

WONDERFUL WALKER: PORTRAIT OF AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CUMBRIAN FURNITURE MAKER

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An article entitled 'Eskdale Chairs' in the last number of *Regional Furniture* identified a hitherto little-known nineteenth century tradition of chairmaking in the remote Cumbrian Dales. In this, Robert Walker (1709-1802)¹ was briefly introduced as the maker of a significant high-backed armchair which was of importance in the development of the Eskdale tradition. This present article examines in more detail the career and furniture of this resourceful Cumbrian. Very little northern English vernacular furniture made in the eighteenth century can be traced to its maker, but because the Reverend Robert Walker was such a celebrated figure, fortunately some of his furniture has been preserved as a commemoration to the man. Walker's furniture also forges a vital link between the eighteenth and nineteenth century furniture traditions of the area. Clearly, the prototype 'bobbin chair' said to have been made by Robert Walker and donated by his descendant to Keswick Museum,² did, as was argued in the above mentioned article, strongly influence the design of Eskdale chairs in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Before examining furniture made by Walker. It may be of interest to record something about the Cumbrian cleric who was celebrated by William Wordsworth in his Duddon Sonnets as

. . . A Pastor such as Chaucer's verse portrays;
Such as the heaven-taught skill of Herbert drew;
And tender Goldsmith crowned with deathless praise!³

Robert Walker was the twelfth child of Nicholas Walker, a yeoman farmer, and his wife Agnes. He was born at Under-cragge near Seathwaite, five miles away from Eskdale, on the twenty-first of February 1709-10. Because he was a sickly child his parents decided to 'breed him a scholar'. Robert Walker attended Ulpha school where he was taught by Mr. Parker, the curate of Eskdale. As a young man Walker became a schoolmaster first at Gosforth in Cumberland, where he taught village children for three years, before moving to Buttermere as a 'reader', a man not yet in holy orders. His income was then only about one pound a year.⁴ Because it was a very small and poor parish, he had no parsonage and was supported by his parishioners who each pledged to supply him with fuel, grazing for his geese, a flax shirt, and to give him board and lodgings for a fortnight.⁵ In his spare time, he began to prepare himself for the ministry, and was taught classics by a 'gentleman' who was probably Henry Forest, the curate of Loweswater.⁶ He eventually took holy orders and in 1735 he returned as curate to his birth place, Seathwaite, in the Duddon valley, where despite being offered other



1. Walker House, Seathwaite, home of Rev. Robert Walker 1735-1802



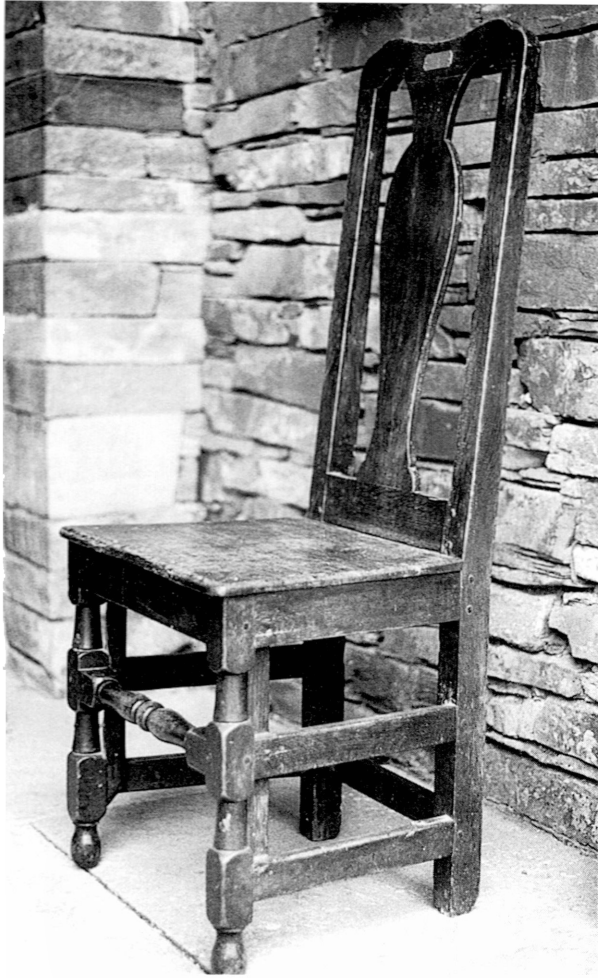
2. The building which housed Rev Robert Walker's original turning shop at Seathwaite

appointments he remained until his death in his ninety-third year in 1802. His stipend was only five pounds per annum, but his new appointment included the use of a cottage. This enabled him to marry Ann, a domestic servant whose '... serious and modest deportment, and ... virtuous disposition ... made her a perfect match'.⁷

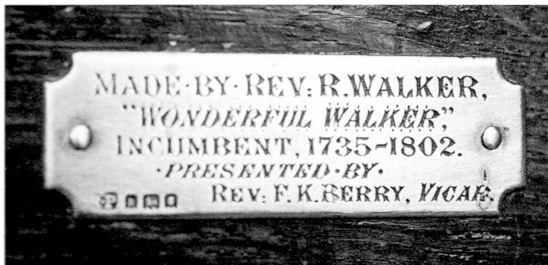
Robert Walker was not only a pious clergyman, but also an energetic and tireless worker who became a legend in Cumberland and earned himself the title of 'Wonderful Walker'. His skills were all embracing and his occupations in order to increase his modest stipend to support his numerous children were many and varied. They included: sheep rearing and shearing; farming; spinning; and weaving. He also made his family's clothes, cured leather from his own cattle and made clogs. Nor did he neglect his parishioner's welfare; he acted as scrivener, wrote their letters, settled their bills; and made their wills with it was said 'pecuniary gain to himself, and to the great benefit of his employers'.⁸ Walker was clearly a shrewd businessman. Another source of income was the payment of one half-penny to Walker for every net cast by the fishermen of Crummock Water, whatever the size of their catch. This was levied as payment for his introduction of the draught net.⁹ In common with other clergymen who worked in small dales communities during the eighteenth century, on weekdays he taught the village children by rote for eight hours in Seathwaite Chapel. The childrens' parents paid him according to their means. Somewhat incongruously, since it seems that both he and his equally saintly and hard-working wife Ann neither drank alcohol nor even tea, he brewed his own ale and opened his rectory as an alehouse. He charged three pence a pint to his 'jug and bottle' customers, and four pence to those who drank on the premises: the logic being to regulate or modify their drinking in the rectory. The Reverend Robert Walker had at least ten children, three boys and seven girls, two dying in childhood. Zaccheus, his eldest son, was apprenticed to a tanner, Mosses, his second son's trade is unknown. William Tyson, his youngest son, also entered the church and eventually became the curate of Ulverston.¹⁰ Robert Walker taught his children his skills from infancy, and on his death in 1802, due to his and his family's frugal life style, tireless energy, money-making ventures and a gradually increasing stipend which rose to fifty pounds per annum, he left the large sum of two thousand pounds.¹¹

WALKER'S FURNITURE

Robert Walker is reputed to have made his own 'simple but durable furniture needed for the home' after he settled in Seathwaite in 1735.¹² How he acquired these skills is unknown, but since he lodged with his parishioners in turn before he returned to Seathwaite he may have learned from one of his flock who was a wood turner. Neither do we know if he also made furniture for others, but since he had a turner's workshop he may have added this activity as yet another profitable side-line. Walker's workshop is situated about fifty yards from Seathwaite church and is now used as a garage (Fig. 2). Walker built himself a study on the roof of his cottage which he slated himself, and fitted up with shelves for his books, and storage areas for his clothes and the cloth he had woven.¹³ Unfortunately there is no sign of the shelves or fittings made by Walker today. However, several pieces of furniture made by the curate in addition to the 'bobbin chair' at Keswick Museum have survived and been traced in the neighbourhood.



3. Vase back chair made by Rev. Robert Walker
Ecclesiastical Collection



4. Inscribed silverplate on chair illustrated above
Ecclesiastical Collection



5. Detail of the front legs and stretcher of chair shown in figure 3.
The wooden support behind the front legs is a later repair
Ecclesiastical Collection

TWO VASE-BACK CHAIRS

Two hybrid chairs of very similar design and construction are illustrated in figs. 3 and 6. The first chair, illustrated in fig. 3, is of special interest since it has a silver plate engraved 'Made by Rev. R. Walker "Wonderful Walker" presented by Rev. F. K. Berry Vicar (Fig. 4). The second vase-back chair illustrated in fig. 6, is clearly by the same maker. They both remain within three miles of each other in the Duddon valley where they were made. Both chairs have similar vase shaped splat backs and wooden seats, with one slat-like back stretcher, two slat-like side stretchers and one square section front stretcher most of which has been turned except for the ends which have tenon and mortise joints and are pegged into the front legs, as can be seen in figs. 5 and 7. The front legs on both chairs are partially turned with square sections into which the stretchers are joined. They terminate in a form of elongated bun foot which is more pronounced on the chair illustrated in fig. 3. The general style of chair from the seat down is similar to chairs made in south Lancashire and Cheshire during the late seventeenth century. However, the carved backs of south Lancashire chairs follow a vernacular tradition, having semi-circular shaped tops and pyramidal finials on the stiles (Fig. 8) whereas the Walker chair backs are an attempt to copy fashionable furniture.¹⁴ The turned front legs sometimes described as 'William and Mary', were old fashioned when Walker made the chairs probably about 1740–1760. Similar but not identical legs and slat stretchers appear on a joined armchair made in Huntington, Long Island, New York, about the same period, c. 1730–1750.¹⁵ Interestingly, the Long Island chair also



6. Vase back chair similar to the Walker chair in figure 3
Ecclesiastical Collection



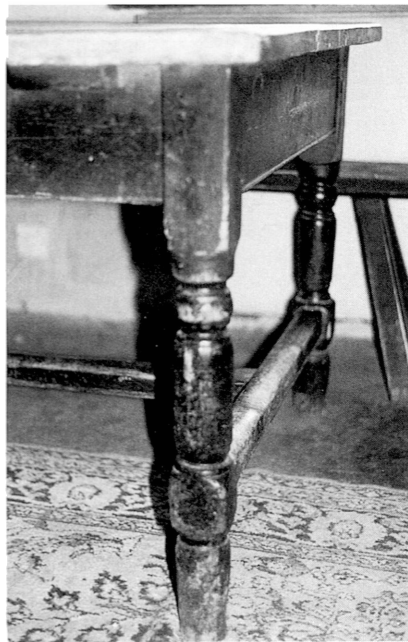
7. Detail of the chair illustrated above
Ecclesiastical Collection



8. South Lancashire or Cheshire backstool. The Walker vase back chairs, up to the seat level, are similar in design and construction
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9. Table from Walker House; probably the one described by a visitor in 1754
Private Collection



10. Detail of the table leg shown in figure 9. Note the similar
ball turning on the chair stretchers in figures 3 and 5
Private Collection

has a similar curved arm shape to that on Walker's 'bobbin' chair. It may be possible that these features were introduced by Cumbrians (particularly Quakers) many of whom emigrated to, or traded with, America from the late seventeenth century. The front stretchers on both vase-back Cumbrian chairs are turned in a very similar style to those on the Eskdale chairs illustrated in figs. 1, 4 and 5 of the 1995 *Regional Furniture* article which were made in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Although crude, both the backs demonstrate that their maker had a rudimentary knowledge of fashionable splat design. The Reverend Walker was a friend of Lord Muncaster so he may have seen fashionable walnut or early mahogany chairs in nearby Muncaster Castle.¹⁷ The cabriole leg which would have appeared on a fashionable vase-back chair at this period was both wasteful in wood, and of course difficult, if not possible, for a country turner like Walker to copy, even if he wished too. Turned legs and sturdy stretchers were also more serviceable for use on Westmorland slate floors. An attempt to create a better finish has been made on the chair in fig. 7, by addition of a groove on the seat edge and rail made by a scratch-tool. Such chairs may have been drawn up to Walker's table in his rectory now called 'Walker House' which is illustrated in fig. 1.

THE TABLE FROM WALKER HOUSE

The table illustrated in fig. 9, was bought at an auction sale some years ago from 'Walker House', and is now in another house in the area, which affords a similar setting to the curate's house. After the sale some Duddon residents expressed relief to its purchaser that the table had not been taken far from the valley. Local tradition also maintains that Robert Walker's wife Ann, gave birth to his children on this table. An anonymous letter found in Seathwaite Register in 1760, written in Coniston on the twenty-sixth of July 1754 to an unknown gentleman, gives us a rare portrait of this unusual clergyman, his family, and a description of their morning activities centred around this table:

. . . Going into a clergyman's house (of whom I had frequently heard) I found him sitting at the head of a long square table, such as is commonly used in this country by the lower class of people, dressed in a coarse blue frock trimmed with black horn buttons, a checked shirt," a leathern strap about his neck for a stock, a coarse apron, and a pair of great wooden-soled shoes, plated with iron to preserve them (we call clogs in these parts) with a child upon his knee, eating his breakfast; his wife and the remainder of his children were some of them employed in waiting upon each other, the rest in teasing and spinning wool, at which trade he is a great proficient; and moreover when it is ready for sale, will lay it, by sixteen or thirty-two pounds weight, upon his back, and on foot, seven or eight miles, will carry it to the market, even in the depth of winter.¹⁸

The description of the table as '. . . a long square table, such as is commonly used in this country by the lower class of people . . .' is especially interesting, since it gives us a rare description (however lacking in detail) of a typical Cumbrian table of the mid-eighteenth century. If it is the table illustrated in figure 5 then it may help to date other Cumbrian farmhouse tables.

Another description of Walker's generosity refers to the free Sunday lunches which took place at the same table after the service:

'Every Sunday, were served, upon the long table, at which he has been described



11. Chest, probably late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, with three panels later carved with the inscription 'Robert-Walker-Seathwaite'

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sitting with a child upon his knee, messes of broth, for the refreshment of those of his congregation who came from a long distance, and usually took up their seats as part of his own household."⁹

The long table measures seven feet by three feet. It has turned legs with side stretchers united by a central stretcher of square section. Perhaps this is what the anonymous writer meant by '... a long square table'? The knobs on the two drawers are probably replacements. The table top is supported on three brackets along each long side, one of which can be seen in fig. 10. The use of a ball-like turning on the legs combined with a square section into which the stretchers are joined is similar to turning on the front stretchers on both the vase-back chairs (Figs. 3 & 6). These features, together with its provenance, suggests that the table was probably made in the same workshop as the vase-back chairs.

ROBERT WALKER'S CHEST AND OTHER FURNITURE

The chest in Dove Cottage, Wordsworth Trust Museum, Grasmere, was once owned by Walker, and is carved 'Robert Walker Seathwaite'. One word appears in each of the three carved panels. The chest itself which has crude blacksmith-made hinges, was probably made in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and the carved lunettes appear to date from that period. The three carved panels have crossed swords, crossed keys, and crossed pikes as the major devices surrounded by other tools and



12. Two bobbin chairs comparable with the Robert Walker example now in Keswick Museum
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emblems. They are in shallow relief and appear to be by another later hand, which may or may not have been Walker's.

Seathwaite Chapel, where Walker taught the village children, also apparently contained furniture made by the curate. Unfortunately Walker's chapel was demolished during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and replaced by the present church in the 1880s. Robert Walker used the old chapel as his schoolroom. The altar formed his desk, whilst the children occupied the area inside the altar rails, beside him was a crib which he is said to have made.²⁰ The crib was normally occupied by one of his children, eight of whom were baptised in the chapel between 1736 and 1751.²¹ Unfortunately the

crib does not appear to have survived. As he listened to the children reciting their lessons, the Reverend Walker spun linen thread on a small spinning wheel. He also had a larger wheel which he used in the evening for spinning wool partly to give him more exercise '... the spinner stepping to and fro. Thus was the wheel constantly in readiness to prevent the waste of a moment's time'.²² Presumably Walker also made these wheels in his turners shop.

TWO BOBBIN CHAIRS

Finally, both the 'bobbin chairs' illustrated in fig. 12 were sold recently in a Cumbrian saleroom by the same vendor and are very similar to the chair in Keswick Museum made by Walker. The ball-turned back supports, front legs, and two rows of ball-turned front stretchers, can also be seen on the Keswick Museum example. Both chairs appear to have had rockers added later, and would therefore have looked, originally, even more like the Keswick Museum Walker chair. The left hand chair has a later wooden seat but was at one time rush seated. Both chairs are smaller than the Keswick Museum example and are broader in general proportion with lower backs. However, the chair on the left hand side has two groups of three finely turned balls in its back instead of the five on the Keswick example (Fig. 6 in 'Eskdale Chairs'), yet the right hand chair has a group of four spindles. All these variations suggest that Walker (or his circle) adapted the basic design to suit the needs or pocket of his customers, just as the Brocklebanks of Eskdale were known to do in the nineteenth century. It is also interesting to note, given the strong resemblance between these bobbin chairs and those produced by the Brocklebanks in the nineteenth century, that Walker had family connections with Eskdale. In his youth he spent some time with his sister Agnes and her husband Edward Tyson, at Borrowdale Place, a farm three miles from the site of the chair work shop which the Brocklebanks were to occupy over a century later.²³ Furthermore, his great-nephew (Agnes's grandson) the Reverend Edward Tyson, compiled his great-uncle's inventory of all his goods, chattels, and effects in September, 1802, and succeeded him as curate of Seathwaite. Edward Tyson would therefore have been familiar with all his great-uncle's furniture as no doubt would others in Eskdale, and when the Brocklebanks moved to the area some fifty years later some of his furniture would still have been in the locality for their inspection, just as they are today.²⁴

WOOD FINISHES AND COPPICE WOOD

Like the Keswick bobbin chair both chairs in fig. 12 are painted or stained black, in common with several Eskdale chairs. Whether this was their original finish or was added during the nineteenth century is difficult to determine. The vase-back chairs both show copious traces of some sort of dark stain, or paint. All these chairs appear to be made of cherry and oak or ash.

Although the higher fells are bare except for a few mountain ash, the valley near Seathwaite where Walker lived was wooded (and coppiced) with a variety of trees including ash. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century there was a dispute between the Lord of the Manor of Dunnerdale-with-Seathwaite and his tenants concerning the rights of the later to cut coppice wood for their own use. Finally in 1731 it was agreed that tenants should purchase the wood, but that a proportion of the purchase money

should be used for the benefit of tenants for a 'pious or charitable purpose' which it was decided should be the acquisition of religious books. The tenants must have purchased a great deal of coppice wood since a large sum was raised and put to interest but the person in charge of the money became bankrupt and only one hundred and forty pounds was recovered.²⁵ Not surprisingly the Reverend Walker was put in charge of the religious book fund and he mentions the fund in his will and ordered his executors to increase the sum from eleven pounds to thirty pounds from his estate.²⁶ Since his workshop was adjacent to these coppices (see Fig. 2), and given his association with the charity which was dependent on the sale of this wood, the resourceful Walker must surely have used these native woods for his furniture.

CONCLUSION

To summarise: the furniture made, or attributed to, the Reverend Robert Walker from c. 1735–1802, has certain interesting features which include; slat-like stretchers; these are similar to the horizontal members of the chair backs illustrated in fig. 7 and the Keswick Museum Walker 'bobbin chair' back (Fig. 6 in 'Eskdale Chairs'). The square section front legs which have been partially turned (Figs. 5 and 7), follow a common seventeenth or early eighteenth century furniture tradition. The chair legs in fig. 6 are also similar though not identical to the legs on the table from Walker House illustrated in fig. 10. If this '. . . long square table' was Walker's table then it is particularly interesting since it was apparently of a common type used in 1754; '. . . by the lower class of people . . .'. If so, was this style restricted only to the Furness area of Lancashire and the lakes (now Cumbria) we may ask, or was the design more widespread? Do other such tables appear in drawings or paintings of cottages and farmhouses of the mid-eighteenth century? More research is needed in order to explore the subject further. However, it appears that 'Wonderful Walker' has cast a long shadow; since some of his eighteenth century furniture influenced the design and manufacture of furniture produced in the Esk Valley in the nineteenth century.

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