

SCOTTISH CHAIR MAKING: THE CASE OF FRANCIS EAST & CO. AND EAST BROTHERS, DUNDEE

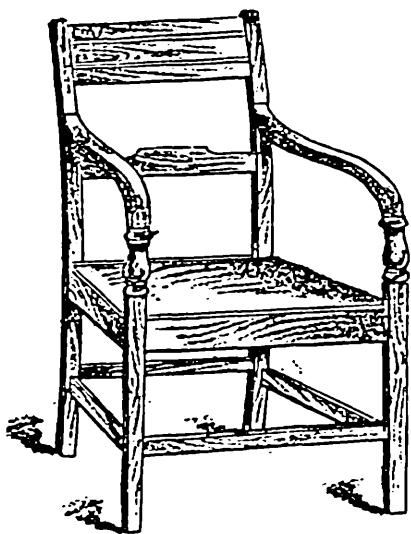
David Jones

Until the Utility period of the 1940s, during which the UK Board of Trade issued a statutory range of designs and defined the market in which they were to be sold, Scottish chair makers had manufactured a wide range of common chairs, providing their own designs which reflected regional traditions from Scotland and further afield. Two of the most successful chair making outfits, whose products illustrated this variety of types, were the separate Dundee companies Francis East & Co. (est 1869) and East Bros. Ltd. (est 1895). Their history usefully outlines that of Scottish chair making between 1870 and 1940.

Francis East¹ is thought to have begun making chairs in Dundee in 1869, the date of establishment claimed in the firm's surviving catalogues and advertising material (Fig 1). In 1871, the firm of East Capell, cane and 'Windsor' chair manufacturer, opened premises at 18, Ireland's Lane. Francis East, partner in this firm, then resided at 28, Dallfield Terrace, Dundee. By 1874, Capell had left the firm, leaving East to continue the business at the new expanded premises of 16-18 Ireland's Lane. Two of Francis East's five sons, Albert & Frank, who appear to have been involved in their father's business, left in 1895 to set up their own chairmaking operation in Albert Street, at an old engine and timber yard, described as 'scarcely bigger than the washing green of a tenement dwelling'.² They were successful with a small range of chairs, enough to enable their move in 1899 to the site of Potter & Co's Jute Mill at Lochee, an industrial parish to the west of Dundee's centre.

They had formed, in direct competition with their father, the separate company of East Brothers, which became a limited liability company in 1909.³ In 1911, the factory at South Road, Lochee was rebuilt, providing spacious workshops, not only for the manufacture of a staple range of chairs, but also for the production of mahogany lavatory seats. Ironically, this highly successful line was exported in particularly large quantities to South America, from which continent the mahogany was initially shipped to Dundee. Tens of thousand of these seats, in different woods, were made for the specific sanitary requirements of Government housing schemes after 1924. *The Tudor Walter's Report on the Provision of Dwellings for the Working Class* (1918) had recommended internal water closets as a minimum standard and this was to be implemented in the 115,000 new council houses planned by the Scottish Housing Act (1919). East Bros. monopolised the supply of seats for these between-the-wars schemes, whose occupants were perhaps unaware that exactly the same product was used by first class passengers on the ocean liner Queen Mary, also a customer of East Bros.

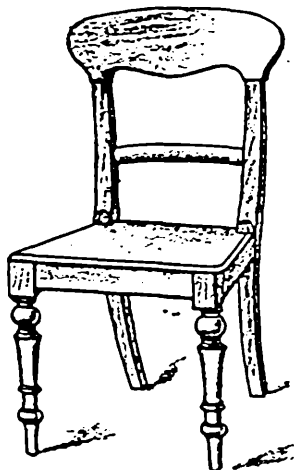
The repertoire of chair designs manufactured by the two companies is interesting because it was drawn from distinctly different regional traditions. The staple designs



Glasgow Pattern.
Arm.

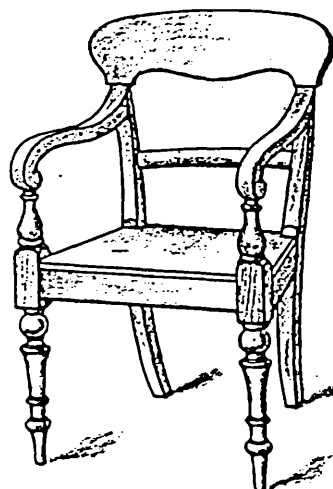


Glasgow Pattern.
Single.



33.

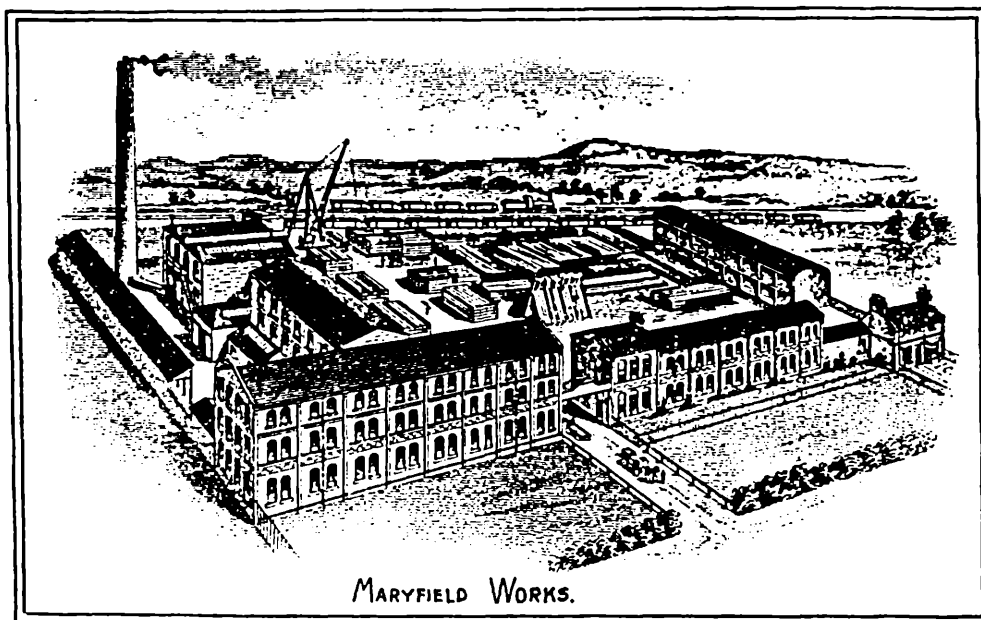
No. 33s. Lighter Make.



33. Arm.

No. 33s Arm. Lighter Make.

1. 'Glasgow' and 'Edinburgh' pattern chairs from Francis East & Co. *Design book of Chairs, Tables, Stools, etc*, Dundee c1890

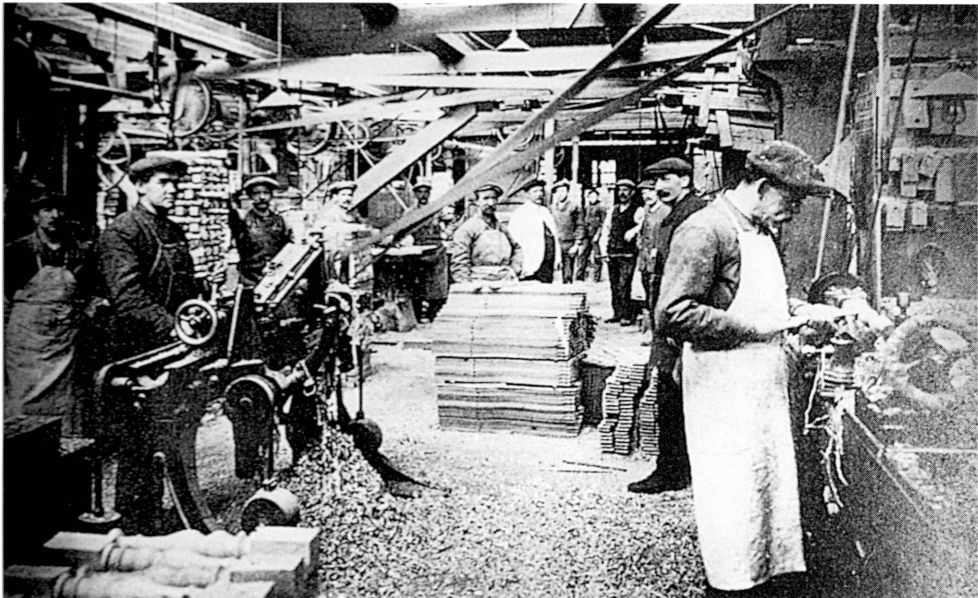


2. Francis East & Co. Maryfield Works, Dundee c1890

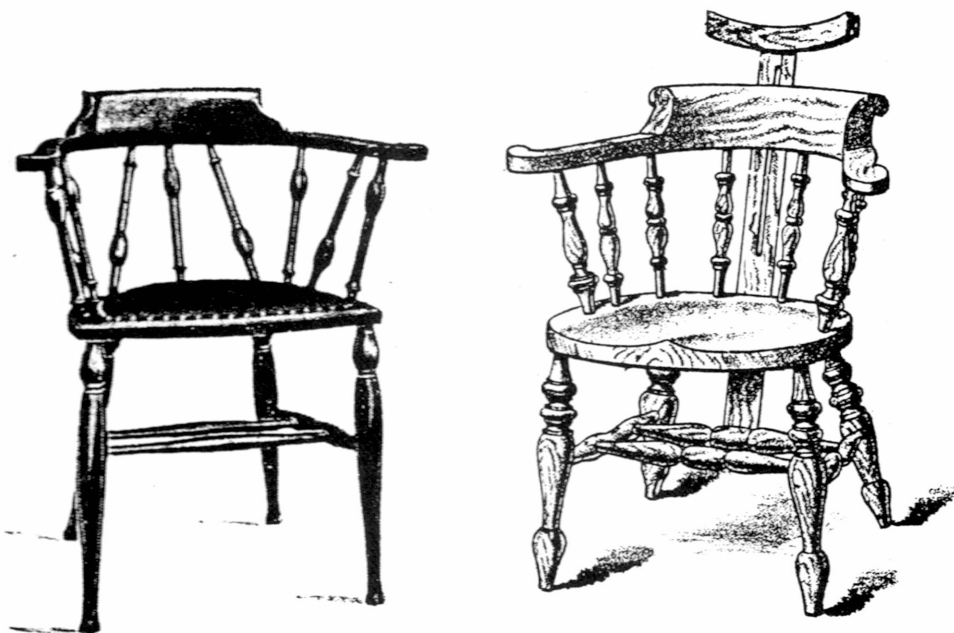
were the 'Edinburgh' and the 'Glasgow' pattern chairs (seen in fig. 1) which served the working population of Dundee. The 'Edinburgh' pattern with its characteristic yoke back, so called because the shaped underside of the top rail resembled the yoke used to harness a pair of draught animals, was the most popular chair for domestic use in East Coast Scotland. This could be found in kitchen or parlour, and is interestingly described in Francis East & Co's catalogue as 'Lighter Make' no doubt in comparison with the more robust construction of the 'Glasgow' pattern, signature of which was the 'dyked' seat and central tab on top of its stay rail. These designs satisfied fastidious local requirements, but were relatively expensive to make. The major contribution to the Scottish chairmaking industry made by Francis East and his sons was, without doubt, the introduction of English designs which, using turned components, were much cheaper to make up in bulk. The light, cheap turned chairs seen in the trade catalogue of Francis East betray his High Wycombe origins. Types such as the Wycombe lath back, the scroll back and gothic scroll back appear to have been lifted straight from the repertoire of firms such as Edwin Skull or Glenister's, where East most probably served his apprenticeship, before moving to Dundee. The patterns for 'Public Hall Chairs' illustrated in figs 8 & 9 are representative of this output, but with refinements which Francis East registered as his own. The three ring turning of chair legs, for instance, is a signature of many of East's designs. Variants on the stick back idea were developed for specific markets in Scotland. Low backs, with head rests, for example, were marketed as 'Hairdressers' Chairs' and a range of fancy low backs found great success in the many



3. East Brothers, Albert Street Works, Dundee c1895



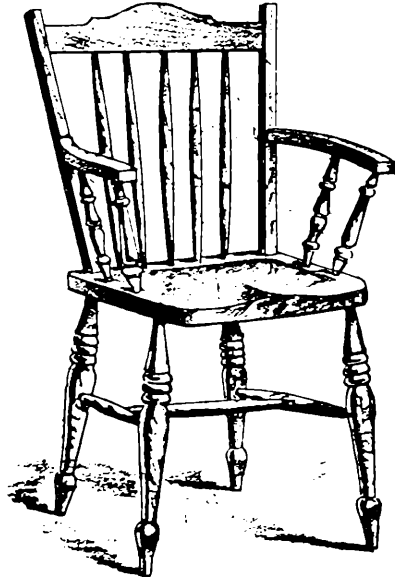
4. East Brothers Ltd., Turning Shop, Lochee Cabinet Factory, Dundee
Courtesy of Dundee Art Gallery and Museum



5 & 6. Francis East & Co. Designs for 'Hydro Arm' and 'Hairdresser' chairs



7. East Brothers Ltd. Lavatory Seat store, Lochee Cabinet Factory, Dundee
Courtesy of Dundee Art Gallery and Museum

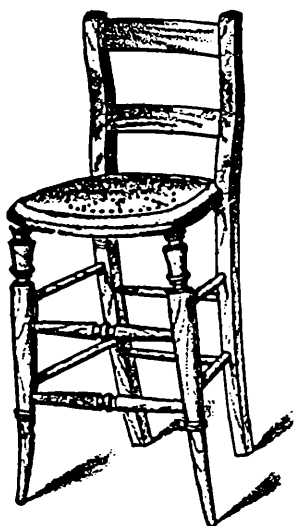


Albert Arm Regd.

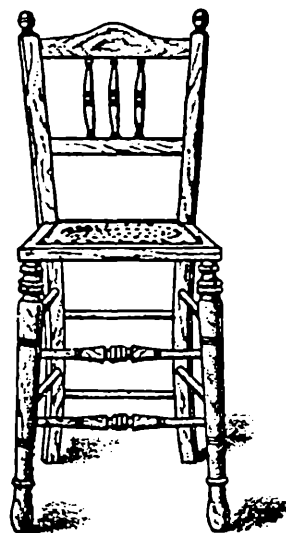
8. Francis East & Co, 'Public Hall Chairs' 'Albert' registered design



9. Francis East & Co. 'Albert' registered design chair
Courtesy of Dundee Art Gallery and Museum



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87.

10. Francis East & Co. Designs for 'Shop Chairs'. The pattern on the right was later adapted to incorporate an enamelled advertising plate

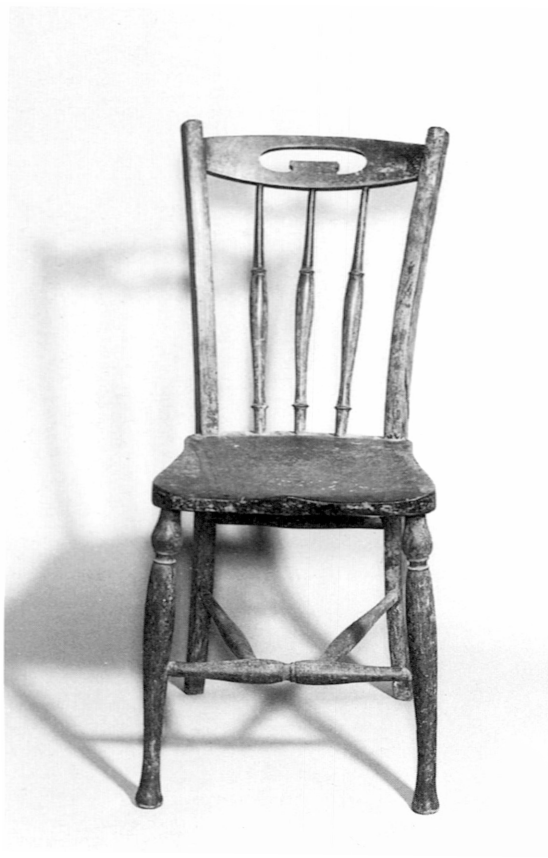
Hydropathic Hotels and Golf Clubs which were being built or enlarged during the 1890's (Figs 5 & 6).

One of Francis East's most innovative ideas for the commercial market was the 'Shop chair' (Figs 10 & 11) which incorporated an enamelled advertising panel in the back. This line was a joint venture with the Falkirk Iron Company (Est 1819) who made the slogan-bearing sheet metal panels. There were two versions, a standard height model and a high chair for children. From the nature of the advertising, it seems that these chairs were intended for use in general grocer's shops. Most of the chairs made by the two East family firms are stamped in a similar manner. Francis East used the words 'F. East Dundee', and East Brothers chairs most commonly bore the legend 'East's Registered Design'.

The most recognisable product to come from East Brothers' Lochee factory marked a progression from a reliance upon established regional forms towards a recognition of wider, international design trends. Although the chair illustrated in fig 12 pays homage to English turned chair tradition in its adaptation of a 'spur' stretcher arrangement and general spindle back form, it is an Art Nouveau design, conceived to catch a new, progressive market. The height of the chair back is slightly exaggerated, the turnings have been given a different, high-waisted look with a flaring, swollen line, and, most distinctively, the top rail has been pierced with an oval hand-hold. Although turned, this chair is not of 'Windsor' construction, because its flared stiles and back legs are



11. Francis East & Co. Shop chair with enamelled advertising panel
Courtesy of Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery



12. East Brothers Ltd. Art Nouveau chair



13. East Brothers' Stamp from chair above

done, Albert East, the driving force behind East Bros. Ltd., continued to import more and more ideas from High Wycombe. His connection with the English chair-making town is verified by the existence of a photograph, (Fig 15) taken in 1900 in the studio of Wycombe photographer E. Sweetland, who was closely connected with the local furniture trade.⁴ To what extent Albert provided a channel between Scotland and England for the progressive Art Nouveau forms of Glasgow designers such as C. R. Mackintosh and George Walton is not easy to measure, but it seems possible that experimental ideas could have reached the otherwise conservative High Wycombe commercial trade in this way. It is certain that Albert East was one of the *côterie* of leading figures in the Scottish furniture trade of the early twentieth century. With his death in 1933 – his obituary appeared in the December 30th issue of *The Cabinet Maker and Complete Home Furnisher*, alongside those of George Walton and W. S. Morton of the Scott Morton and Tynecastle Company Ltd. – the heyday of the East family chair manufacturing concern came to an end.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. Francis East, a chair maker from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, settled in Dundee during the 1860s. He is known to have subscribed to John Small's *Ancient and Modern Furniture* (1883) in which he is described as a 'Manufacturer, Dundee'. Francis died in 1916 and the company which bore his name continued trading until the 1960s
2. 'Industry in Tayside' *Journal of Dundee Chamber of Commerce* September, 1962 p 1186
3. East Brothers Ltd eventually passed into the hands of the receiver in November, 1986, after over ninety years of chair production
4. Ivan Sparkes has published photographs of the furniture trade in and around Wycombe by E. Sweetland. See Ivan H. Sparkes, *The Windsor Chair. An Illustrated History of a Classic English Chair*, 1975