention has been focused represent one end of a range of quite simply constructed vernacular chairs. It is suggested that the mercantile and industrial growth that occurred in England during the latter part of the eighteenth century, in cities such as London, Bristol, Salford and Manchester produced middle income groups who were in a position to welcome and afford this imaginative but relatively cheap furniture. Some typical examples of unprovenanced vernacular fancy chairs, illustrated in figure 7 highlight the importance of future research. Their 'impermanent' decorative appearance and fragility of construction may account for their low survival rates.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Ivan Sparkes for a copy of William Treacher's billhead of the 1790s which inspired the search for the rush-seated chair illustrated on the billhead and to understand more about the context in which such chairs were made.

REFERENCES

1. Stubb's Manufactory trade card, late eighteenth century, Banks Collection, British Museum. Further reference to be found in G. Beard, *English Furniture*, Viking Press for N.T., 1985, p. 232.
2. Stipple engraving 12½ ins × 12½ ins, titled 'The Farmer's visit to his married daughter in Town', based upon a George Morland painting, engraved by W. Bond and published by W. Dickson, 1 May, 1789.
3. G. Dawe. *Life of George Morland, with remarks on his work*, 1807.
4. The captions included in a set of stipple engravings titled 'Delia in Town' and 'Delia in the Country', J. R. Smith, 12 February, 1788.
5. L. J. Mayes, *The History of Chairmaking in High Wycombe*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960, p. 20 and 21.
6. T. Sorrell, *The London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship*, 1802.
7. *An Exhibition of Back-Stairs Furniture from Country Houses*, Temple Newsam, Leeds, Catalogue reference No. 8, 1977. 'Ladder-Back Chair' lent by Reresby Sitwell, Renishaw Hall. Also C. Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture 1750–1900*, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 86.
8. Nancy Goyne Evans, *American Windsor Chairs*, New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1996. Very decorative slat-back Windsors, with tapered back posts and thumb tops, have been recorded between 1820 and 1850. Makers labels, stencil marks or brand marks include I. Gormly (Pennsylvania), Stephen Shorey (Rochester N.H.), S. Buss (Mass), Samuel Fizer (Virginia), Christian Nestell (Providence).
9. *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* (D.E.F.M.), p. 903.
10. Guildhall Library, London.
11. *The History of Chairmaking in High Wycombe*, pp. 25 and 26.
12. B. North, *Autobiography*, 1882. C. Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture, 1750–1900*, p. 115. J. Boram, 'Chiltern Trading Networks', *Regional Furniture*, ix, 1995, 34–42.
13. Pat Kirkham, 'The London Furniture Trade 1700–1870', *Furniture History*, xxiv, 1988, 21.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Also S. Pryke 'Fancy Finishes', *Country Life*, 15 August, 1991.
16. D.E.F.M., pp. 888 and 889.
17. George Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet Maker & Upholsterer's Guide*, 1788, 1789 & 1794 (third edition). Also *The London Furniture Trade 1700–1870*, extract quoted on p. 21.
18. S. Stuart and D. Jones, 'Eskdale Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, ix, 1995, 28–33.

16 EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FANCY CHAIRS

19. D.E.F.M., p. 36 and B. D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, 1990, published by The Antique Collector's Club, p. 351.
20. B. D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, pp. 420–22.
21. Catalogues of Amos Catton *c.* 1849, Benjamin North *c.* 1865, Glenister and Gibbons *c.* 1870, William Collins and Son 1872.
22. *Antiques*, November 1973, M.P.A., U.S.A.
23. D.E.F.M., p. 712.
24. D.E.F.M., p. 820.