

THE SALISBURY MAYORAL CHAIR OF 1795

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The eighteenth-century chair discussed here is one of a group of three mayoral chairs in the collection of Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum. The first two, made of walnut and dating from 1585 and 1622 respectively, have been identified by Victor Chinnery¹ as possibly originating from the same New Sarum (Salisbury) workshop, though their quality raises the possibility that their maker was trained in London. Both chairs were donated by the mayors of the day to the Council House, built in 1585 by the Merchant's Guild. Since the thirteenth century all trading in the prosperous market town of Salisbury had been under the control of the Church, and the erection of the Council House was inextricably linked to the traders' desire for local self-government. Although new charters were granted after 1612, they made little difference to the way the City was actually run, and it was a fire at the Council House in 1780 that finally gave the merchants something like autonomy. John Chandler² summarises the fire's significance:

Salisbury's growth as an agricultural and livestock market seems to have coincided with the city council's ultimately successful attempts to wrest control of the Market Place from the Bishop. The fire which damaged the Council House in 1780 provided an excellent pretext for a renewed attack, and the Bishop was persuaded to accept a package of redevelopment which involved not only the demolition of his medieval Guildhall and its replacement by a new, more opulent building — the gift of a secular lord — but also the relinquishing of his rights over the market.

The third mayoral chair in the Salisbury Museum (Figure 1) was made to commemorate the eventual opening of the New Council House — now known as the Guildhall — in 1795. With some two hundred years separating their manufacture, there are no shared details of construction to connect all three to a local chair-making tradition. However, the three imposing chairs are linked as symbols of Salisbury citizens' long struggle to run their own affairs.

The 1795 chair is monumental in both size and style. Made of mahogany, with a solid seat, it stands 5 ft 7 in. high, the back is 2 ft 9 in. at its widest, the square seat area approximately 2 ft by 2 ft. Including the top of the legs, the seat front is 2 ft 8 in. wide, and each massive claw and ball front foot is about 16 in. in circumference. Every surface of the chair is elaborately carved. The most striking elements of the decoration are locally significant (Figure 2). Three maces, representing civic authority, dominate the top of the back panel, their staffs surmounted by the eight-banded shield of New Sarum's coat of arms. Either side of the shield, facing out from the uprights supporting the back panel, are eagle heads with coronets as collars (ducally gorged). The double-headed eagle is part of the arms of both New Sarum and the Earls of Radnor; it was the 2nd Earl of Radnor — the 'secular lord' — who financed the building of the New Council House. Below the shield, in a medallion surrounded by an intricate burst of carving resembling a sun's rays, are the sword and scales of justice; the Council House doubled as both meeting place and courts, and a number of council members served as



1. The Salisbury Mayoral chair, 1795, mahogany

both aldermen and justices.³ At the base of the back panel are carved the initials J (I).M.T., presently identified as the initials of Joseph Tanner, mayor in 1795, and the date in Roman numerals.

The remaining carving is a lexicon of late eighteenth-century neo-classical motifs. The cresting on the back comprises a shell shape enclosing anthemion-style detail, flanked by swags of bell-flowers, or husks; the join of the reeded back uprights to the arm rests is concealed with acanthus leaves, the arm rests themselves are thickly carved with stylised leaves which transmute into the flowing hair of grotesque masks. At the join of each arm to seat front are three oval paterae enclosing a formal leaf motif; more acanthus leaves cover the top of the legs. The front-facing panel of the seat is serpentine-shaped and carved with a formal scrolling foliage motif, in the centre of which is a pelta-like motif. To this virtuoso display of neo-classical decoration, the maker has added a square diaper pattern, enclosing small formal flower heads as a background to the armorial motifs on the back panel. On the upper back panel, trailing vines and grapes are superimposed on the diaper pattern. The high quality of the piece does not necessarily indicate that the maker was London-based; indeed, there is empirical evidence to suggest the maker — or makers, as the chair may be the work of specialist chair maker and carver — was local.

There is no published account of a continuous local furniture-making tradition in Salisbury beyond the mid seventeenth century. The Salisbury Joiner's Guild, founded in the early fifteenth century, included furniture makers in its seventeenth century membership,⁴ but was moribund by the late eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the *Universal British Directory of Trade and Commerce and Manufacture*, compiled between 1791 and 1798, lists three cabinet makers (George Brownjohn, Charles Long and Joseph Vilder), one chair maker (Thomas Chater) and two carvers (George Crouch and Richard Earlisham) in Salisbury. In *Pigot and Company's London and Provincial New Commercial Directory* for 1822–23, there are seven Salisbury 'cabinet makers and upholsterers' listed, in addition to thirteen carpenters and joiners; in 1830, *Pigot and Company's Directory of Wiltshire* lists six Salisbury-based cabinet makers, plus two carvers and gilders, and twenty-three carpenters and joiners. As late as 1861, when 'the superior and modern household furniture and effects' of the Judges' Lodgings were put up for auction, the auctioneer emphasised 'N.B. The above-named Furniture is especially worthy of attention, since no expense was spared in the complete furnish of these large and excellent Premises from a well-known manufactory in this City only a few years since'.⁵

In 1795, an advertisement in the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* for Monday 12 January suggests a healthy demand for locally made furniture (and a possible local source of mahogany for the Mayoral chair): 'Two additional cabinet makers may have constant employ either by the piece or week; apply at R. Smith's Furniture Warehouse, High Street. N.B. Seasoned mahogany of all dimensions, in any quantity, to be sold at a very low price'. However, the advertisement does not necessarily imply that Salisbury itself was capable of sustaining a quality furniture industry. As John Chandler relates, the city had been in steady decline throughout the eighteenth century and, through inactivity and stagnation 'had dropped in the national stakes to become a relatively small and insignificant country town' with a population, by 1801, of only 7,668. Any



2. The Salisbury Mayoral chair, detail of back

viable furniture industry in Salisbury would probably have supplied both town and its surrounding district.

As for the style of the chair, Salisbury makers would probably have been aware of fashionable neo-classical motifs. The posthumous publication of Hepplewhite's *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, adapted Robert Adam's neo-classical decorative vocabulary in 1788 and these motifs were also featured in Thomas Sheraton's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, published in parts between 1791 and 1794. These pattern books made the Adam style accessible to every provincial cabinet maker. There is, of course, little connection between the elegant designs of Hepplewhite or Sheraton and the massive 1795 Mayoral chair. This is partly a product of function — it is meant to make an imposing statement of civic authority — and partly because the maker could not resist gilding the design lily, with the dramatic sun-burst, the diaper pattern and naturalistic trailing vines. Does this lack of restraint — together with the anachronistic cabriole legs and claw and ball feet, both old-fashioned features by this date — suggest the chair is of provincial origins?

There is no published account of the chair's history, but local sources provide some information. *The History of Modern Wiltshire*, by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, Bt., published posthumously in 1843 after Hoare's death in 1838, includes an account of the formal opening ceremony of the New Council House in September 1795, at which 'The Honourable William Bouverie offered an elegantly carved chair for the use of the mayor in council, and the gift was accepted with thanks'. The statement is ambiguous; the chair might only have been promised but not yet delivered. The same source does confirm the chair was *in situ* by 8 August 1796, 'about half-past eleven, the King, Queen and Princesses arrived in Salisbury . . . The royal party inspected the council chamber and courts of justice; and the King took his seat in the handsome chair provided for the use of the mayor'. The Hoare account, however, provides a date reference and the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* of Monday 28 September 1795 gives its own account of the New Council House ceremony the previous Wednesday:

A superb chair, richly carved and ornamented with civic emblems, was presented to the Council for the use of the Mayors of the city, by the Hon. W. Hen. Bouverie, one of the Representatives in Parliament, to whom a vote of thanks was also ordered to be given for the same.

This precise description would seem to prove that the chair was actually presented at the opening ceremony. The day after the opening, according to the same issue of the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, the Council elected William Boucher as Mayor for the 'ensuing year', 1796. This tallies with the *Correct List of the Mayors of New Sarum or Salisbury from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, published in 1826. John Tanner is listed as Mayor for 1795; apparently Joseph Tanner, identified by the initials on the chair, did not become Mayor until 1798.

The Salisbury entry in the *Universal British Directory* is known to have been compiled between 1795 and 1798. The Earl of Pembroke is listed as Lord High Steward, and he was unanimously elected to this position on 4 February 1794; the Earl of Radnor — benefactor of the New Council House — is listed as Recorder, and the Mayor is named as Thomas Goddard. Assuming the reliability of the *Correct List of the Mayors of New Sarum*, this would suggest the *Universal British Directory* entry

was compiled in 1797. John Tanner has three mentions in the entry, as Alderman and Justice, as Gentry, and as Clothier. Joseph Tanner does not appear in the listings. This would seem to support the view that it is actually John Tanner's initials that appear on the chair; further research might confirm that his middle initial was M. Because the chair was the gift of a private donor, there would be no record of it in the Council's contemporary financial accounts and so no indication from that source of the maker's identity. The Radnor family, whose principal residence, Longford Castle, was about five miles from Salisbury, patronised both London and local furniture makers, as the Castle's present collection testifies. The Radnor estates papers are lodged in the Wiltshire County Records Office, but as the chair was a personal commission, any surviving record of payment is most likely to be lodged among the family archives.

However, a search of the Longford Castle archive has not revealed any reference to the chair, and it seems any surviving record will be found in Surrey. The chair's donor, the Hon. William Henry Pleydell Bouverie (1752–1806), younger brother of the 2nd Earl of Radnor, was MP for Salisbury between 1776 and 1802 but actually lived at Betchworth House, near Reigate, Surrey. He could have commissioned the chair from a maker in either London or Surrey. It does seem illogical, however, not to employ a Salisbury maker to create a chair so intimately connected, in decorative detail and purpose, with Salisbury. Further research among the Radnor family papers might identify the maker of the 1795 Mayoral chair.

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