

# WILTSHIRE WINDSORS

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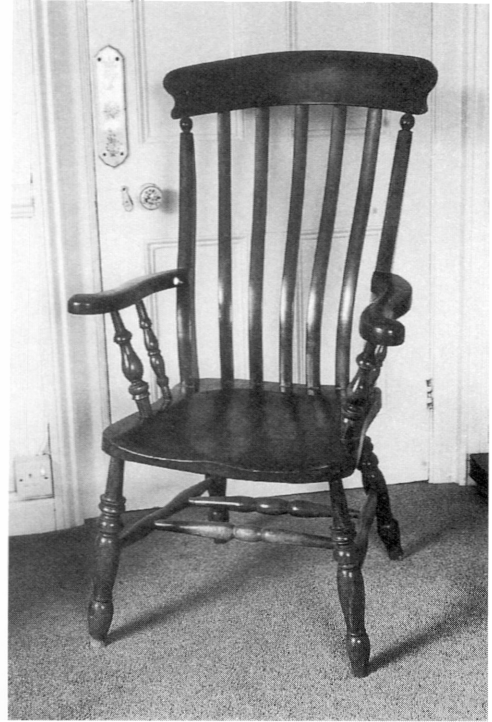
Apart from the Salisbury Joiners' *caqueteuse* chairs, no particular local type of chair has yet been identified in Wiltshire.<sup>1</sup> Pigot's *Directories* of 1822 and 1830 list five chair makers in the county, three of whom were also basket makers. A chance remark at the end of a lecture in December 1995 revealed that at Aldbourne there was a small factory making Windsor chairs between about 1867 and 1927.

Aldbourn lies in the downland eight miles from Marlborough and nine miles from Swindon. It was formerly noted for the manufacture of fustian, willow weaving, and bell-founding. There have been two histories of the village, published in 1975 and 1980.<sup>2</sup> According to these, the chair factory was started by Thomas Orchard in 1854 or 1867 in Castle Street, and moved to South Street in 1887. These premises were damaged by fire in 1921 but the business was continued in a nearby barn on a smaller scale until it ceased in 1927. Thomas Orchard's name first appears in official records in the census of 1841, aged eight, son of John Orchard, agricultural labourer.<sup>3</sup> No record has been traced of his birth or baptism but he is stated in the census to have been born in Wiltshire. He is absent from the census of 1851, but in 1857 at the baptism of his son Edwin he is described as cabinet maker.<sup>4</sup> In the 1861 census he is described as chair maker, aged twenty-eight. In 1862, 1864, and 1866 at the baptism of three more children he is given as cabinet maker, but at the baptism of his son John in 1871 he appears as chair maker.<sup>5</sup> Kelly's *Directories* of 1875 list Thomas Orchard, 'Farmer and Chairmaker'. Thomas Orchard was buried on 1 April 1903, aged seventy,<sup>6</sup> and in the same year Kelly's *Directory* gives Thomas Orchard (Mrs) 'Farmer and Chairmaker'. In 1909 the entry is Orchard and Bray, 'Farmers and Chairmakers', and in 1911 Albert E. Bray, 'Chairmaker'. Albert Edward Bray, aged twenty-one, Cabinetmaker, married Honor, aged twenty, daughter of Thomas Orchard, in 1884.<sup>7</sup> Honor Bray was buried in Aldbourne in 1914, aged forty-nine, being at that time resident in Swindon.<sup>8</sup> In 1915 Kelly's *Directory* gives John Orchard, 'Chairmaker'. In 1915, Albert Bray died aged eighty-two at Roundway Hospital, Devizes, and in 1946 John Orchard was buried aged seventy-five.<sup>9</sup> Only one other chair maker has been traced in the Parish records — Henry William Westall, who married in 1909. Eric Barrett, who died in 1995, was the last man alive known to have worked in the factory. No catalogues or business documents relating to the factory have been traced. An interesting article published in *The Country Home* in 1909 gives a detailed account of the working methods employed, supported by a number of illustrations.<sup>10</sup> One of these (Figure 1) shows a row of finished chairs of various patterns, standing outside the thatched barn which was the factory. Clearly most of these chairs are modelled closely on contemporary types made in the Chilterns and Thames Valley. Although there are chair makers named Orchard recorded in Bath and in Bristol in the early nineteenth century, it seems likely on stylistic grounds that Thomas Orchard of Aldbourne learnt his craft in the Thames Valley.<sup>11</sup>



1. A row of completed chairs awaiting staining, standing outside the factory at Aldbourne

Figures 2 to 7 are all chairs photographed in Aldbourne in 1996. Figure 2 is a typical scrollback chair. It retains much of its original reddish stain and varnish finish.<sup>12</sup> The article in *The Country Home* begins, '... The wooden Windsor chair is a familiar enough object to most of us, and when stained to produce a poor imitation of mahogany may not be very attractive, but it has points of elegance ...', an interesting revelation of contemporary attitudes to regional furniture. The article continues with an account of working methods similar to those recorded elsewhere, with two exceptions. The first is an ingenious system of pegs and wedges on the workbench by which the legs were held to be bored for the stretchers. The second is the finishing of the yoke rail: '... This is slightly bowed, and shaped on an ordinary lathe, each end being dealt with separately and turned on a single headstock, while the other, which is at a slight angle to it, makes a larger circle as it revolves freely ...'. This appears a somewhat clumsy and dangerous method of working. The result as seen in Figure 2, however, leaves nothing to be desired. The pattern of the turnery is almost identical with that of Stephen Hazell of Oxford.<sup>13</sup> Figure 3 shows a substantial lathback armchair with double 'H' stretchers. This is of beech with an elm seat and arms of ash. The *Country Home* article includes a photograph of an elm plank being sawn out for the backs, but this is not borne out by observed specimens. Armchairs are described as being '... very comfortable and can be bought for 10s. 6d. (52.5p) each retail ...'. The arms of this chair are thicker than usual on such chairs. From Figure 1 it can be seen that these armchairs were also made with a single 'H' stretcher, and some had downward-curving arms. The pattern of the legs on this chair is a variant from the normal High Wycombe type. Figure 4 is an unusual version of the Gothic spindle scrollback armchair.<sup>14</sup> The lower framing is standard except for the additional rings on the centre stretcher. The ogee arches in the back and the turned spindles are highly individual, as is the use of a plain narrow cross splat without the usual reversed arches. The arm supports are of a style more akin to some West Country Windsors, while the arms themselves seem unnecessarily heavy. Although the individual parts are well-made, the whole does not seem to belong to any standard production pattern. The belief of its owner, a granddaughter of John Orchard, that it was especially made for the family, bears out this impression.



2. Scrollback Windsor chair from Aldbourne. Beech with elm seat, retaining most of its original stain and varnish

*Courtesy of Mr and Mrs W. J. Palmer*

3. Lathback armchair with double 'H' stretcher. Beech with elm seat

*Courtesy of Mrs E. Brown*

4. Gothic spindle scrollback armchair from Aldbourne. Beech with elm seat. The seat has split across the centre. The end of one of the battens used to repair it underneath can just be seen

*Courtesy of Miss C. M. Liddiard*

Figures 5, 6 and 7 are all children's chairs. Figure 5 is a primitive example with minimal turnery, the arm bow a single piece of bent ash. It may well have been made by one of the workers for his own children. Figure 6 is a more sophisticated version with round seat, the arm bow formed of two pieces of sawn beech dowelled together at the back. The simulated bamboo legs and arm supports may be compared with the children's chairs in a 1920 catalogue by Wm Brear & Sons, of Addingham, Yorkshire. The proportions, however, are very different.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 7 is one of four still in use in Aldbourne Church and identical with those in Figure 1. It has three-ringed turned legs with a box stretcher and six turned spindles supporting an arm bow in two parts of sawn beech. The *Country Home* article states '... The little armchairs seen at the extreme edge of the picture are intended for small children, and recently a number have been made for the county council schools. These chairs look exceedingly pretty and would cost retail no more than 3s. 6d. (17.5p) each ...'. The catalogue of Wm Brear & Sons states that such chairs '... are supplied in hundreds to the Council schools and highly recommended by His Majesty's Inspectors for hygiene purposes ...'. They are priced in 1920 at 30s. (£1.50) per dozen.<sup>16</sup> The Aldbourne chairs have seats 11 in. (279 mm) high and the total height is 22 in. (558 mm). For a small child the arm bow would be unnaturally high for comfort and was probably intended to confine the child in its place. There are no accounts for furniture in the Wiltshire County Education Committee Treasurer's files.<sup>17</sup> The quantity supplied from Aldbourne cannot be determined, but the pattern does not appear to have been recorded from any other chair-making centre in the south of England. Chairs of this type have been reported still in use in 1965 at a primary school in Aldershot, Hampshire.<sup>18</sup>

At the Aldbourne factory it is said that one hundred chairs per week were being made, and that it employed forty men.<sup>19</sup> It seems likely that this figure may include farm workers. Some of the work took place in the old fustian factory opposite. It is related that deliveries, including shavings for firelighting, always took place on Saturdays when the farm wagons and horses could best be spared.<sup>20</sup> The price of a set of chairs was £1 os. od., and when given as a wedding present also included a low nursing chair and a small stool. Some of the stools can be seen at the front in Figure 1. Initially yew wood and cherry are said to have been used, but this was soon discontinued. No examples in these timbers attributable to Aldbourne have been seen. The original caption to Figure 1 reads '... The birch logs shown at the back are those which are cut up for making the legs and rungs ...'. Some of the chairs illustrated in this article may be partially made of birch. The wood was turned green and stacked to season under an open shed. All the timber used is likely to have been procured locally. There is a large tract of woodland south of Aldbourne, and Savernake Forest which is principally oak and beech. Orchard himself is said to have walked the woods selecting his own timber. Elm for the seats came from Aldbourne Chase. The Parish Registers and Census Returns record numbers of Aldbourne men who were woodmen. It has been suggested that the presence of a sawpit in Castle Street was a contributory factor in the founding of the business. At that time many farms had their own sawpits for use by itinerant sawyers as occasion demanded.<sup>21</sup> The existence of one in Castle Street may have been a convenience, but not significant in the establishment of the factory. The



5. Primitive child's chair. Beech with elm seat, the arm bow a single piece of bent ash. The right-hand front leg in the photograph is a replacement in another timber

*Courtesy of Mrs E. Brown*

6. Child's armchair with round seat and simulated bamboo turnings. Elm seat, the rest in beech, the arm in two parts dowelled together

*Courtesy of Mrs E. Brown*

7. Child's armchair from St Michael's Church, Aldbourne. Beech with elm seat. Of a total of twelve chairs of this pattern seen, eight had box stretchers and four 'H' stretchers

*Courtesy of the Parochial Church Council*

fact that Thomas Orchard was until 1871 described variously as cabinet maker or chair maker suggests that he may not have served any formal apprenticeship in the Windsor chair-making trade. There is a story related of Thomas Orchard that on one occasion he walked to Swindon carrying a set of six chairs on his back. It is likely that the foundation and success of the business depended on a ready supply of suitable timber and an expanding market in a nearby town. From the records it appears that after the death of Thomas Orchard his widow carried on the business assisted, and eventually succeeded by, her son-in-law Albert Bray. It was evidently flourishing in 1909 when the article was published in *The Country Home*. According to Kelly's *Directory*, in 1915 the proprietor was John Orchard, presumably the youngest son of Thomas. After the fire in 1921 production is said to have continued, employing twelve men, until the closure in 1927. It has been suggested that this was entirely due to competition from the machine-made output of High Wycombe.<sup>22</sup> It is likely that changing fashions were also responsible.

In the whole context of Windsor chair-making such a small centre seems relatively unimportant. Its most significant contribution may have been the children's chairs. It is a reminder that even at the time when the High Wycombe industry was at its most prolific there was still room for a local factory to flourish.

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#### REFERENCES

1. cf. Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1979, pp. 448–54.
2. Ida Gandy, *The Heart of the Village*, Moonrakers Press, 1975. Maurice A. Crane, *The Aldbourne Chronicle*, 1980, published by the author.
3. Census Returns, Wiltshire County Record Office, Trowbridge.
4. Aldbourne Parish Registers. Originals and microfiche in WCRO. The Thomas Orchard described as woodman in the 1851 census was another of the same name, born 1827, died 1902.
5. Parish Register, WCRO.
6. Parish Register, WCRO.
7. 24th Dec. 1884 Albert Edward Bray 21, Cabinetmaker, son of Jesse Bray, Innkeeper, married Honor Orchard, 20, daughter of Thomas Orchard, Chairmaker. Parish Register, WCRO.
8. Although given as resident in Swindon it is possible this refers to her death in hospital there.
9. Parish Registers WCRO. Roundway Hospital was the County Mental Institution. How long he had been there has not been established.
10. 'A Wiltshire Village Industry', by 'Ragged Robin', article in Vol. iv (December 1909) of *The Country Home*, published for the proprietors by the Sphere & Tatler Ltd.
11. 1819–24 Orchard & Sons, 46 Margaret's Buildings, Bath. 1820 William Orchard, Chairmaker, 40 Wellington Street, Bristol. Geoffrey Beard and Christopher Gilbert, *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, Furniture History Society/W. S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1986. For Thames Valley styles of Windsor chairs, see Bernard D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1990, pp. 32–99.
12. Maurice Crane gives the names of Fred Hale and William Hawkins as polishers.

13. Cotton, op. cit., Fig. TV209, p. 95. cf. also TV181, p. 85 by J. Aldridge of High Wycombe.
14. Illustration on p. 104, *The English Country Chair* by Ivan Sparkes, Spurbooks Ltd, 1973. See also Cotton, op. cit., TV53, p. 57.
15. Cotton, op. cit., NE421, p. 209.
16. Cotton, as above.
17. WCRO.
18. Information from a former Head Teacher.
19. Statements in this and the following paragraphs are taken from Ida Gandy and Maurice A. Crane, and from an article by Alfred Williams in the *Wiltshire Times*, October 1927. Most of this information appears to have been taken from oral sources and can no longer be verified.
20. Ivan Sparkes, op. cit., p. 29.
21. There is a very circumstantial account of this practice in the opening chapters of a biography of David Davies of Llandinam, who started his working life as a sawyer. Ivor Thomas, *Top Sawyer*, Longmans, 1938. The later career of David Davies is mentioned briefly in *Furniture History* Vol. XXXI, 1995, p. 217.
22. Even in 1927 the High Wycombe industry was not fully mechanised. Sir Lawrence Weaver wrote in 1929 of chair legs being brought in in their tens of thousands from the bodgers in the woods. Sir Lawrence Weaver, *High Wycombe Furniture*, Fanfare Press, 1929.