

A COMMON CHAIR FROM WEST WALES

Luke Millar

The plain oak chair illustrated (Fig. 1) is one of a set of twelve which formed part of the refurnishing of Salem chapel, Maesteg, Glamorgan, in the 1890s. French polishing and moderate use have retained its original golden colour, and the joints are glued, without pegs. The marked taper of the front legs beneath the box stretchers is a common feature of South Wales vernacular chairs.

Beneath the seat of each chair, however, is a label 12 cm square (Fig. 2) printed in white on black, which reads:

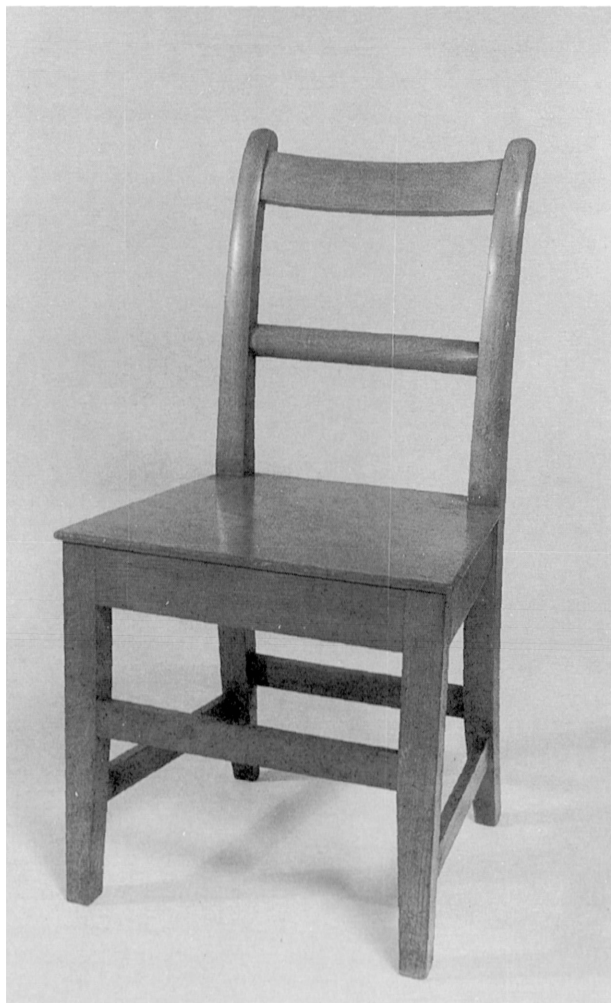
PHILIP WHEELER
(LATE T. WHEELER AND SON)
Cabinet maker, upholsterer and undertaker
HIGH STREET, NARBERTH
Hearse with glass sides on hire
suitable for one or a pair of Horses as required
CHARGES MODERATE. ESTABLISHED OVER 40 YRS.

Philip Wheeler is recorded in the *Directory of Cabinet, Furniture and Upholstery Trades* for 1886 as 'Thomas Wheeler in High Street, Narberth', and in 1899 as 'Philip Wheeler', so we have a close dating for the chair.

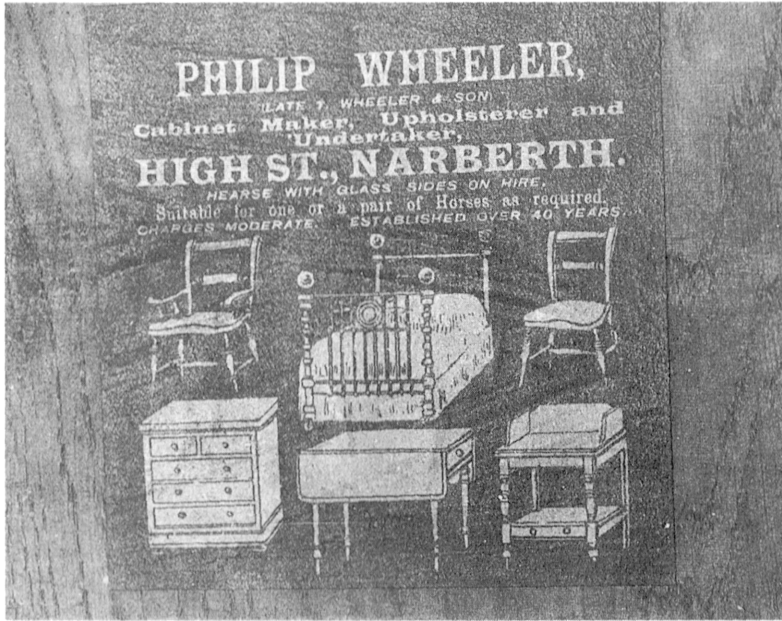
The text is followed by illustrations of pieces from Wheeler's stock-in-trade. As such it has much in common with local newspaper advertisements,¹ in that it is concerned to sell the other goods and services offered by the firm, in this case an undertaking service and a variety of pieces presumably bought in by Wheeler. Hence we have a brass bedstead, and two Windsor chairs probably of Thames Valley type² together with a washstand, chest-of-drawers, and Pembroke table, all probably made by the firm.

All the cabinet making and upholstery advertisements found in West Wales newspapers from 1810 to about 1860 (when they become rare) feature bought-in goods, notably carpets and soft furnishings. They thus represent retail establishments, making their own goods to a great extent, competing with London firms advertising in the same papers. Early advertisements were for high-style fashion, but the coming of the railways in the 1850s and 1860s, together with rising prosperity after the agricultural slumps of the 1830s and 1840s, seems to have led to the infiltration of mass-produced cheap fashionable goods into rural areas. Hence, no doubt, the common occurrence of chairs by J. Reilly³ of Manchester in Vale of Glamorgan farms, and in 1859 the firm of P. & S. Beyfus of Finsbury Terrace, City Road, London E.C. advertised 'Furniture carriage-paid to any railroad station',⁴ together with a 'Complete Furnishing Guide' illustrated with 300 engravings of pieces 'suited to all classes of Society', forwarded 'gratis and post free'.

The illustrated label under the seat of the Wheeler chair can be seen as his attempt to



1. Oak chair by Philip Wheeler, Narberth, Pembrokeshire



2. Label of Philip Wheeler, Narberth, pasted beneath seat of chair in Fig. 1

compete in the fashionable goods market. The chair itself is in sharp contrast to this, and represents a continuing vernacular tradition, still valued by some customers in preference to available cheap fashion items. It is well known that such preferences and loyalties preserved Welsh vernacular furniture-making well into the twentieth century.

REFERENCES

1. *Carmarthen Journal* from 1810, and *The Welshman* from 1832.
2. For example, Fig. TV 187, *The English Regional Chair*, B. D. Cotton, 1990. Craftsmen identified as 'chair-makers' occur in directories after 1850 in a number of S. Wales towns, including Pontypool, Usk, Newport, Abergavenny, Cardiff and Swansea. Apart from chairs by Baker, Pontypool, none have been attributed as yet, so the possibility that popular English types were copied locally cannot be ruled out.
3. Mentioned by L. Millar in RFS Newsletter No. 13, 1990, and given detailed coverage by Barbara Ferguson in her M.A. Dissertation; *James Reilly, Artisan to Entrepreneur, 1850-1913*, Salford University, 1992.
4. *Carmarthen Journal*, 27 May 1859.