

# THE TRADING NETWORKS OF THE CHILTERN CHAIRMAKERS

John Boram

Numerous documentary references are to be found relating to the extensive trading networks established by the workshops of the chair makers and chair turners in the Chiltern Hills, S.E. England, throughout the nineteenth century. However the destination of the various products of these workshops, the extent of chair-part distribution and the scale of these activities, may eventually provide us with an understanding of the impact of inter-regional trading and competition upon the evolution and longevity of other regional chairmaking traditions.

A number of provenanced Windsor chairs have recently been examined which afford a glimpse of their origins as well as their initial destination. Evidence of this nature not only provides substance to available documentary sources but assists in our understanding of the involvement of wholesalers, furniture brokers and chair part makers in the various supply mechanisms. Beyond the traditional markets in London, the Thames Valley towns and the Essex towns, there is evidence of a much wider pattern of distribution throughout a number of other regions.

The *Autobiography of Benjamin North*, published 1882,<sup>1</sup> recounts his travels during the 1830s, for his employer Mr Randel, chairmaker of Thame in Oxfordshire. Using a horse drawn cart and van, loaded with chairs, he visited various towns in the counties of Northamptonshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, selling the products of the workshop. In 1887 he started working for Thomas Harris, chairmaker of West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. He recorded his travels, selling chairs in Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire. The Yorkshire towns visited included Sheffield, Rotterdam, Pontefract and Leeds. It is interesting to note that his customer base in the first half of the 19th century, excluded or by-passed many of the counties such as Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Staffordshire which supported well established traditions of regional chairmaking.

An unpublished *Short History of Stokenchurch* by M. Towerton (1935) refers to the frequent distribution of locally made Windsor chairs from this Chiltern village in Oxfordshire to Leeds and Gloucester during the 19th century.<sup>2</sup> A more recent publication, titled *Stokenchurch in Perspective* (1992)<sup>3</sup> refers to chairmakers, in 1820, travelling to Leeds with chairs and returning with cloth. A considerable number of chairmakers (Fig. 1) and chair turners occupied workshops in Stokenchurch throughout the 19th century. Trade directories list five chair turners and two chairmakers in 1847 and between 1860 and 1920, refer to sixty chairmaking concerns.

In Yorkshire, the account books of Pratt's of Bradford<sup>4</sup> refer to the regular purchase of stocks of Windsor chairs from the Buckinghamshire firms of Glenister, B. North and E. Hutchinson, from 1850 onwards. A typical example of a hoop-back Windsor side chair from one of the High Wycombe workshops has been found with the printed label of Ann Jessop of 26 Fargate, Sheffield, applied to the underneath of the seat. The chair is



1. Alfred Bird (b. 1867) chairmaker of Stokenchurch, carting chairs up Aston Hill

*Photograph by courtesy of Reg Cornwell*

constructed with an elm seat, ash hoop, turned beech legs and a beech cartwheel-fretted splat (Fig. 2). Except for the absence of scribe lines around the edge of the seat and the hoop, it is very similar to the Windsor chairs made by the workshop of J. Mead of High Wycombe, in the period 1830–1850.<sup>5</sup> The printed label, (Fig. 3), reads:

From A. Jessop's  
Cabinet, Upholstery  
Picture Frame, and Looking Glass Manufactory,  
26 Fargate, Sheffield

Trade directories list Mrs Ann Jessop, widow of James Jessop cabinet maker, as occupying 26 Fargate, Sheffield between 1839 and 1854.<sup>6</sup> A diversity of furniture appears to have been retailed by Ann Jessop, utilising the same paper label. Such furniture includes a Windsor chair, a mahogany chiffonnier and a looking glass. Examples have previously been recorded of other Yorkshire cabinet makers, such as S. E. Collison and R. Oddy, who freely applied their own paper labels and, in the case of Bunnings of Doncaster, name stamps, to 'high splat back' Windsor chairs originating



2. Hoop-back Windsor side chair, High Wycombe



3. Ann Jessop's printed label on underside of seat of chair in Fig. 2



4. Stamp of furniture broker George Parman on a hoop-back Windsor chair

from Nottinghamshire workshops.<sup>7</sup>

It is also noteworthy that in the 1840s, George Parman, furniture broker of 57 Old Street, London, name stamped hoop-back Windsor side chairs (see Fig. 4), which probably originated from one of the Chiltern workshops. It is possible that such chairs were transported from one of the Chiltern workshops to London, either complete or assembled from a stock of Windsor chair parts (Fig. 9) on the nearby premises of James Parman at 67 Old Street. Kelly's directory of 1845 describes James Parman as a Windsor chairmaker at the above address.

A version of the lath-back Windsor chair (Fig. 5) has recently been found, stamped GORDON & CO. BIRMINGHAM (Fig. 6). The chair is made with a plain elm seat in conjunction with beech and ash parts. The only reference to this Company, in trade directories, is in 1899. Gordon and Co. of Bradford Street, Birmingham are described in Kelly's directory as Wholesale Cabinet Makers and Upholsterers. However the likely maker of this chair is James Cox and Sons (1864-1907) whose chair manufacturing works was in Oxford Road, High Wycombe. B. D. Cotton has recorded an identical chair name stamped JS. COX, HIGH WYCOMBE, BUCKS.<sup>8</sup> It is of further interest that the components for some of the Windsor chairs, assembled by James Cox & Co. in the early 20th century, were supplied by workshops in Beacons Bottom, Stokenchurch.<sup>9</sup> The reference to the wholesale activities of Gordon and Co. suggests that the chair was made



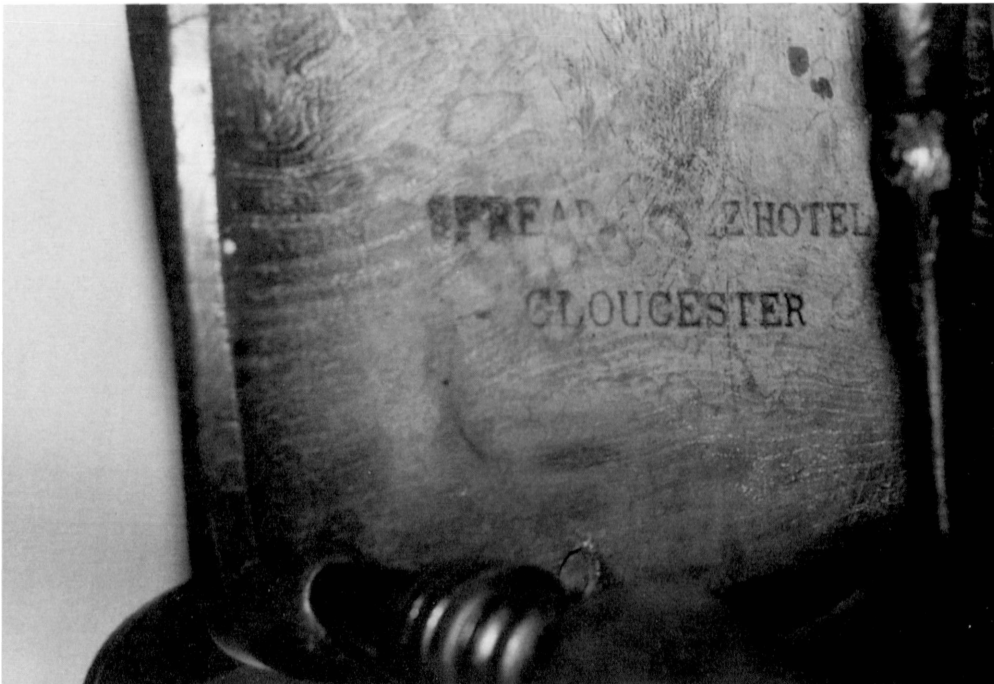
5. Lath-back Windsor chair  
*Collection of I. Macdonald*



6. Stamp of furniture wholesalers Gordon & Co. Birmingham on seat of chair in Fig. 5












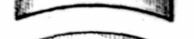

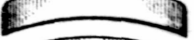





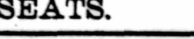







7. Smoker's Bow  
Windsor chair



8. Stencil mark of The Spread Eagle Hotel, Gloucester on underside of seat of chair in Fig. 7

## CHAIRMAKERS' WORK.

Windsor Chair Legs.	1½ in. x 18½ in.		Per Gross
.. Spindles	1½ .. 14½		14s. 0d.
.. Stands	1½ .. 18		6s. 6d.
Turned Windsor ..	1½ .. 16		11s. 0d.
.. ..	1½ .. 17		.....
Smoking & Arm Chair Legs 2½	.. 18		.....
.. Spindles	1½ .. 17		.....
Long Stands	1½ .. 26		.....
Rocker & Arm Chair Stands 1½	.. 25		.....
.. ..	1½ .. 21		.....
.. ..	1½ .. 16		.....
Laths	1½ .. 25		.....
.. ..	1½ .. 21		.....
.. ..	1½ .. 16		.....
Turned Rocker Stands	1½ .. 22		.....
.. Arm Chair Stands	1½ .. 25		.....
Windsor Arms	2 .. 16½		.....
Rockers	1½ .. 22½		.....
Let-in Tops	2½ in. plk. x 15 in.		.....
.. ..	3 .. 15		.....
Laid-on Tops	3½ .. 18		.....
.. ..	3 .. 18		.....
Arm Chair Let-in Tops	3½ .. 18		.....
.. Laid-on Tops	3 .. 23		.....
.. ..	3½ .. 23		.....

## CHAIR SEATS.

SIZE.	BIRCH.	ELM.	ELM IF DOWN SIZES.
18 in. x 20 in., 1½ in. ... per gross	198/-	178/-	198/-
17 .. 18½ .. 1½ .. .. ..	145/-	130/6	145/-
15 .. 16 .. 1½ .. .. ..	115/6	104/-	115/6
15 .. 16 .. 1½ .. .. ..	96/-	86/6	96/-
14½ .. 15 .. 1½ .. .. ..	82/6	74/6	82/6
14½ .. 15 .. 1 .. .. ..	69/-	62/-	69/-
14 .. 15 .. 1½ .. .. ..	84/-	75/6	84/-
14 .. 15 .. 1 .. .. ..	67/6	61/-	67/6
12 .. 13 .. 1½ .. .. ..	53/-	48/-	53/-
10 .. 11 .. 1 .. .. ..	29/9	26/6	29/9

elsewhere and reinforces our knowledge of the widespread nature of the trading networks radiating from the Chiltern workshops. This substantiates evidence that wholesalers or furniture brokers (Fig. 4) felt free to name stamp chairs in the same way as many chairmakers. Name stamping was no doubt perceived as an integral aspect of advertising and marketing.

An example of another Windsor chair type (Fig. 7), possibly from one of the Buckinghamshire workshops, can be traced to its original customer in Northgate Street, Gloucester. The chair is stencil marked with the words 'Spread Eagle Hotel, Gloucester' (Fig. 8). This late 19th century office or smoker's bow Windsor chair, with its bulbous vase shaped front legs and distinctive under-arm turning, combines a number of the features illustrated in the Glenister and Gibbons pattern book of 1865 to 1879 and some from chair designs by Walter Skull in 1849.

In the late 19th century, several Stokenchurch chairmaking firms such as Griffiths Bros. and H. Messenger supplied chair components or parts not only to local makers, but also to those in Lancashire.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find that the 1881 Price List of Joseph Owen and Sons, timber merchants of Liverpool, includes a section titled 'Chairmaker's Work'. This list illustrates and prices Windsor chair parts by the gross (Fig. 9). The illustrations closely resemble many of the components used in the construction of scroll-back, and lath-back Windsor chairs from the Buckinghamshire workshops. It is noticeable that the list refers to the availability of elm and birch seats. Although elm was a readily available indigenous timber in the Chilterns, American birch would need to be imported. Edwin Skull's broadsheet of c1866 indicates that imported American birch was available and used in the construction of chairs from his workshop. There would appear to be a potential profit incentive in transporting chair parts to Lancashire. Joseph Owen and Sons sold a gross of Windsor chair legs for 14 shillings in 1881. Mr White, chair turner of Beacons Bottom (Stokenchurch) supplied common Windsor chair legs in 1914 at 9 shillings a gross.<sup>11</sup>

B. D. Cotton<sup>12</sup> has commented on the relatively undeveloped state of the chairmaking trade in the Yorkshire industrial towns in the 19th century. This contrasts strongly with the well established rush-seated chairmaking traditions established in the Cheshire and Lancashire industrial towns throughout the 19th century. It is therefore not surprising that the well established chairmaking centres in the Chilterns and Nottinghamshire found a ready market in the Yorkshire industrial towns. In the latter part of the 19th century I. Allsop and Sons, fl.1871-87, chairmakers of Workshop, Nottinghamshire are known to have supplied Windsor chairs to Bradford, Cleckheaton, Doncaster and Huddersfield, Wakefield, Glossop, Manchester, Stalybridge and Oldham.<sup>13</sup>

Was the arrival in Lancashire, during the latter part of the 19th century, of the kitchen Windsor chair making tradition a response to competition from the Chiltern and Nottinghamshire trades? If so, was the scale of this activity capable of affecting the longevity of a well established tradition of rush-seated chairmaking such as that in the North-West? Kitchen Windsors, name-stamped by local makers from Wigan, Blackburn and Manchester, have been recorded.<sup>14</sup> The development of the railways in the second half of the 19th century and steam powered lorries in the early 20th century may have had an important effect on distribution patterns, but the scale of product movement is essentially uncharted.

## 42 CHILTERN TRADING NETWORKS

Since we have sparse information about the quantitative aspects relating to output from the various workshops, there are many potential benefits in seeking the records and account books of these makers in order to understand more about the dynamics of the trade and the more detailed aspects of product distribution between the regions.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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