

THE AMOS CATTON PATTERN BOOK

Christopher Gilbert

In August 1990 a sketchbook containing small, elegantly finished watercolour designs for chairs was purchased by Leeds Art Galleries from John Clay, antique dealer of London, for £1,500.¹ It had moved several times in the trade, but enquiries later revealed that about a year previously the volume had been offered to High Wycombe Chair Museum by a local person in whose family it had descended.² The collection of manuscript designs has happily now found a good home and the purpose of this short article is to bring it to the attention of furniture historians.

The leather-bound book measuring 5 inches by 9 inches has a brass clasp, and one of the marbled endpapers bears a small stationer's label: 'From|BUTLER AND Co|Bookseller &c|HIGH WYCOMBE'. The pages, watermarked 'J WHATMAN|1849' are interleaved with flimsy pink sheets and the first page is inscribed: 'Mr Amos Catton,|Chair Manufacturer,|High Wycombe,|Bucks.|Late Savage' (Fig. 1). There is a second identical title page just over half-way through the book. Amos Catton is recorded as a chairmaker with premises in Lane End, High Wycombe between 1864 and 1895; he evidently took over the business of J. Savage (listed as a chairmaker at Lane End in Kelly's *Dictionary* of 1847),³ sometime during the 1850s.

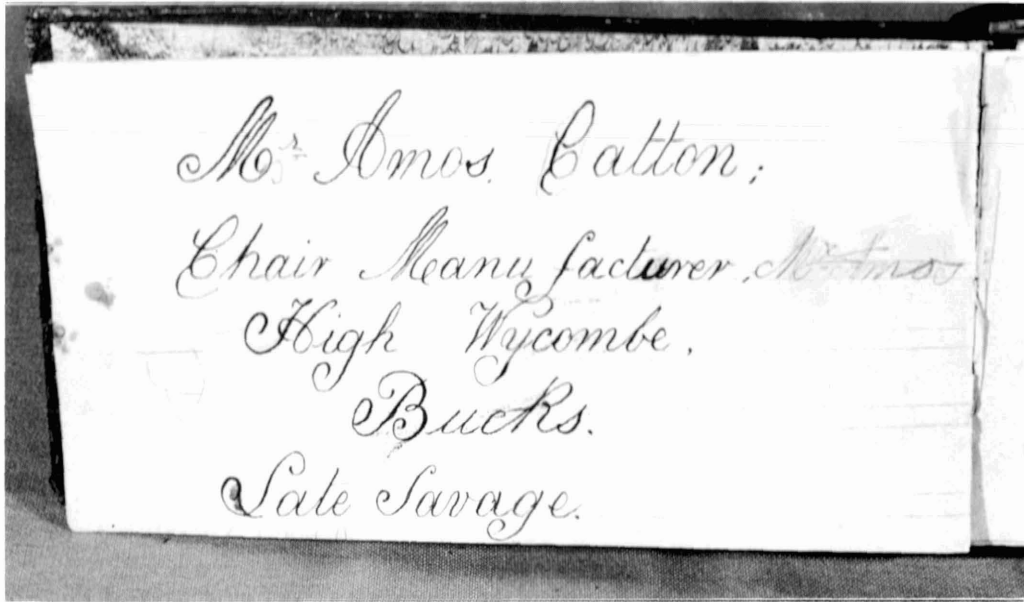
The book contains 66 leaves, three at the front are probably now missing, eleven have been left blank, the others bear, on recto only, a total of 139 numbered designs for chairs, mostly three to a page. The first 93 are executed in watercolour (Figs 2–9 and 12). The remaining 46, which follow the second title page, are drawn in pen and ink with a yellow wash to represent cane seats (Figs 10 and 11), apart from the last six coloured sketches which portray upholstered Elizabethan Revival chairs (Fig. 13). The collection is organised according to design types with, in order:

1. A group of stick- and wheel-back Windsors
2. Grecian and lathback Windsor types
3. Rush-seated fancy chairs
4. A wide range of cane-seated chairs
5. Fancy chairs with split willow seats
6. Folding or camp chairs
7. Round-backed smokers' and corner armchairs.

Part 2 is similarly arranged:

1. Wood-bottomed kitchen chairs
2. Cane-seated chairs (mostly balloon back)
3. Round-backed chairs
4. High-backed elaborately turned, carved and upholstered Elizabethan Revival chairs.

The manner in which the designs have been arranged is closely similar to the way that the earliest High Wycombe printed trade catalogues are ordered, such as Benjamin North, *Antique and Plain & Ornamental Modern Chairs* (c. 1865); Glenister and Gibbons, *Patterns of Cane, Windsor, Fancy and Other Chairs* (c. 1870) or William Collins & Son, *Cane and Fancy Chairs* (1872).⁴



1. Amos Catton: First title page

The full title of the latter reads:

WM. COLLINS & SON
Manufacturers
of all kinds of
CANE AND FANCY CHAIRS
In Birch, Cherry, Sycamore, Walnut, Oak and Mahogany Woods,
or in imitation of the above woods

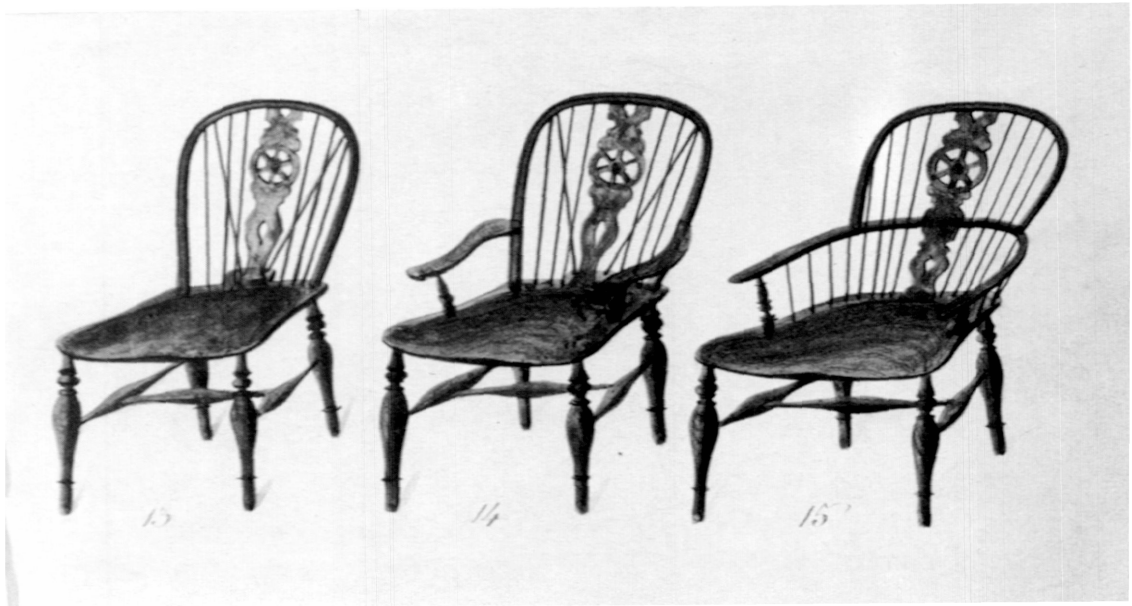
ALSO
Chairs Suitable for Churches, Public Halls, Hotels, Reading
Rooms, Lecture Halls, Railway Companies, &c
Windsor and Rush Chairs, Smoking and Easy Chairs

ROCKING AND FOLDING CHAIRS, &c

MERCHANTS' AND SHIPPING ORDERS EXECUTED WITH DESPATCH
DOWNLEY, HIGH WYCOMBE
Buckinghamshire, England

These catalogues and accompanying price lists (when they survive) provide a wealth of rewarding information about the trade names under which the bewildering variety of chairs in the Catton pattern book were marketed at the time. Relevant terms have been incorporated into the captions to Figures 2 to 12.

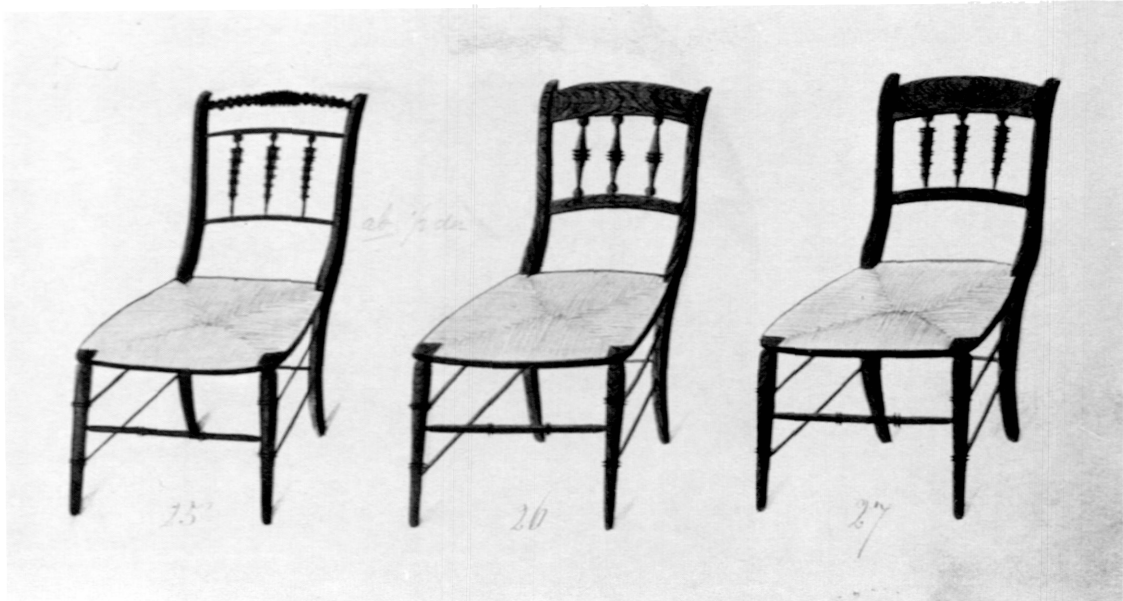
The High Wycombe Chair Museum owns a virtually identical mid nineteenth-century manuscript pattern book now in a modern library binding.⁵ It contains 148 leaves, one of



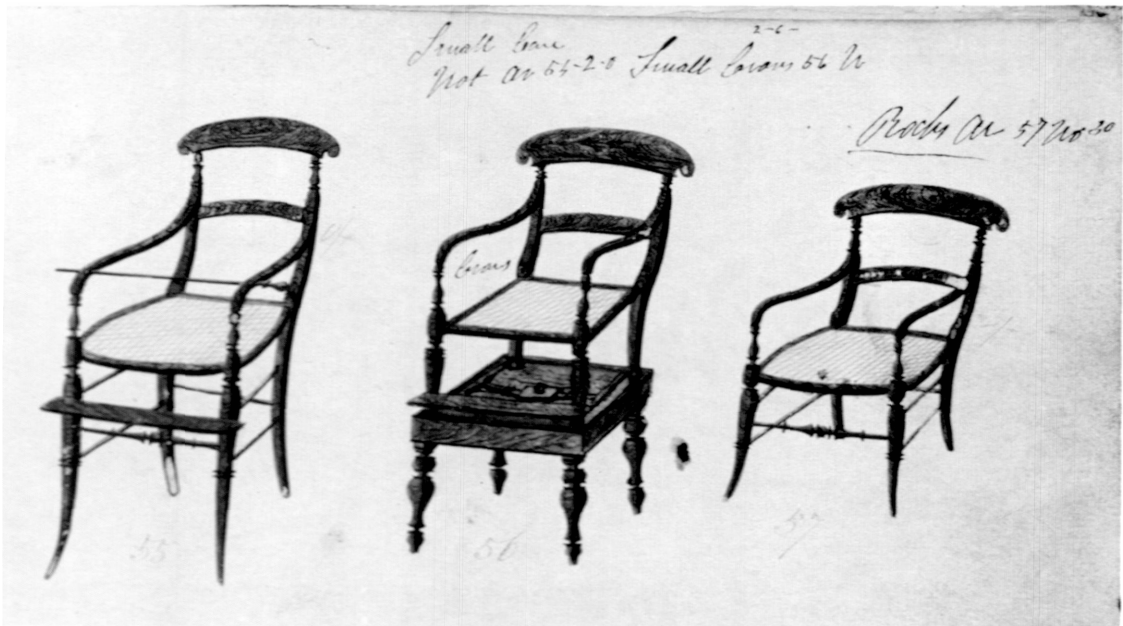
2. Amos Catton: Windsor chairs, watercolour, c. 1850



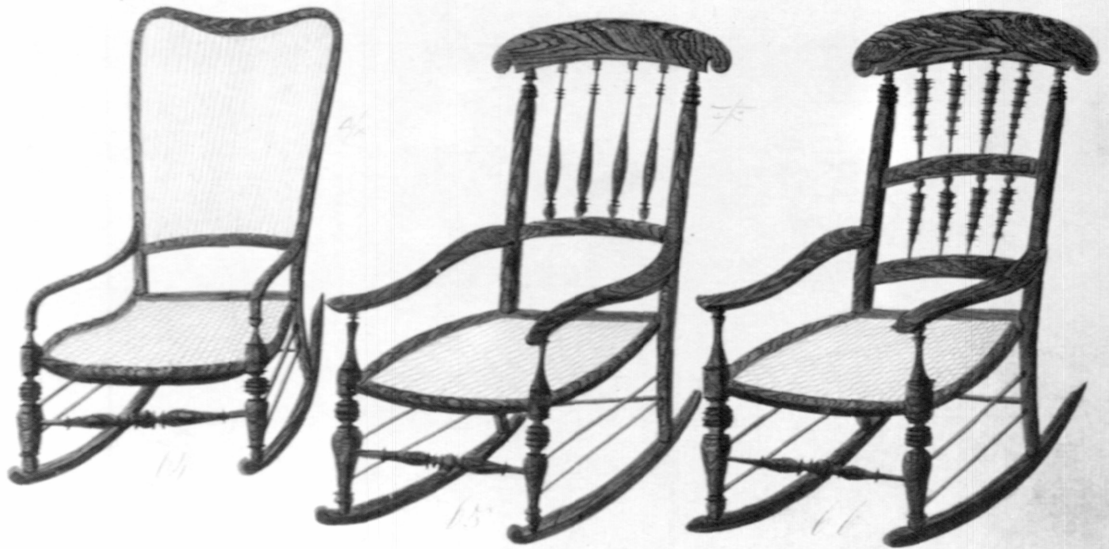
3. Amos Catton: Windsor and large kitchen armchairs, watercolour, c. 1850



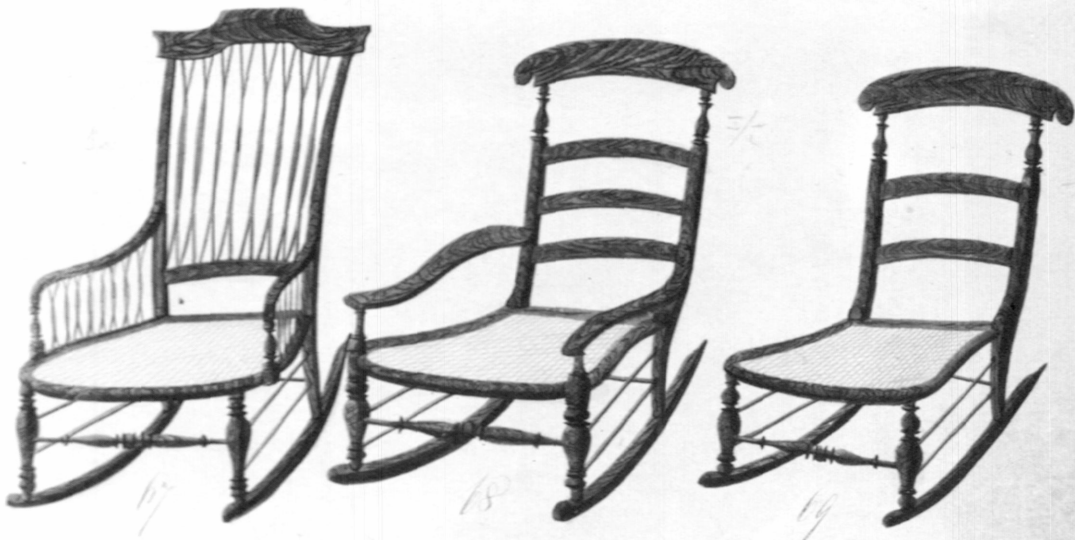
4. Amos Catton: Banister back rush-seat chairs, watercolour, c. 1850



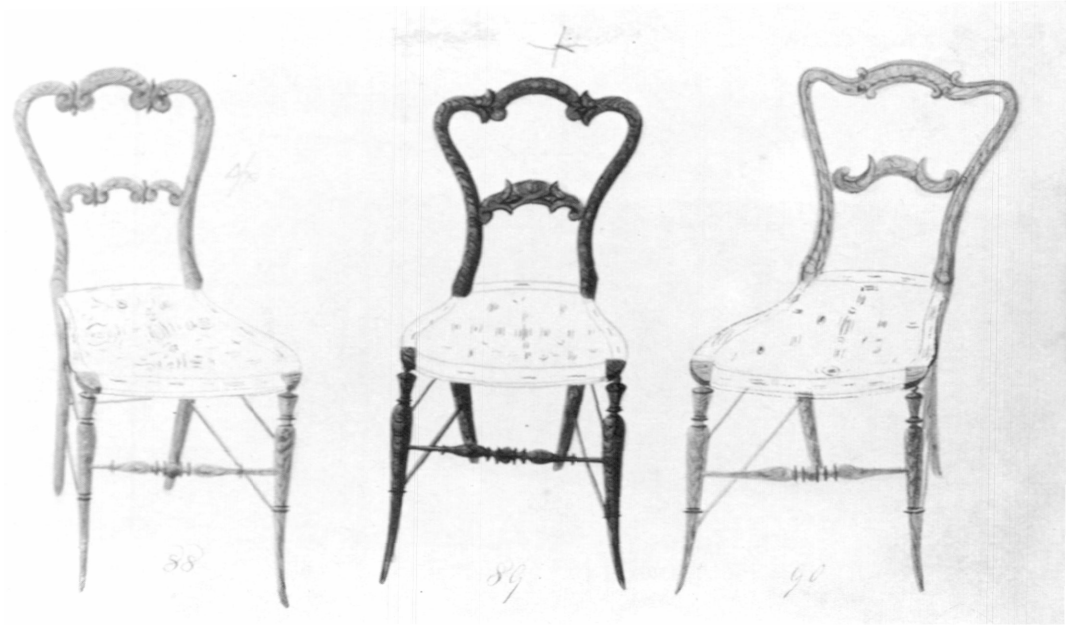
5. Amos Catton: Children's chairs (table chair, cane seat, screw-down table chair, low chair), watercolour, c. 1850



6. Amos Catton: Cane seat ladies' rocking chairs, watercolour, c. 1850



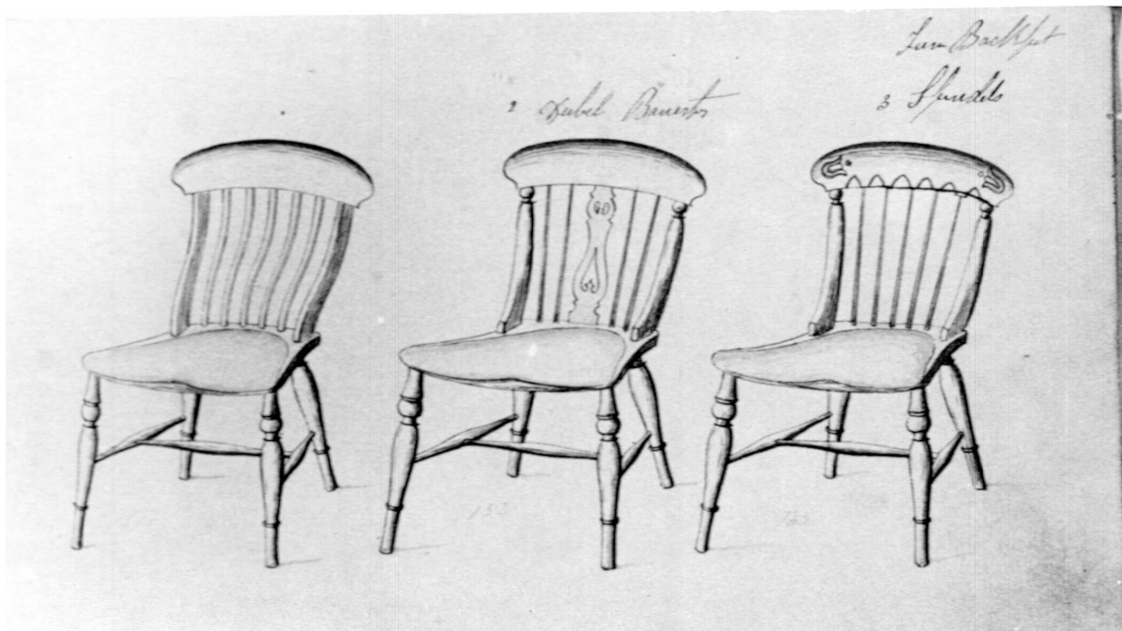
7. Amos Catton: Twisted or 'Swiss' back (left) and high back ladies' rocking chairs, watercolour, c. 1850



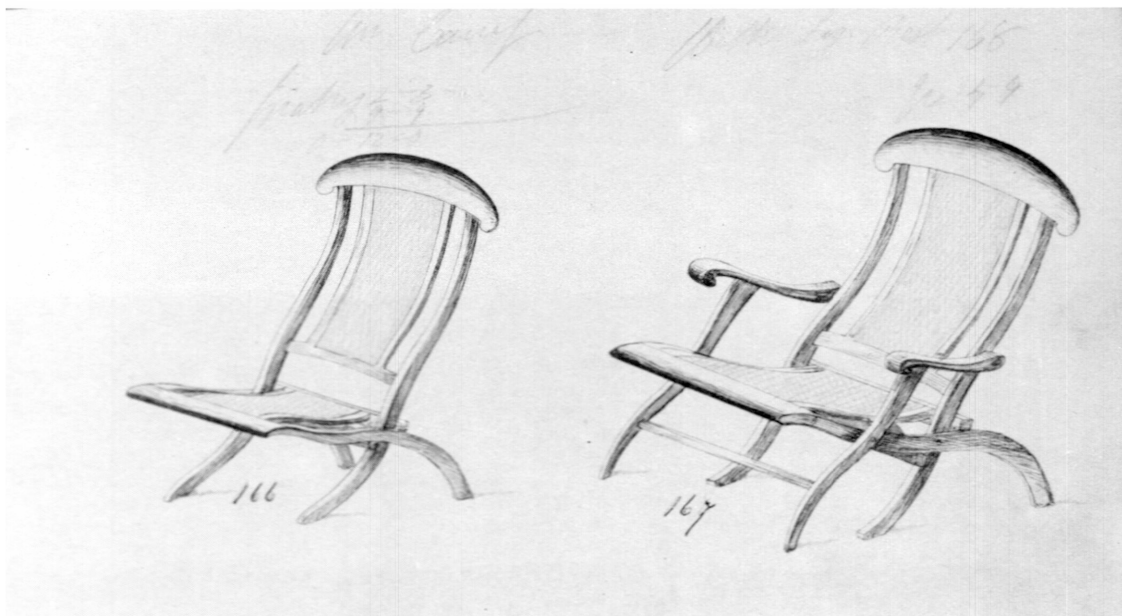
8. Amos Catton: Fancy-back willow seat chairs, watercolour, c. 1850



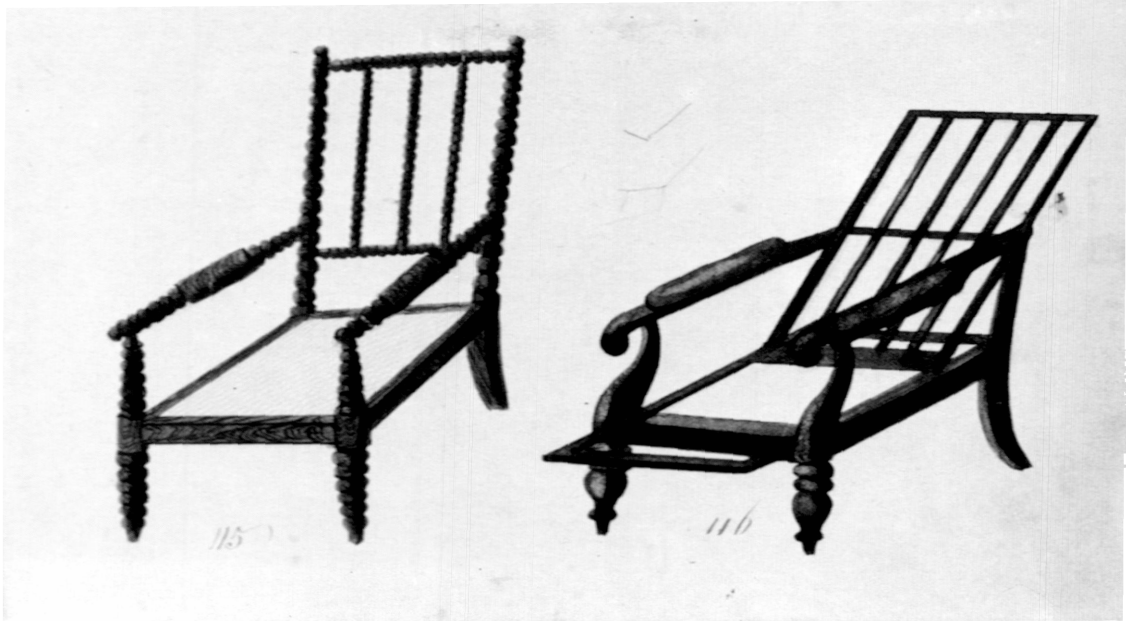
9. Amos Catton: Banister-back music chairs and a balloon-back shop chair, watercolour, c. 1850



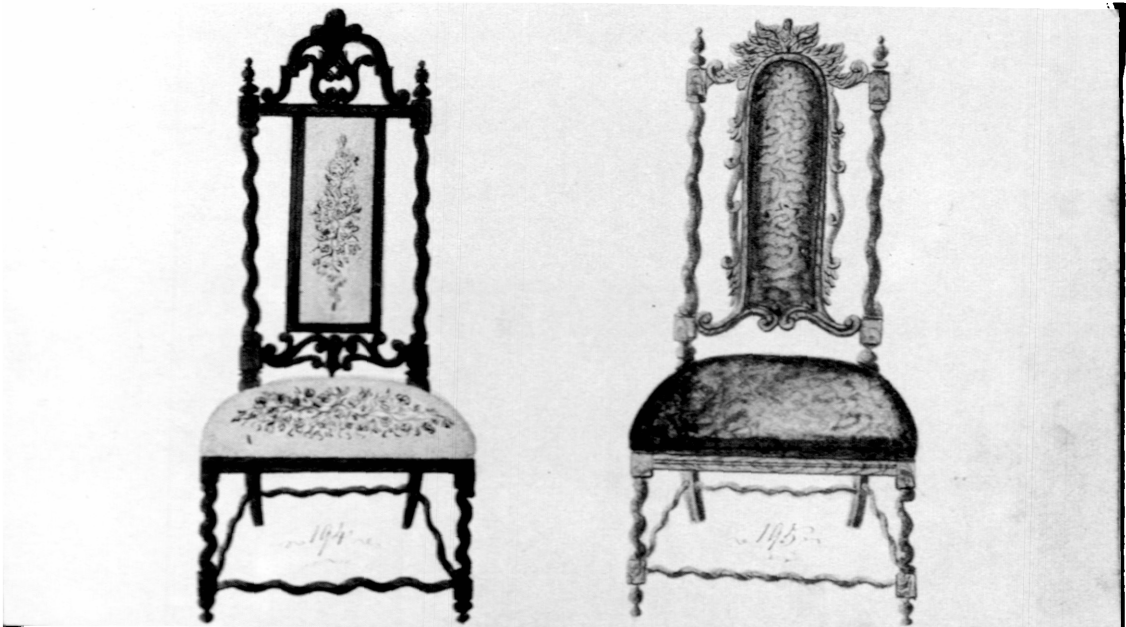
10. Amos Catton: Kitchen chairs, pen and ink, c. 1850



11. Amos Catton: Cane-back and seat folding chairs (lady's on left) or 'camp' chairs, pen and ink with yellow wash



12. Amos Catton: All ball easy chair (left), watercolour, c. 1850



13. Amos Catton: Elizabethan chairs, watercolour, c. 1850

which is inscribed 'Formerly the property of Walter Skull', a member of the great Wycombe dynasty of chair manufacturers. In the 1851 census, he was recorded as a 'chair traveller', aged 32. This volume contains over 150 numbered watercolour designs, of which thirty exactly correspond to models portrayed in the Amos Catton album, while a further fifteen exhibit only trifling differences. They are, in fact, so strikingly similar that both are almost certainly the work of the same professional artist. The Chair Museum also possesses twenty-two loose cards from a larger set, each bearing an attractive watercolour or pen and ink sketch of a chair.⁶ These designs appear to date from the 1840s rather than the 1850s. Scattered annotations, coded prices, jottings and the occasional name in the Skull and Catton albums such as: '1/2 doz Rosewood: 5 x 9/- 8/x 1 doz cane regular chair red', and others, visible in Figures 3 to 7 and 10 and 11, indicate the books were used by salesmen collecting orders.

L. J. Mayes in his classic *The History of Chairmaking in High Wycombe* (1960), describes how, in 1836, Benjamin North, at the age of 25, started to travel for Mr Randel of Thame and later Thomas Harris of West Wycombe⁷ with van loads of chairs for sale. In addition to selling the stock he carried, Benjamin North was required, on his provincial journeys, to take orders from retailers. A logical development of this kind of trading was to send out a traveller with an album illustrating various types of chair, rather than the actual chairs. It is reasonable with some confidence to assume that the set of cards bearing watercolour chair designs were produced for a salesman employed by an unidentified manufacturer, while the Catton and Skull volumes document a further development of this sales strategy. The pen and ink sketches in Part 2 of the Catton collection foreshadow the printed trade catalogue with numbered black and white illustrations issued by large firms from the 1860s onwards. Analysis of these sources reveals that High Wycombe chairmakers were producing an astonishingly wide range of traditional local patterns, the more conservative of which were still available as late as 1910.⁸ For instance the Catton and Skull sketchbooks of c. 1850 and the slightly later printed catalogues published by Benjamin North, William Collins & Son, and Glenister & Gibbons between c. 1860 and 1872, each record a repertoire of standard High Wycombe patterns; it would therefore be seriously misleading to view these collections as advertising a strongly individual house style: rather they offered an anthology of popular designs with relatively few innovative features.

REFERENCES

1. Museum no. 26/1990. Bill Cotton kindly told the author that this book was being offered for sale.
2. Information from N. Wyatt-Spratt.
3. B. D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair* (1990), pp. 448 and 458.
4. I wish to thank Philip Crouch of High Wycombe Chair Museum for making these catalogues available. The catalogues and price lists also help to illuminate obsolete terms encountered in the *Wycombe Chairmakers' Trade Union List of Prices* (1872).
5. Press Mark, 749.31. The Skull album was discussed by Ivan Sparkes, *The English Country Chair* (1973), pp. 64–67, he dates it 1849. Several of the designs for Windsor chairs are illustrated by B. D. Cotton, op. cit., Chapter 2 (who attributes the volume to Edwin Skull).
6. Museum nos 71/1–22.
7. Pp. 30–32, quoting evidence from Benjamin North's privately printed *Autobiography* (1882).
8. The collection at Temple Newsam House, Leeds, contains several early twentieth-century trade catalogues by C. Gibbons, T. Glenister, Hearne Bros. Mealing Bros and B. North.