

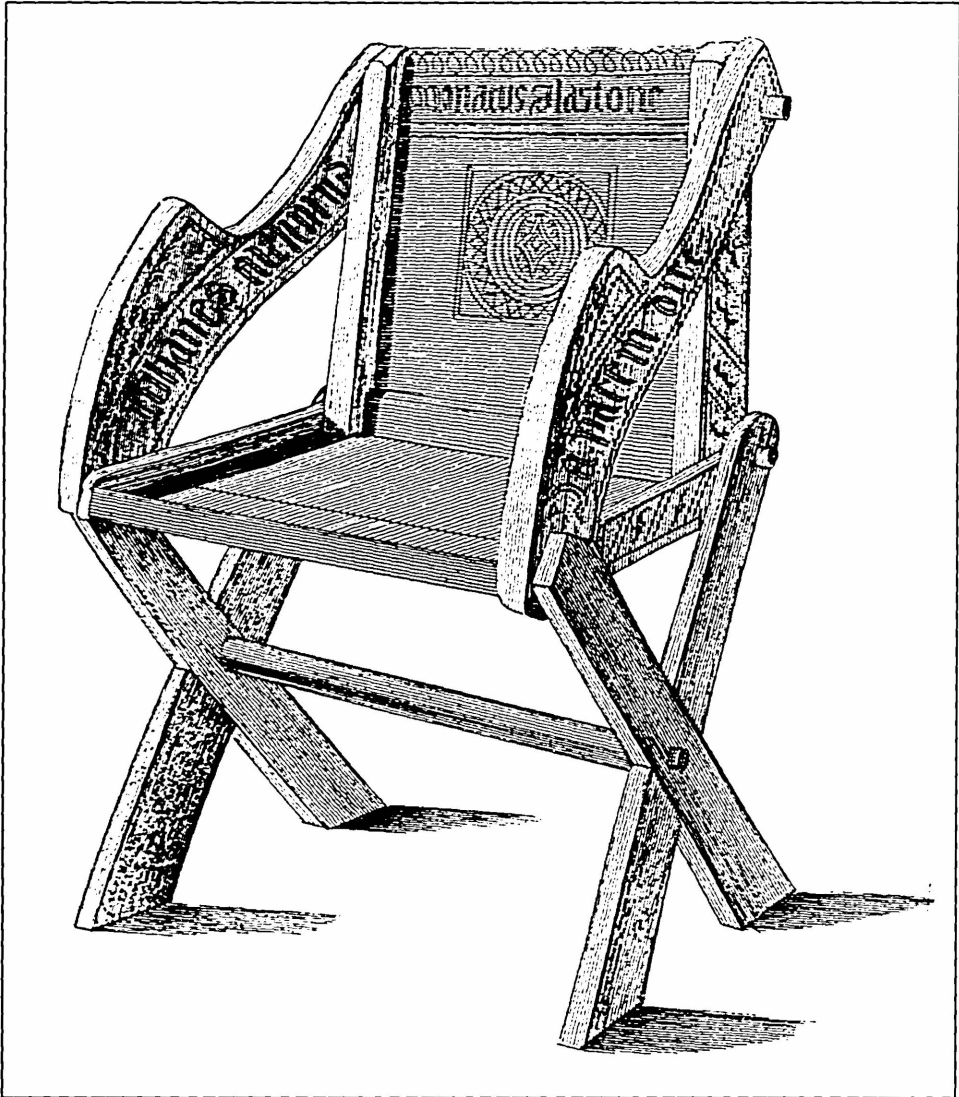
THE GLASTONBURY CHAIR

Gabriel Olive

Of all English furniture the Glastonbury chair must have been the most frequently copied individual item. The supposed original of all these reproductions is preserved in the Bishop's Palace at Wells, where it is known to have been for many years. Its history before it came to Wells is obscure. No original documentary evidence relating to this chair has been discovered: if it was ever mentioned in any wills or probate inventories, these have now disappeared.¹ There is, however, some contemporary printed evidence which appears to be reliable and from which some conclusions may be drawn. The principal source of information is *An History of Glaston Abbey and the Town of Glastonbury* by R. Warner, published in 1826.² Warner quotes many earlier sources and draws on the memories of those whom he knew in the area. The book is, however, written in a very discursive style, the factual matter appearing in no logical order, interspersed with anecdotal material and the author's own opinions. All subsequent accounts of the chair at Wells appear to be based on a misinterpretation of the information given by Warner. Although it is impossible now to write a complete history of the Glastonbury chair, this article may at least serve to dispel some of the myths surrounding it.

There is no dispute that the chair was presented to Bishop Law by John Bowen on 21 November 1824 at Bowen's house in Portland Place, Bath, *as an heirloom to the see of Bath and Wells*. John Bowen was a Priest Vicar of Wells Cathedral, perpetual curate of the chapel at Godney, and Vicar of Bishops Lydeard. He had, according to Warner, 'a taste for the collection and preservation of antiquarian rarities.' He married Elizabeth Jeanes who was a direct descendant of Elizabeth Whiting, sister of the last Abbot of Glastonbury and it was through her that he inherited Abbot Whiting's watch and seal.³ The chair, the subject of this article, we are told by Warner, 'was purchased by Mr Bowen between forty and fifty years ago at the sale of the goods of John Moss Esq; of Wells.' The name Moss was, in the late Eighteenth century, not uncommon in Wells,⁴ and there was also a family of the same name in West Pennard (near Glastonbury) who were connected by marriage with the Jeanes family. The John Moss of Wells to whom Warner refers, appears to have been the John Baron Moss of whom it is recorded in the Cathedral Register that administration of the effects of John Baron Moss of Wells out-parish was granted in the Dean's Court in 1779. The grant of Letters of Administration implies that he died intestate, and a sale of his effects would be the likely result.

Also in the Cathedral Register is recorded in 1720 the wedding of John Moss of Wells, gent and Mrs Joan Baron, of Milton in St Cuthbert's parish.⁵ The wife of the above John Moss was a daughter of Matthew Baron the elder, of Milton in the parish of St Cuthbert's, and he is mentioned in a codicil to the will of his father-in-law dated 13 November 1729, by which he was to have £500. According to the *Monastican Anglicanum*⁶ John Moss (presumably the same) inherited a one-seventh share in the manor of Glastonbury. Warner's account differs, but includes a Moss as part-owner at one time. This did not include possession of any part of the Abbey grounds, of which a full separate account is given by Warner. It can be stated with reasonable certainty that

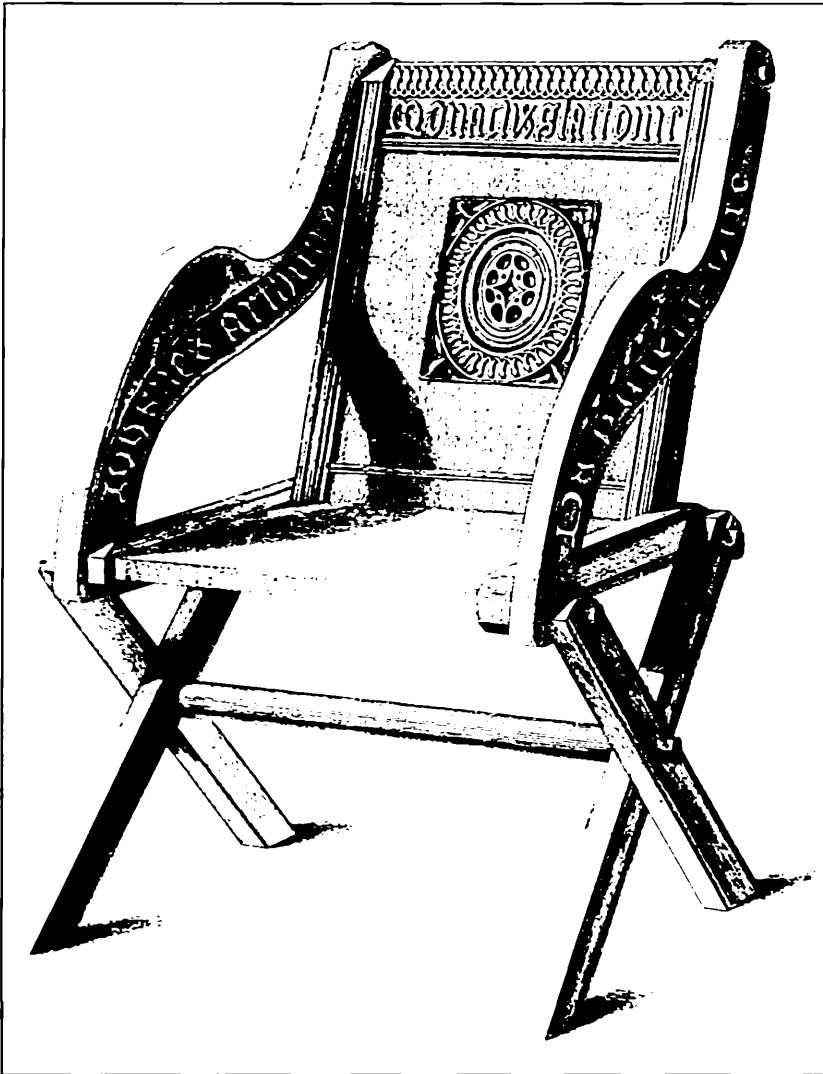


1. 'Monk's Chair' at Wells. Plate XIV in R. Warner's *History of Glaston Abbey and the Town of Glastonbury*. Drawn by T. Shew Esq. Mr Thomas Shew of Bath was a subscriber to Warner's book published 1826

the chair now at Wells was owned by John Moss, who lived at Wells and had a financial interest in Glastonbury, at some time in the mid-eighteenth century. There is no evidence to suggest that this chair was handed down in the Jeanes family. Its early history remains a matter of speculation.

An examination of the chair itself reveals that it has been heavily restored. The only remaining parts that can in any sense be described as original are the arms, the top rail and the centre of the panel in the back. These are the parts which carry the carving, upon which all theories of the chair's origins have been based. These pieces, which are of elm, do not show the quality of workmanship one would expect to find in a wealthy abbey during the sixteenth century.⁷ The rest of the chair is in oak. There is no record of when the restoration took place although it is noticeable that in both of the two earliest drawings of the chair it is shown as if in perfect condition and all references describe it as of oak. (Figs. 1 & 2). Certainly in 1824 no-one seems to have doubted that John Bowen's chair dated from before the dissolution of the abbey in 1539 and that it had been preserved in the abbey until a few years previously. Some parts of the conventual buildings were not pulled down until the latter part of the eighteenth century and fragments of woodwork are known to have survived.⁸ Rev Warner also points out that among the list of monks who subscribed to the Act of Supremacy in 1536 was one who signed himself Jöhes Arthur. However, this was not the only Glastonbury chair in existence in 1824. On 2 February 1759 Horace Walpole wrote in a letter '... I have bought a monk of Glastonbury's chair full of scraps of the psalms ...' and in July 1780 in another letter '... I am proprietor of the chair of Johannes Arthurus the monk of Glastonbury ...' The same chair is illustrated and described in detail in *A Description of the Villa at Strawberry-Hill*, dated 1784.⁹ 'A very ancient chair of oak, which came out of Glastonbury-abbey; on it are carved these sentences, Johannes Arthurus Monacus Glastonie, salvet eum Deus: Da pacem Domine: Sit Laus Deo.' (Fig. 3). There is a drawing of a third similar chair by H. O'Neill in the Braikenridge Collection at Bristol. (Fig. 4). Braikenridge's own notes read: 'Drawing by Mr O'Neill 1822. An old chair that came from Glastonbury Abbey lately, owned by John Foy Edgar, Esq. Sword-bearer of this City, and now in the possession of Mr Garrard the Chamberlain who purchased it for the sum of 10 guineas.'¹⁰ Walpole's chair remained at Strawberry Hill until the sale in 1842.¹¹ Thomas Garrard's effects were sold by auction in Bristol in 1856.¹² Both of these chairs have disappeared and it is impossible therefore to make any modern assessment of their antiquity. At the time, each of their owners seems to have believed his own specimen to have been an unique survival from the sixteenth century. Standards of judgement may well have altered: J. H. Smyth Pigott, who paid the large sum of seventy guineas for Walpole's chair, was a subscriber to Warner's book and must have been aware that he was not buying a unique piece.¹³

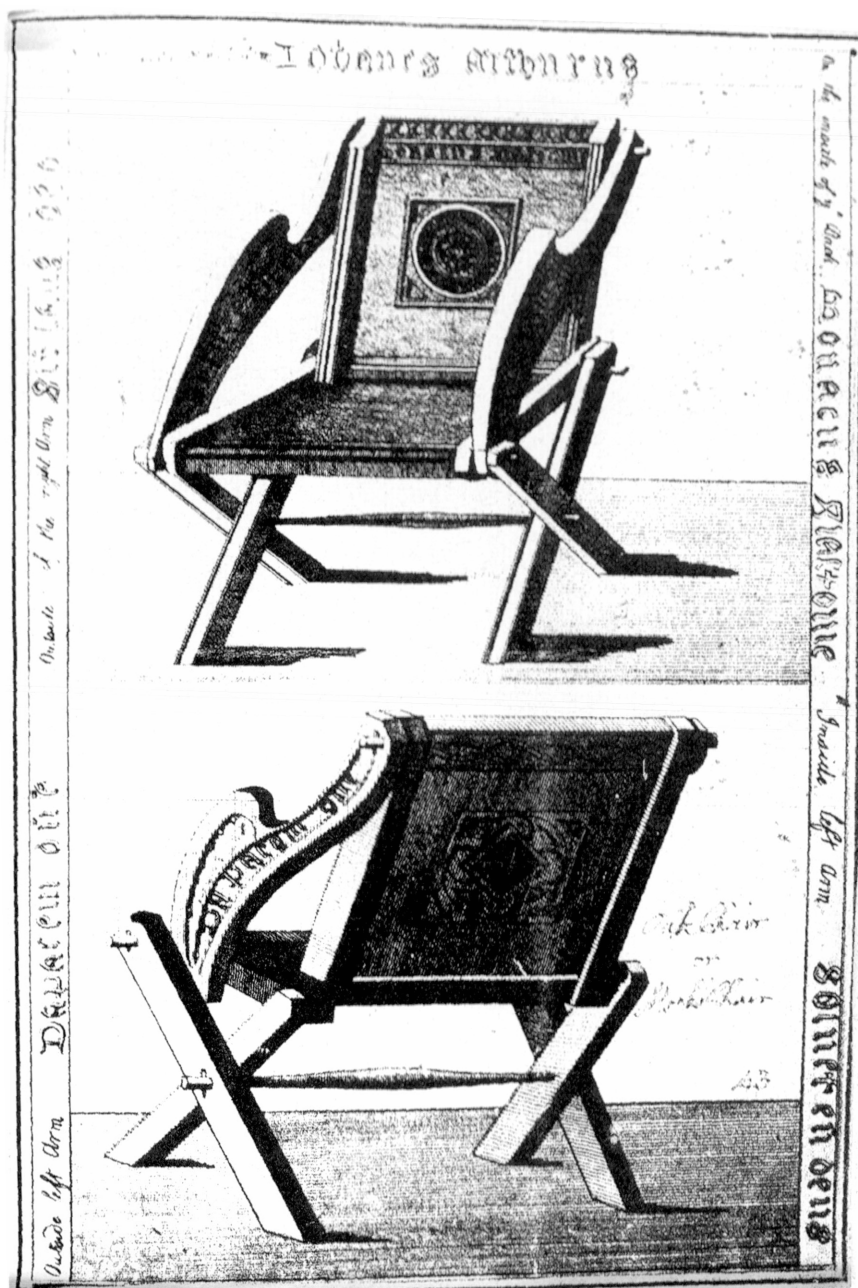
Like all X-framed seating, the Glastonbury chair derives from the folding stool. The essential difference between the Glastonbury type and most others is that it folds fore-and-aft rather than sideways. This allows the back also to hinge and fold within the compass of the legs. The disadvantage is that, with a slung seat, the necessarily hard edge of the front frame is less comfortable. It is for this reason, perhaps, that all surviving examples have solid seats, although this would make folding impossible without dismantling them completely. The form, though never so popular as laterally-folding stools



2. 'The Abbot's Chair' at Wells. Plate IX in Henry Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*. Drawn and engraved by Henry Shaw. A more accurate and skilful portrayal than Fig. 1. Published 1833 but probably drawn in 1824

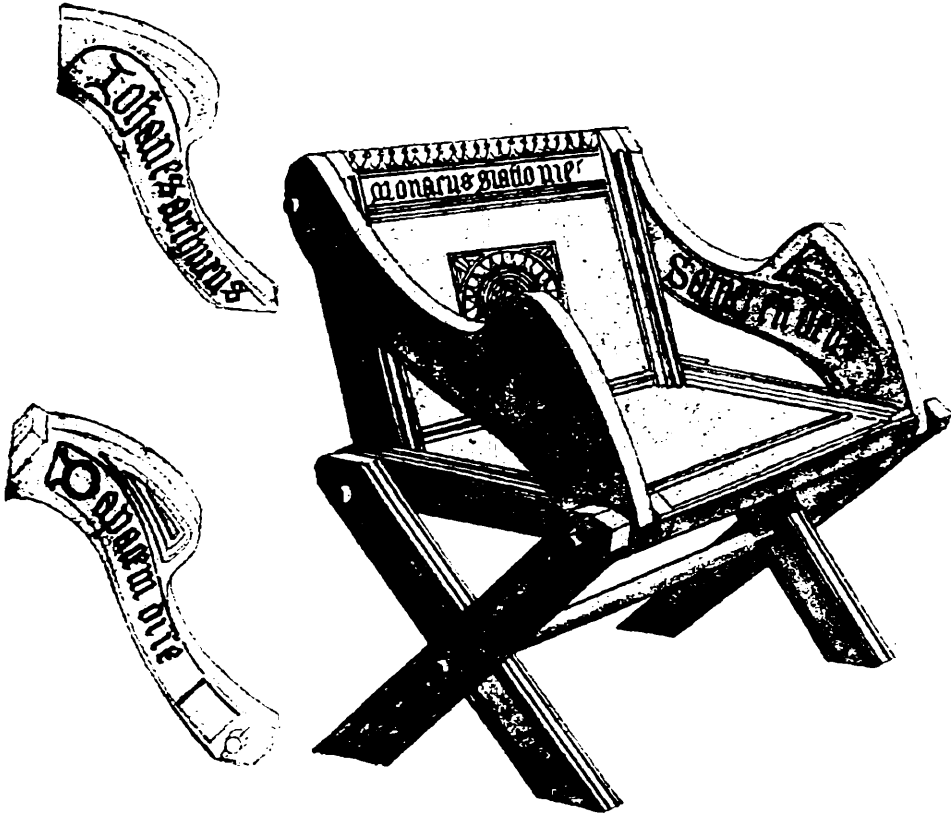


2. 'The Abbot's Chair' at Wells. Plate IX in Henry Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*. Drawn and engraved by Henry Shaw. A more accurate and skilful portrayal than Fig. 1. Published 1833 but probably drawn in 1824



3. Horace Walpole's chair. Virtually identical to Figs. 1 and 2 except for the stretcher, which is of an eighteenth century type. Print of about 1780

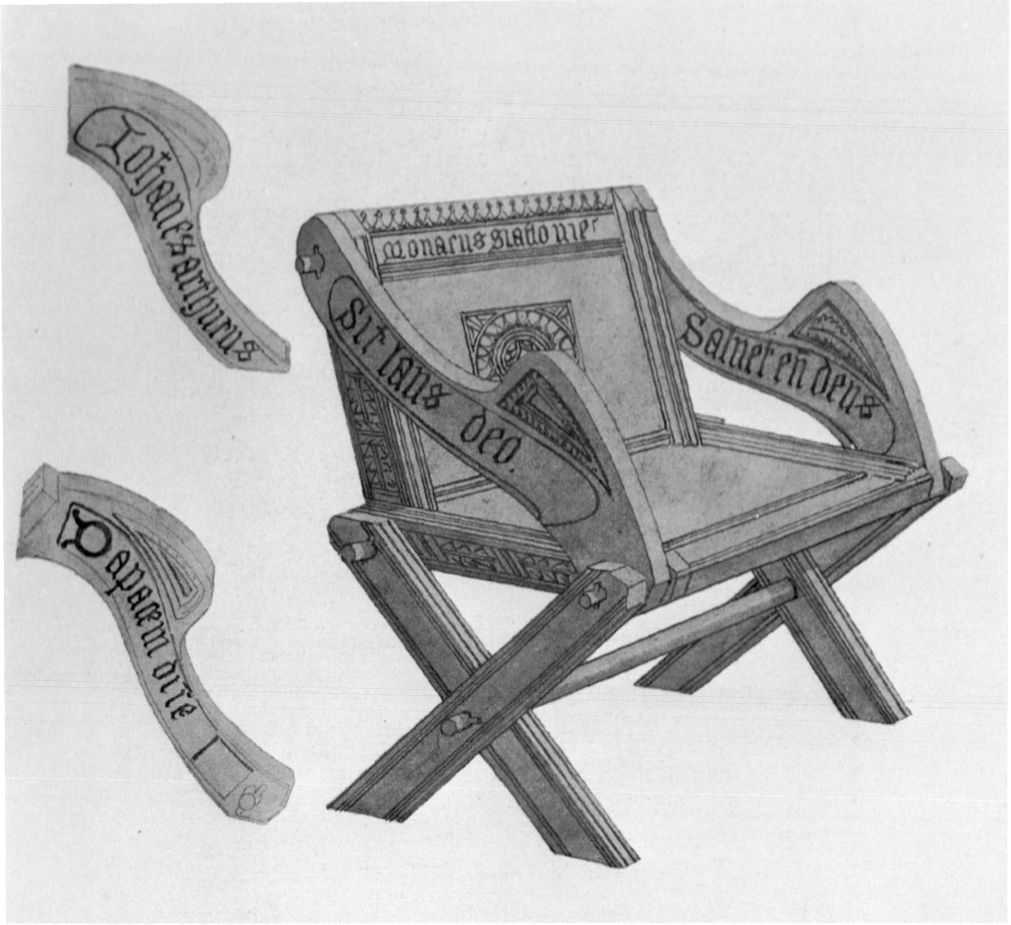
Copy kindly supplied by Clive Wainwright.



4. The chair formerly belonging to John Foy Edgar of Bristol. Drawing by H. O'Neill commissioned by the Bristol collector F. W. Braikenridge. Identical in all essentials with Figs. 1, 2 and 3. Dated 1822

Photograph by courtesy of Bristol Museums and Art Gallery.

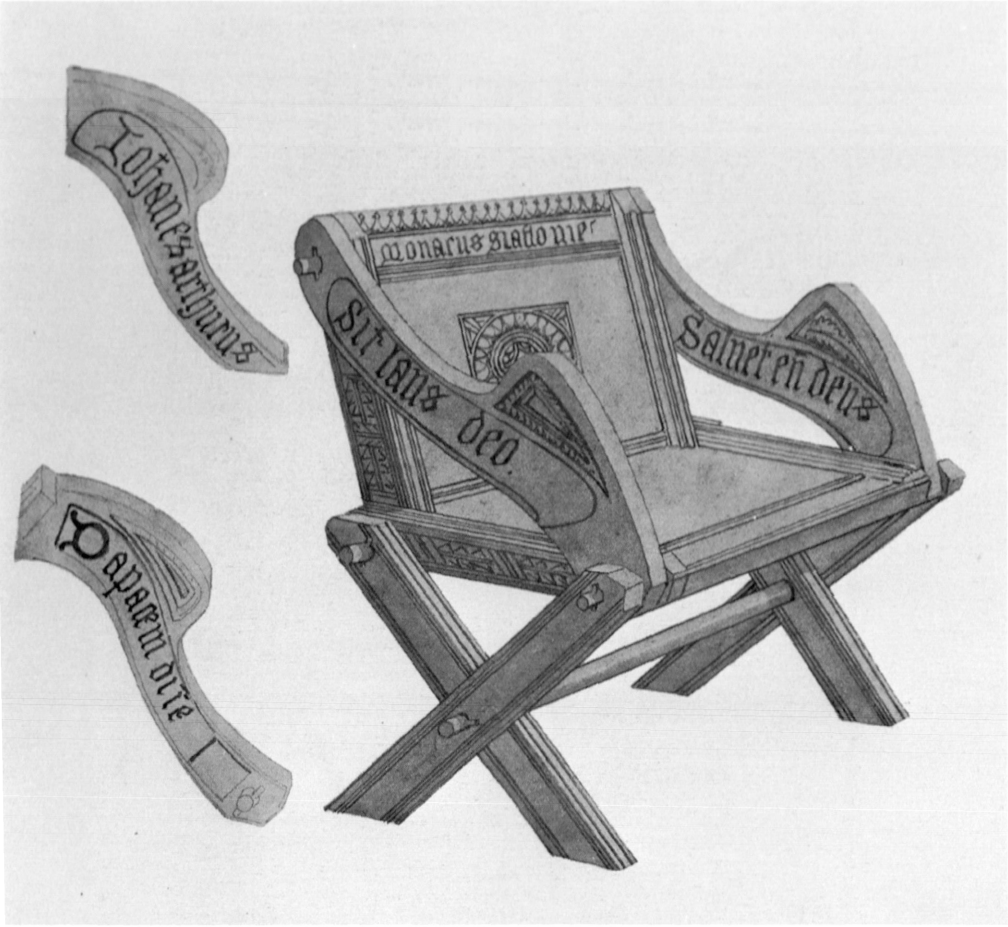
or chairs, has a long history. An Egyptian wall painting now in the British Museum shows an important personage sitting in a similar chair,¹⁴ and a folding camp stool designed on the same principle appears in the Army and Navy Stores catalogue of 1907.¹⁵ The earliest extant example is that said to have belonged to Petrarch, now preserved in his house at Arquà.¹⁶ Rev Warner quotes this chair illustrated by Tomasini (Fig. 5), as the archetype of the Glastonbury chair. Other examples of the type appear in Italian Renaissance paintings.¹⁷ It is not known when the form first appeared in England. A chair in the Victoria and Albert Museum has the back panel decorated in the English Renaissance manner and has been tentatively ascribed to about 1600.¹⁸ Under the heavy modern staining and varnish neither the timber nor the carving appear to be of such an



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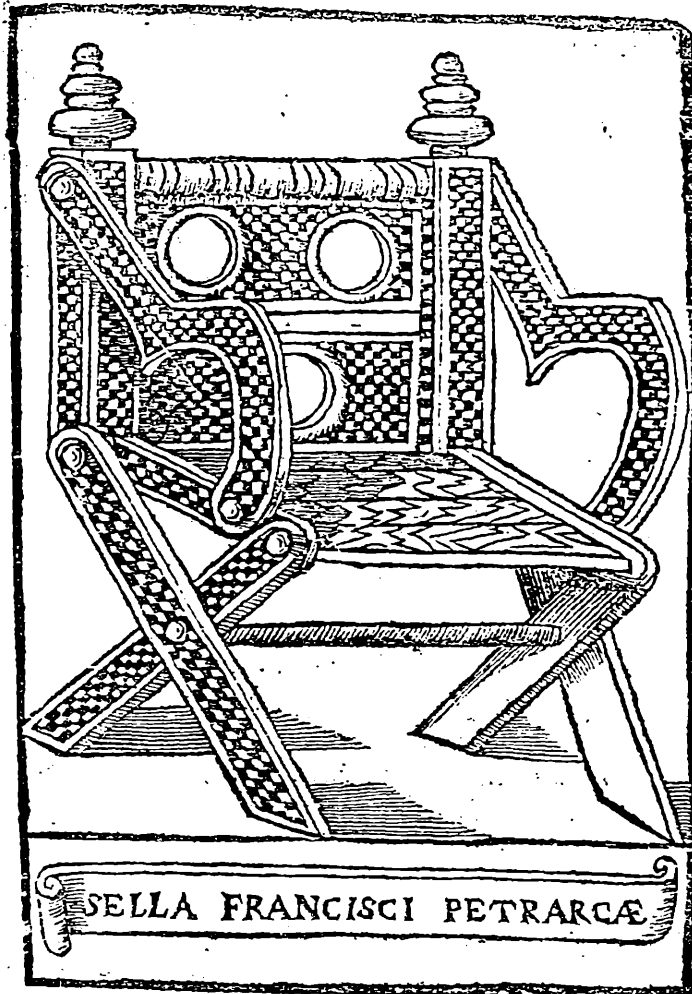
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5. Petrarch's chair. From *Petrarcha Redivivus* by Giacomo Philipppo Tomasini. Padua 1635

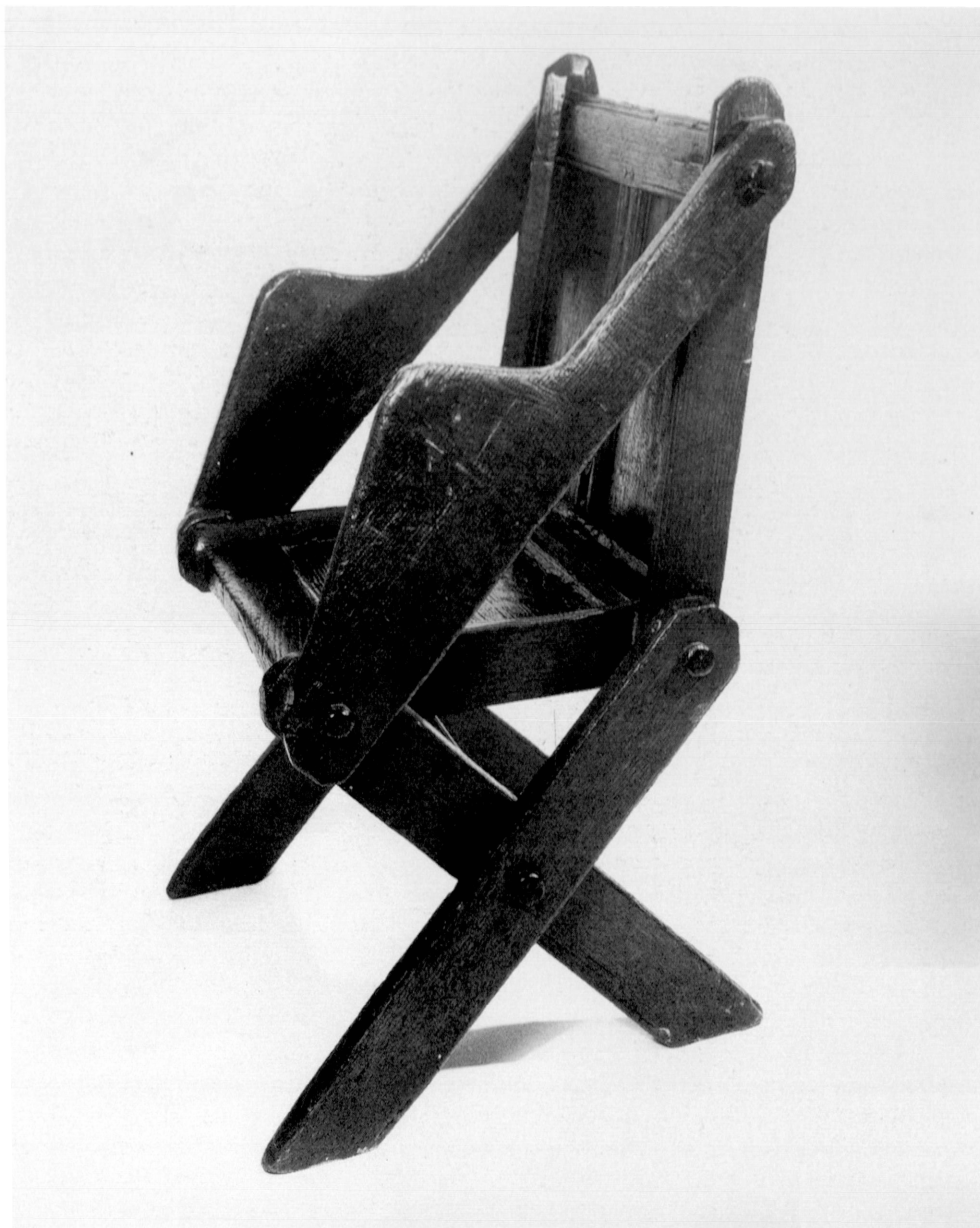
Copy kindly supplied by Clive Wainwright.

early date. In particular the beaded top edge of the arms shows no sign of any natural wear and the fixing of the upper end of the arms is not consistent with sixteenth or seventeenth century practice. There is an almost identical chair, the legs reduced, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A more convincing example may be seen in Figs. 6 & 7. On this small chair the arms and legs are held on the tusk tenons by dowels driven right through the members. It can never have been folded. The crude shaping of the arms and the simple panelling of the back are typical of provincial craftsmanship from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries. The shape of the stretcher, a rectangular section set on edge, can also be seen on much late provincial oak furniture. One



6. A very simple oak chair of 'Glastonbury' type. The construction is virtually identical to that of Figs. 1 to 4 except that the pegs holding the arms and legs are driven through the thickness of these pieces. Possibly about 1700

By courtesy of Antique Collectors Club.

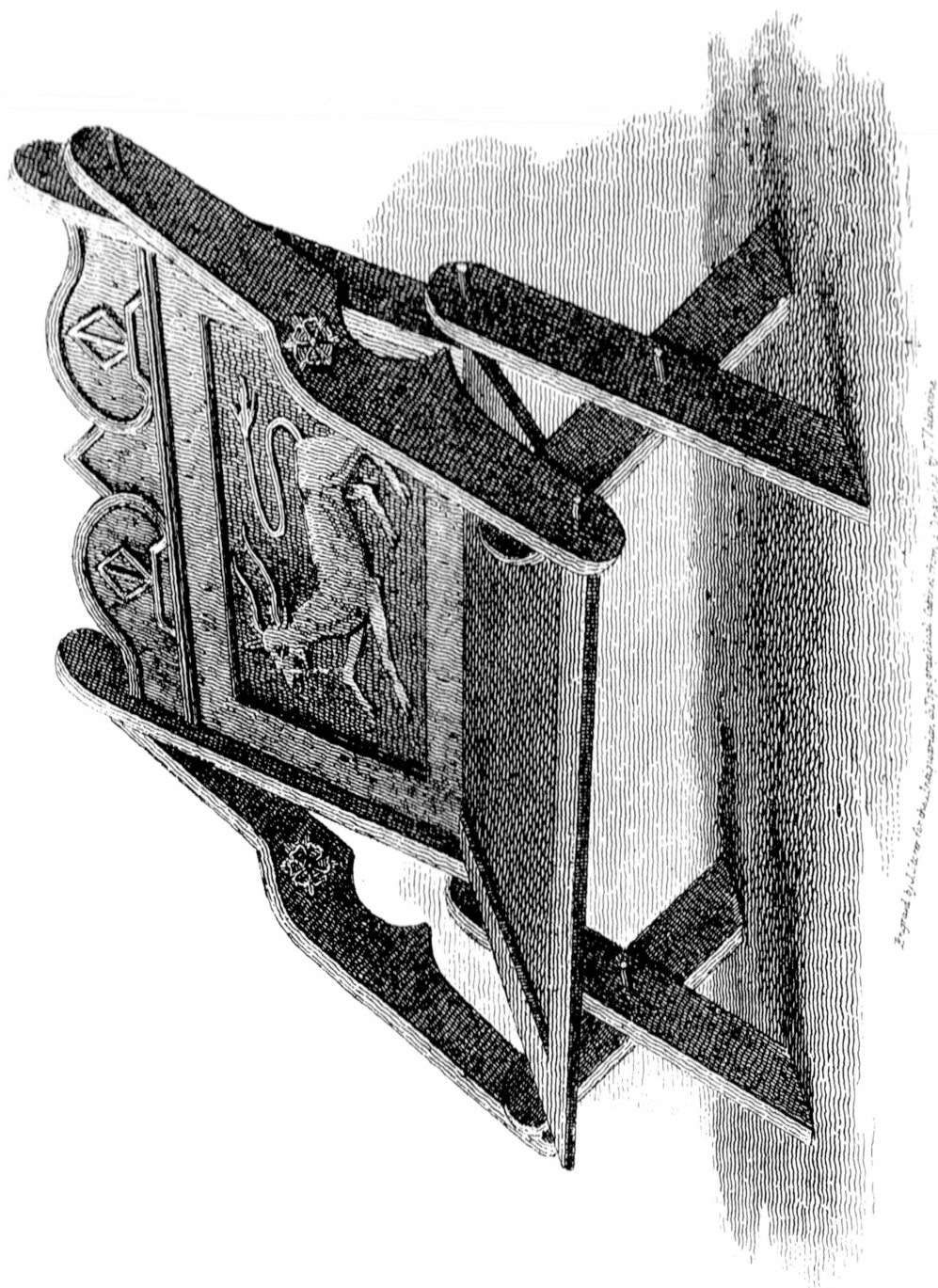


7. Side view of chair shown in Fig. 6

other early chair is recorded in England, from Southwick Priory, Hants. (Fig. 8) This was published in the *Antiquarian and Topographical Cabinet*, February 1810, where it is stated, 'Part of the Priory Buildings having lately been taken down, this chair with other old furniture found on the premises, was sold by auction . . .'¹⁹ The roses on the arms of this chair appear in the Arms of Southwick Priory. The chair has now apparently disappeared. The evidence for the English tradition of fore-and-aft folding armchairs is slight and does not go back beyond about 1700. It has no traceable continuity with the Italian Renaissance type.

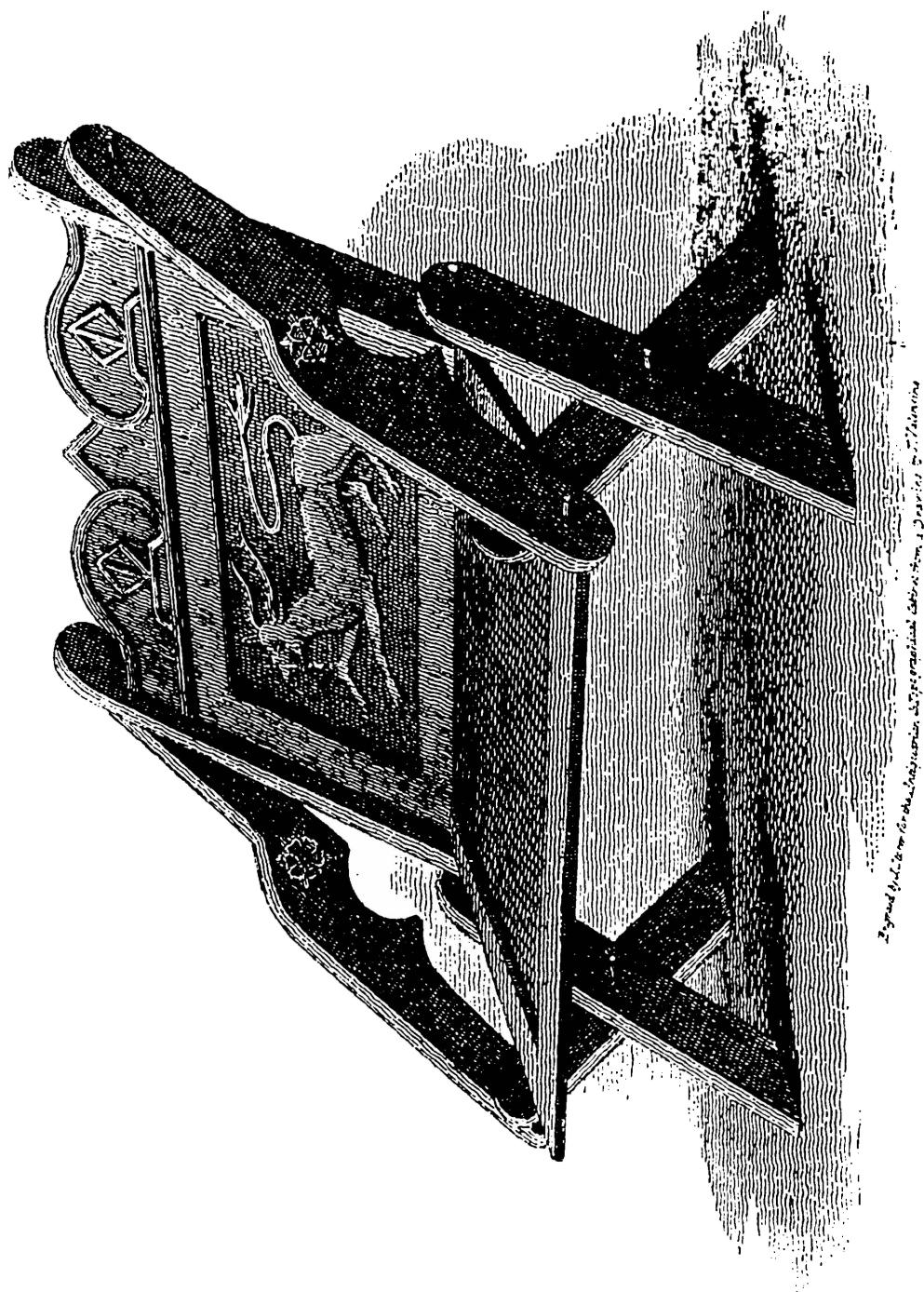
The existence of three chairs with the same carving from one Abbey must call into question their monastic origin. Although the abbots of Glastonbury lived in great state it is unlikely that the Rule would have permitted to an ordinary monk even two pieces of personalised furniture. It has been suggested that the original chair belonged to John Thorne, the last Treasurer of Glastonbury Abbey, who was tried and executed with Abbot Whiting in 1639. There is no evidence that his name was other than John Thorne.²⁰ It has also been suggested that the inscription was in memoriam, the two sentences on the outsides of the arms — *Salvet eum Deus* and *Da pacem Domine* — lending some credence to this theory. The monk who signed himself Jöhes Arthur in 1536 must have died before 1553. His name does not appear among the list of monks still receiving a pension at that date.²¹ It is possible that all these chairs were made at some later date and that the name of John Arthur was chosen almost at random. The juxtaposition of Arthur and Glastonbury would have seemed doubly attractive to an early collector of Gothic furniture. In the absence of further evidence, today's judgement must rely on weighing the balance of probabilities.

Early writers on the Glastonbury chair commented especially on the 'simplicity of its construction'.²² These qualities, in eighteenth century terms the 'affect' of the piece, seem to have attracted the first collectors every bit as much as its associations. The earliest recorded copies were made for Earl Bathurst before 1784.²³ None of these can now be traced. The earliest known surviving copies are at St Michael's Mount in Cornwall.²⁴ There is a total of thirteen Glastonbury chairs in the Chevy Chase room at St Michael's Mount. Of these, one has the same carving as that at Wells and is said to have been brought to the Mount as an original (Fig. 9) All the others are said to have been copied from this by the estate carpenter in about 1800. Eleven have plain arms and top rails, the centre of the back panel being carved with the arms of St Aubyn. Two others have no carving. The timber and some constructional details of all these chairs, including the so-called 'original', appear to be of the same period.²⁵ Although the Chevy Chase room is in fact the refectory of the old monastery (much restored in the eighteenth century) it is clear that these chairs, with their coats of arms, were designed to enhance the Gothic flavour of the room, rather than its monastic associations. A watercolour by Francis Nixon dated 1811 shows these chairs *in situ* together with a triangular-framed chair and some mid-eighteenth century fanciful Gothic Windsors.²⁶ All the Glastonbury chairs at St Michael's Mount have the single panel of the back divided into three sections by two vertical half-round beads applied to the front face. (Fig. 9) These correspond in position precisely with the divide between the older and restored parts in the chair at Wells. This feature, not seen elsewhere, invites the speculation that the 'original' was copied from that at Wells at a time when the junction of old and new on that chair had been



8. Chair from Southwick Priory, Hants. From the *Antiquarian and Topographical Cabinet*
February 1810

Photograph by courtesy of Hampshire Record Office.



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Photograph by courtesy of Hampshire Record Office.

concealed by similar mouldings, long since disappeared.

In 1826 Rev Warner wrote, at the end of his description of the Monk's Chair at Glaston, '... within these few years, the pattern has again revived, in the halls and other apartments of several of our countrymen of taste and fortune.' It seems clear that the popularity of this type of chair was in the first place engendered among the wealthy in the belief that it was of Gothic origin. Some were conscious of the particular medieval usage of the X-framed seat as a symbol of authority.²⁷ When Horace Walpole entertained the Archbishop of Canterbury he made a point of bringing forward his monk's chair and 'enthroned the Primate in it'.²⁸ In the same spirit an engraved portrait of the antiquarian, John Britton, dated 1820, shows the sitter surrounded by books and the busts of philosophers, in a copy of Petrarch's chair.²⁹

A few years after Warner's History was published an engraving of the Glastonbury chair appeared in Plate IX of Henry Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*, 1836 (Fig. 2). Shaw was in Wells, working on John Britton's *Cathedral Antiquities of England* in 1824, and may well have seen and drawn the chair when it arrived at the Bishop's Palace.³⁰ This may account for the fact that he erroneously describes it as the Abbot's chair. *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*, although strongly antiquarian, was also intended for the inspiration of designers. It exercised a wide influence on public taste.

In 1833, Loudon wrote in his *Encyclopaedia*, 'Kensett of Mortimer Street has also some curious specimens both of Elizabethan and more ancient furniture. Among these we may mention . . . and two other chairs from Glastonbury; one of which, called the Abbot's chair, is of very elaborate workmanship, and the other no less remarkable for the simplicity of its construction. Correct copies of these celebrated chairs are manufactured by Mr Kensett for sale'.³¹

The Glastonbury chair had become an article of commerce. During the next half-century large quantities were produced to furnish dwelling houses and educational and religious establishments. The following illustrations and notes may serve to indicate how widespread was this production.

- 1 The chair in Fig. 12, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, was designed by A. W. Pugin for the Bishop's House at St Chad's (RC) Cathedral, Birmingham and dates from about 1838. Pugin had visited Wells in 1835 or 1836, where he made a number of drawings.³²
- 2 Fig. 13 is from Gillows' Estimate Sketch Book dated 21 March 1840. It is called 'Glastonbury Monk's Chair'. It was not apparently to be carved.
- 3 A sketch for the arm of a Glastonbury chair occurs on a page of 'Elizabethan' items in the notebook of John Davies, cabinetmaker, of Carmarthen, dated 1848.³³
- 4 The page from a catalogue illustrated in Fig. 14 can be dated between 1844 and 1846, the only years in which the 'Patent Wood-carving Co.' appears at the address given in Kelly's Directories.

It is difficult to see how both these designs can be described as facsimile and it was perhaps this and variations such as Pugin's which drove Charles Eastlake to write in 1868 'as a rule, the "Glastonbury" chairs and "antique" bookcases sold in that venerable thoroughfare (Wardour Street) will prove to be nothing but gross libels on the style of art which they are supposed to represent'.³⁴

The earliest recorded use of 'Glastonbury chair' as a generic term designating the type,



9. Glastonbury chair at St Michael's Mount, Marazion, Cornwall. Said to be the original from which the others in the same room were copied. Known to have been at St Michael's Mount in 1811. Made probably not more than fifty years earlier

Photograph by courtesy of Country Life.

occurs in the 1853 catalogue of Cox & Sons, a well-known firm of church furnishers. 'Glastonbury chairs of the annexed design are manufactured at a very moderate price'.³⁵ Probably the greatest number now surviving are those in churches, mostly Anglican. In 1878 Frederick Litchfield wrote of '... the Abbot's chair at Glastonbury, temp. Henry VIII, the original of the chair familiar to us now in the chancel of most churches.'³⁶ His illustration, however, though labelled 'The Glastonbury Chair in the Palace of the Bishop of Bath and Wells', is almost identical with Fig. 6. Litchfield was a dealer and it is possible that the chair illustrated here was actually part of his stock-in-trade when he was writing. In a domestic context the place of the Glastonbury chair is finely depicted in a portrait by Millais of a young girl in a red pelisse and feathered hat sitting holding a doll before her. The painting is dated 1864. The chair was presumably in the house

10. Oak Glastonbury chair, one of a pair, bearing the label of Kendell and Co. Leeds. The upper part is an accurate copy of the chair at Wells, but the legs are halved together at the crossing. The turned swelling stretcher is similar to that in the print of Walpole's chair. About 1850

Photograph by courtesy of Christopher Hutchinson.



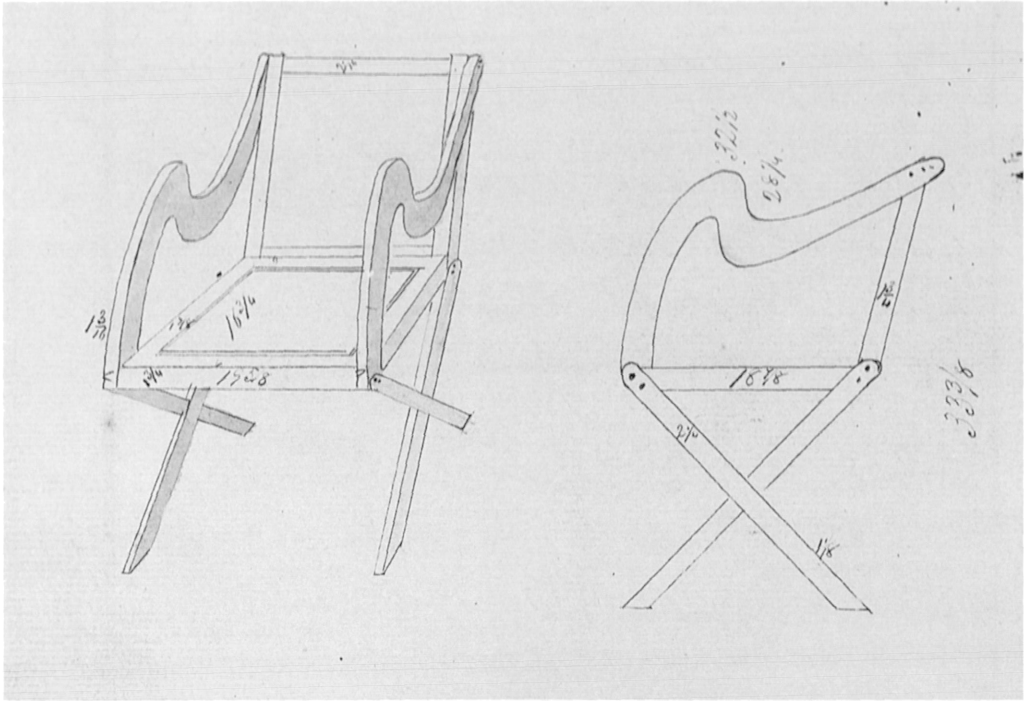
11. Printed label.
J. Kendell & Co





12. Oak chair designed by A. W. Pugin for the Bishop's house at St Chad's (R.C.) Cathedral, Birmingham. Obviously inspired by the Glastonbury chair, but not designed to fold

Photograph by courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

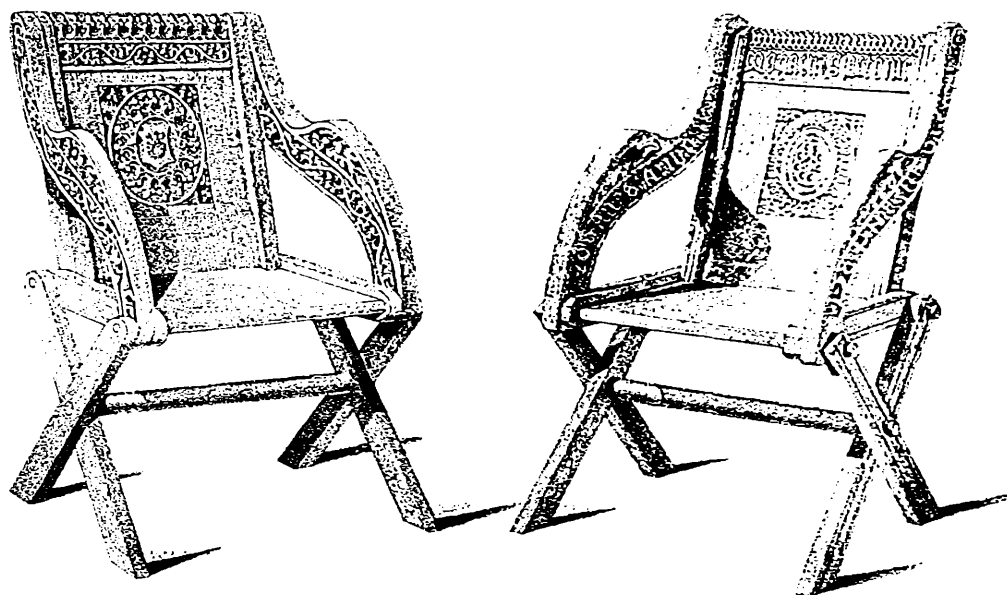


13. 'Glastonbury Monk's Chair.' Design from Gillow's Estimate Sketch Books, Folio 20.
Ordered by Ferguson and Co. 21 March 1840

Photograph by courtesy of Westminster City Archives.

where the portrait was painted and is shown in almost as much detail as the sitter herself.³⁷ A chair in the Parish Church of Rothwell, Yorkshire, is particularly unusual in having a maker's label pasted under the seat. (Figs. 10 & 11) The label is that of Kendell and Co., Leeds, and has on it the workman's name, 'Walters'. Kendell and Co. were taken over by Marsh and Jones in about 1860 and the chair must pre-date this. No other Glastonbury chairs have yet been recorded with makers' names.

In the words of Rev Richard Warner, 'for information respecting Abbot Whiting's family and connections, our search has been less successful than industrious', and such has been the case with John Arthur and his chair. In 1759 Horace Walpole wrote '... I have bought a monk of Glastonbury's chair full of scraps of the psalms, and some seals of most reverend illegibility.' It is likely that the history of the Glastonbury Chair before that date will remain for ever a matter of most reverend illegibility.



14. Two designs on a catalogue page from the 'Patent Wood Carving Co.' No. 5 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden. An early example of mechanical reproduction

By courtesy of Hampshire Record Office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many people for help in preparing this article: the staff at Devizes Library, Richard Hatchwell, Luke Millar, Christopher Hutchinson, Pat Colman, Iris Preston, Pat Robinson, Susan Stuart, Peter Thornton and Karin Walton.

My greatest debt is to Clive Wainwright who has, like a great scholar and teacher, generously shared his own knowledge and the fruits of his own researches over many years into the same subject.

REFERENCES

1. All the documents of the Somerset Record Office were destroyed by fire in 1942.
2. *An History of Glaston Abbey and the Town of Glastonbury* Richard Warner, published by R. Cruttwell, Bath, 1836.
3. Warner, as above.
4. In addition to several families named Moss living in and near Wells, Dr Charles Moss (1711-1802) was translated from St David's to the See of Bath and Wells in 1774, where he practised nepotism on a considerable scale.
5. Information on John Baron Moss is given in a lengthy footnote in *Wells Cathedral: Its Monumental Inscriptions and Heraldry* by Arthur J. Jewers F.S.A. London, Mitchell and Hughes, 1892.
6. *Monasticon Anglicanum* by R. Dugdale, Ed. Bandinel, Third Edition, 1817.
7. The consensus of opinion among members of the R.F.S. who examined the chair in July 1993.
8. *Monasticon Anglicanum* and Warner.
9. Quoted by permission from *The Romantic Interior* by Clive Wainwright. Yale University Press, 1989.
10. Information kindly supplied by Karin Walton, Bristol Museums and Art Gallery. John Foy Edgar died November, 1850 aged 83. There is no record how or at what age he acquired the chair.

11. 17th day of Sale, 13 May 1842. In the Holbein Room, 'Here is the original chair of the Abbot of Glastonbury from which so many copies have been made . . .'
Lot 75 'A very ancient chair of oak which came out of Glastonbury Abbey. On it are carved these sentences: ' . . . This chair from its authenticity, orthodox shape and extreme comfort has been repeatedly copied, particularly for the late Earl Bathurst'.
12. 2nd day of Sale, 17 April 1856. Lot 199. 'The Original Carved Oak "Glastonbury Chair" formerly in Glastonbury Abbey, a most interesting relic of the Sixteenth Century, and worthy of a place in the British Museum. It has the following original inscription carved on it: . . . ' There is no record of the purchaser or the price realised.
13. Smyth Pigott paid seventy guineas for the chair at the Strawberry Hill sale. It is possible that he was more interested in the connection with Walpole. Other pieces in his collection were associated with famous names. The chair was sold again in 1849 at the Brockley Hall sale on the twelfth day, Lot 351; the description follows that at Strawberry Hill verbatim.
14. *Illustrated History of Furniture, From the Earliest to the Present Time*. Frederick Litchfield, 1899.
15. P286, 'Barrack Furniture and Camp Equipment'. Folding Camp Stools. (illustrated) With back and canvas seat . . . each 1/4.
16. Casa del Petrarca, Via Valleselle, Arqua-Petrarca. (Padova).
17. cf Plates 201 & 202, p. 183, from *The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600* by Peter Thornton, Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1991.
18. Illustrated in Victoria and Albert Museum Large Picture Book No. 10 Plate VI, first published 1951, and in *Oak Furniture, The British Tradition* by Victor Chinnery, p. 232, Figs. 3:3 and 3:3a. Antique Collectors Club, 1974.
19. The catalogue of the Auction has recently been lost.
20. There is no evidence even to suggest that the Treasurer might have had any room to keep his own furniture. In a survey of the Abbey made in 1535, out of 175 halls, chambers or offices not one was allocated to the Treasurer.
21. List given in *Monasticon Anglicanum*.
22. e.g. *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* by Henry Shaw.
23. 'A very ancient chair of oak, which came out of Glastonbury-abbey; . . . Lord Bathurst had several chairs copied from this'. From *A Description of the Villa of Mr Horace Walpole, . . . with an Inventory of the Furniture* . . . Thomas Kirgate, 1784.
24. cf article 'Chairs Ancient and Gothick' by John Cornforth, in *Country Life* 9 September 1993. Quoted by permission.
25. The author's opinion after a personal inspection.
26. Illustrated in *Country Life*, 9 September 1993.
27. The subject has been very fully discussed by Dr Penelope Eames in her *Furniture in England, France, and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*. Furniture History Vol. XIII 1977, p. 182 et seq.
28. Quoted from *The Romantic Interior* by Clive Wainwright.
29. Engraved by J. Thompson from an original drawing by T. Unwins, London, published for *The European Magazine*, 1 April 1820. A version of the same print appears in Britton's *Autobiography*, 1840. It is not known whether the chair actually existed outside the artist's imagination.
30. Plates in the book by Shaw have various dates between 1 May 1824 and 1 January 1825.
31. *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture* by J. C. Loudon, 1833, p. 1101 para. 2171.
32. He drew the Vicar's Close in 1835.
33. Information kindly supplied by Luke Millar.
34. *Hints on Household Taste* by Charles Eastlake, 1868, p. 64.
35. Information kindly supplied by Clive Wainwright.
36. From Litchfield, 1899.
37. The sitter was Lily, daughter of J. Noble, Esq. The painting was illustrated in colour on the front cover of *Country Life*, 22 September 1988.