

THE CHAIRS OF SUTHERLAND AND CAITHNESS: A NORTHERN TRADITION IN HIGHLAND CHAIR-MAKING?

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The little country chairs from the County of Sutherland can be firmly placed in the vernacular tradition. Many of them indeed rightly deserve the term 'primitive' given them by some recent writers. The term 'Caithness chair', on the other hand, is normally applied to more sophisticated, craftsman-made pieces from that neighbouring county. The discovery of a very crude 'Sutherland chair' in Caithness, during a fieldwork exercise on a long-deserted croft, prompted the following reassessment of the relationship of these two types of Highland country chairs.

The vernacular tradition of chairmaking in Sutherland, that remote, inaccessible northern corner of mainland Britain, is a particularly interesting one, in terms of construction. By far the most common type of vernacular, or indeed country-made, chair in Britain, in common with the rest of Western Europe, is the stool to which a back is added. The remainder tend to have the whole back, including the legs, as the principle structure, with the seat and front legs joined on. But the main structure of a Sutherland chair comprises the back and the seat frame — a highly individualistic piece of furniture, mirroring, perhaps, the isolated nature of the inhabitants of that area.

The basic structural element of a Sutherland chair comprises two branches with natural 'L'-shaped form, 'knees' as they would be termed in the shipwright's trade. In one or two examples, matching sides have been achieved by cleaving one thicker branch down the middle. These natural 'knees' are then joined together by a series of rails, normally just branches of birch or some other scrub timber, sometimes even complete with bark. The rails pass through holes in the frames, and are fixed by wedges. The legs are similarly fitted into the seat section of the frame, and this simple wedged-joint technique extends also to the stretchers which brace the legs (Fig. 1).

The rails, which give this type of chair the appearance of a 'ladder-back', are not evenly spaced over the height of the back, but are grouped in twos or threes at irregular intervals. In some cases, they are angled over the depth of the main frame, giving a rather pleasing proportion. The rails continue round the bend onto the seat part of the frame, usually with a front and back rail being provided, although additional front and back seat rails are a feature of some examples.

The seat itself is a single short plank, the width of which is roughly half the depth of the seat frame, ranging, in the examples in the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, from 5½ in. to 7 in. The plank is loosely slotted into rebates cut out of the sides of the framing branches. These rebates are usually very crudely executed, being, perhaps, simply carved out with a knife.

The dating of such vernacular pieces, and the identification of a maker, is normally quite impossible, but the Highland Folk Museum is fortunate in having two chairs in its collection



1. Chairs in the Sutherland tradition; left and right from East Sutherland, centre from West Sutherland



2. Two chairs, made c. 1900 by Samuel Clark, a shepherd on the Assynt Estate, West Sutherland. These chairs, which came to the Highland Folk Museum forty years apart, are from a set of seven



3. Two Caithness chairs, illustrating common patterns of back design
Thurso Museum



4. Chair in the Sutherland tradition, found at Achlipster, Watten parish, Caithness in 1978
National Museums of Scotland



5. Armchair, early 19th century, from Watten, Caithness
National Museums of Scotland

made by a shepherd in Assynt (north-west Sutherland), Samuel Clark. The chairs were made between 1895 and 1905 as part of a 'set' of seven, according to Mr Clark's daughter. Despite their late date, they show little development from much earlier pieces, the only element of sophistication being in the use of dowel pegs as well as wedges to fix the rails and legs. One has been built round a cleaved branch of birch. In the other case it is difficult to tell whether one branch or two have been used, because a certain degree of shaping has been done to the inside edges, although overall the wood is relatively unworked, to the extent that bark remains. The legs have been roughly squared, and then whittled to the round where they socket into the seat.

The use of the term 'set' to describe these two chairs, and the five others which once went with them, is perhaps a little misleading. They cannot be said to match other than in general appearance. Figure 2 shows both chairs together. One is smaller than the other in every way — in height by 1½ in.; in width by 5 in.; and in the depth of the seat by 3 in. It would be virtually impossible to retain the vernacular tradition and make a 'set' of chairs, in the sense that the term is used by craftsmen. Rather, one has here evidence of a group of chairs, made with the explicit intention of their adorning one house. This in itself is an interesting concept, and one wonders how many other vernacular chair makers conceived such deliberate groupings.

Caithness chairs, while by no means the epitome of the cabinet maker's art, are altogether more sophisticated than the chairs from Sutherland. Flat rails predominate, although round rails are not unknown, cresting rails appear; through mortises replace socketed joints in many cases, and dowel fixings are the norm. Turnery, too, features in some Caithness chairs. The main structural element is the whole back, with the seat and front legs attached. The skills of the country joiner, if not the furniture specialist, is apparent in their construction and finish (Fig. 3).

The seat of the chair is the part which most closely resembles the Sutherland type. It comprises front and back rails, still often no more than roughly shaped branches, although there are also some simple turned versions. The seat is slotted into rebates in the side frames, usually less loosely than in the Sutherland chairs. Sometimes a front seat rail, immediately adjacent to the seat board, is also incorporated. Local Caithness tradition has it that the function of the front rail, and the space between it and the seat proper, was the overnight drying of the thick knitted socks worn under seaboots.

The backs of Caithness chairs normally comprise a series of flat rails joined to the uprights by mortise and tenon joints, with the addition of a cresting rail in some cases. Round 'stick' rails, either natural or turned, do occur in a small number of cases. But the most distinctive feature of these chairs is the series of vertical spars which run between two of the back rails. Like the seat rails, these are round sticks, turned in a simple fashion, or, more often, they are simply peeled branches. This sparred 'panel' appears between the two uppermost rails or else in the centre of the back.

Figure 4 shows a very crude chair in the Sutherland tradition, but it was discovered during fieldwork in Caithness in 1978, by members of the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, including the writer. The only untraditional feature is the presence of a cresting rail, formed from the handle of a slaughter or turf-flaying spade. The discovery prompted a re-examination of Caithness chairs, which yielded up a number of links with the Sutherland tradition which had been overlooked previously.



6. Chair from Caithness, similar examples have been recorded in the
Wester Ross and the Hebrides
National Museums of Scotland



7. Chair, reputedly from West Caithness
Strathnaver Museum, Bettyhill



8. Stickback chair in the West Coast or 'celtic' tradition



9. Two chairs; left — West Coast Mainland, right — North Uist; plank seats possibly renewed

An early 19th-century armchair, which prior to 1844 was part of the plenishings of Market Hill, Watten, in the heart of Caithness, and is now in the collections of the Royal Museum of Scotland, is a very typical example of a Caithness chair, except that the main structural element is two natural 'knees' of timber (Fig. 5). As befits the general standard of joinery in the piece, these knees of elm have been rather more shaped than would be common in a vernacular chair from Sutherland, but the technique is firmly in that tradition. Several other 'natural knee' chairs from Caithness have been reported, but they have not been examined, and this remains the only confirmed example.

Another chair in the national collection is shown in Figure 6. This is again from Caithness, and structurally it is part of that tradition. In style, however, it is far closer to a Sutherland chair, even to the extent of the rails being offset within the back frame. One or two cruder examples in the Strathnaver Museum in Bettyhill, on the North coast of Sutherland, show the same mixture of Caithnesian structure and traditional Sutherland style. There, too, can be seen an amazing chair with a back 'panel' comprising both horizontal and vertical spars. In terms of its construction it fits fairly well into the Caithness pattern, but the work is less sophisticated than one would expect — with the forming of the timbers being done with a drawknife perhaps (Fig. 7).

It is now possible to argue, however tentatively, that the links between these two chair types suggest a common vernacular tradition — a Northern Highlands tradition, out of which the craft-made chairs developed. The local idea about drying of socks before the fire may well explain the survival of the front rail and the rebated seat in a craftsman-made chair where the technique is structurally obsolete. In the virtually treeless county of Caithness, this method of seat construction had the added merit of using considerably less timber, and especially substantial timber, than the normal method.

The case for a more widespread vernacular tradition is strengthened by the existence of a number of simple ladder backs with rebated seat boards and front rails in the more northerly parts of Wester Ross, and in the Hebrides. These are so obviously alien to the main vernacular tradition of the west — the little stickback chairs built round a slab or a forked branch (Fig. 8) — and yet show little evidence of being influenced by fashionable pieces. If, however, two local traditions met in these areas, as would be very likely, then chair makers would have a choice of techniques, one of which was more suited to areas with reasonably large trees, and the other to the utilisation of scrub timber. The sparse and uneven distribution of good growing timber in these areas would have made such a choice very acceptable.

The final group of chairs which came to light as a result of this fresh look at the Sutherland and Caithness traditions again have their provenance in the Western Isles and in Wester Ross. This is another small group of ladder backs, which also have as a common denominator a rather peculiar set of additional stretchers immediately below the seat. Indeed, in some, the seat sits rather unhappily over the arrangement of rails (Fig. 9). It might be argued that this awkwardness stems from the amalgam of materials used in the construction of these chairs, much of which comprises driftwood from the sea, or other recycled timber, but equally it can be said that it comes from the superimposition of one chairmaking technique upon another.

If the heavy boarded seats of these chairs were removed, the remaining structure would be very akin to some of the simpler Caithness chairs, or the ladder backs discussed above. The

front and back stretchers of the upper set are analogous to the seat rails, and the side stretchers to the frame. It is difficult to see how a rebated seat could ever have been made to fit in, although a woven seat of straw or marram grass (both common in the country joiner-made chairs of the area) is very feasible. Thus the plank seat may be a later addition. Certainly, in the case of the armchair from North Uist (Fig. 9), the batons of driftwood which support the seat have been cut to fit round the stretchers, which might be indicative of such a theory.

Even if one accepts the complete integrity of these chairs, and puts any awkwardness down to the unhappy choice of materials, it is possible to postulate that the upper stretchers are an anachronism — a carryover from an earlier type of chair, in a similar, if less aesthetically pleasing, manner to the retention of the sock-drying rail on the Caithness chairs.

The case for a Northern Tradition of chairmaking, serving perhaps a sixth of the landmass of Scotland, is far from proven in the foregoing essay, but perhaps the way in which it re-examines and links the two strands of country chairmaking — the vernacular and the country craftsmanship — make it a worthwhile exercise, and one which might be developed in the future.