THE LABURNUM TRADITION IN SCOTLAND

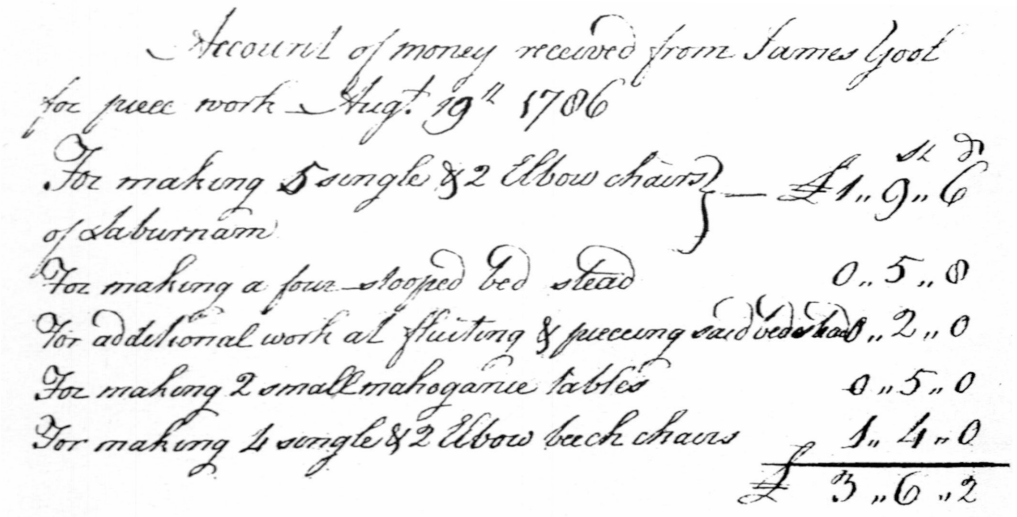
David Jones

In Perthshire and Angus today, furniture made from laburnum, the surviving remnants of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition, can still be seen in everyday use. Chairs made from this distinctive dark wood can be found in old established offices, private houses, or in folk museum collections, and there are still cabinet makers living who will recall the working qualities of laburnum, calling it 'Scotch Walnut' or more rarely, the 'Pease Cod' tree. The wood to which they refer is not the small yellow-flowered tree found so commonly in suburban gardens throughout England, but a much larger species, *Cytisus Alpinus*, which thrives in Scotland and was perhaps the most highly prized amongst the more unusual cabinet- and chair-making woods — birch, larch, alder, rowan, broom, and elder — which have been employed in the country.

Botanical literature records a wide variety of uses for *Cytisus Alpinus*; Loudon for instance notes that: 'The ordinary use of the wood in the north of Scotland ... is to form alternate staves with the wood of the holly, or the spindle tree, in making small noggins, or bickers; but it is also used for the bowls of punch ladles; for flutes, and other musical instruments, for knife handles, pegs, and wedges; and for pulleys and blocks.'[1] In France, Switzerland, and Germany he observed that the same species was used to make oars and the poles for sedan chairs. Great numbers of Scottish woodwind instruments, flutes, oboes, clarinets and recorders, were turned from laburnum, and many examples survive; but the wood was in particular demand amongst bagpipe makers. For the best bagpipes the hardest possible wood was required and laburnum was a locally available material which had the qualities of hardness, weight and suitability for turning. It had also a very attractive colour and looked good when highly polished or embellished with ivory ornaments. Hugh Cheape has documented the use of laburnum in bagpipe making and attributed its wane in the early nineteenth century to the increased use of imported cocus wood and later on, African Blackwood.[2]

William Boutcher, nurseryman at Comely Garden, Edinburgh, and author of *Forest Trees* (Edinburgh, 1775), alludes to the versatile nature of *Cytisus Alpinus* and makes an early reference to its use for furniture: 'It is very valuable for sundry purposes, and by some preferred even to mahogany for its solidity and beautiful colour, which is bright yellow veined with dark purple, and I myself have seen a large table and a dozen chairs of it, in the possession of a noble Lord, which good judges of elegant furniture thought the finest of those kinds they ever seen.'[3]

Boutcher was writing as a plantsman — the 'bright yellow veined with dark purple' is the colour of the freshly-cut wood (which is also remarkably fragrant). The heartwood soon darkens upon exposure to air but the sapwood remains a bright whitish-yellow and this can be seen in distinctive contrasting streaks or highlights in furniture made from 'Scots Laburnum'. By all accounts for furniture making its properties were ideal; it was an attractive, strong wood and it could be procured in good-sized pieces. The mature trees reached forty feet, with large specimens achieving a trunk circumference of up to eleven feet.

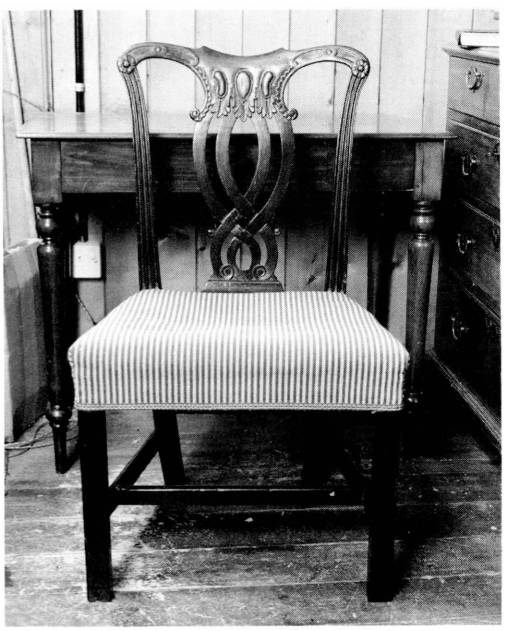


Account of money received from James Yoot
for piece work Augt 19th 1786

	£	s	d
For making 5 single & 2 Elbow chairs of Laburnam	1	9	6
For making a four stooped bed stead	0	5	0
For additional work at fluiting & pieceing said bedstead	0	2	0
For making 2 small mahoganie tables	0	5	0
For making 4 single & 2 Elbow beech chairs	1	4	0
	£ 3	6	2

1. Receipt detailing laburnum furniture supplied to Kinnaird Castle, 1786
The Earl of South Esk

2. Brander back chair. George Sandeman, Perth 1789
Mr and Mrs R. F. Waterston, Leslie, Fife



3. Chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

4. Upholstered elbow chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

5. Cupboard dresser collected from a Perthshire farmhouse, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

From a sample study of country house papers, laburnum appears to have found favour with fashionable furniture makers and their patrons in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, but almost exclusively in the East, Perth and Montrose being notable centres of production. An exciting discovery in 1987 was of a set of brander back dining chairs made in very dark laburnum by George Sandeman of Perth (1724–1803) a leading cabinet maker who is well known for the glamorous broom wood furniture he supplied to the Duke of Atholl in 1758–59. These chairs (Fig. 2) demonstrate the good carving qualities of laburnum, in a regional pattern frequently found in conjunction with the wood. They were made for Sandeman's own daughter, for her new house in Edinburgh. In a letter of April 1789 the cabinet maker writes: 'I have in Perth a set of lyburnum chairs, exactly like your mahogany ones', continuing 'You may have another kind as most agreeable to yourselves, but they are lik'd by many'.[4] It appears that laburnum was less well known in Edinburgh than it was in the North-East.

North of the Tay, a number of prominent landowners commissioned local makers to provide laburnum furniture for their houses. John Scott of Montrose, for instance, supplied at least two sets of laburnum chairs to Sir David Carnegie, Kinnaird, in 1786–87 (Fig. 1) for which there are surviving bills still at Kinnaird Castle.[5] Loudon records public sales of

6. Pembroke table, eighteenth or early nineteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

laburnum timber at Brechin Castle and Panmure in November 1809 at which the wood went for half a guinea a foot. He quotes 'It was all bought by cabinetmakers, who were as anxious to get the small and middle-sized trees as they were to have the large ones'.[6]

But perhaps the best country house collection of laburnum furniture in Scotland is at Blair Castle, Perthshire. This is a good representative anthology because it includes examples from a wide range including 'fashionable provincial' and simple wright-made pieces. It is also an indication that the early collecting of Scottish vernacular furniture was an aristocratic initiative. Lord James Murray, later 9th Duke of Atholl, assembled this group immediately before the First World War, as part of a much larger collection of 'Old Scots Furniture' categorised according to indigenous wood types. Of the laburnum he wrote: 'This furniture was all made in Perthshire and Angus. It was the custom for the smaller lairds to have their furniture made by local cabinet-makers in imitation of the Chippendale and Adams (*sic*) furniture procured from London by the wealthier landlords. Mahogany not being procurable they used the local laburnam (*sic*) of which the centre core is very hard and almost as dark as mahogany. Sometimes the outer white sap-wood is noticeable.'[7]

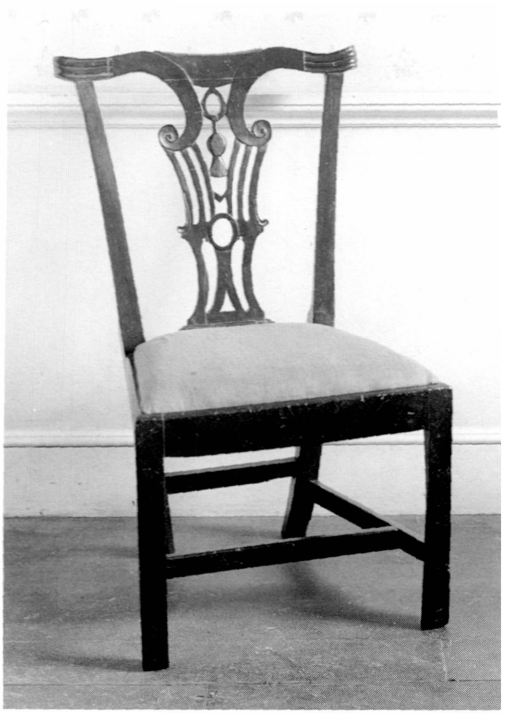
7. 'Director' style chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

8. 'Director' style chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

'Lairds Furniture' in fashionable taste is represented in the collection by items shown in Figures 3 and 4, a nicely carved single chair which has affinities with Chippendale's Director designs, and a dwarf upholstered elbow chair, from a pair. These are well made pieces intended to have smart upholstery and suitable for the library or dining room. Murray's furniture hunting grounds, however, included farmhouses both on the Atholl estates and further afield; from these he procured several cupboard-dressers which express regional personality. One of these, which follows a recognisable Perthshire pattern with deeply-panelled doors, moulded cornice and plinth, is illustrated in Figure 5. Case furniture in laburnum does not seem to have been uncommon but little survives; this is a particularly important extant example. With the exception of the back and baseboards, it is made in solid laburnum in which the characteristic yellow streaks are particularly visible. Falling into the same category of farmhouse furniture is the small pembroke table illustrated in Figure 6. This has incised grooves in place of stringing on its drawer-edges and legs.

As in Wales, wright-made furniture in native woods survived in Scotland throughout the nineteenth century, resisting the inroads made by mass-produced designs in cheap mahogany veneer and deal. There was some conservatism in the use of patterns and the 'Chippendale' splat back retained its popularity even into the twentieth century. Illustrated here (Figs 7–11) is a group of chairs which reflect this design preference. All have stretchers, as is usually the case with laburnum seat furniture.

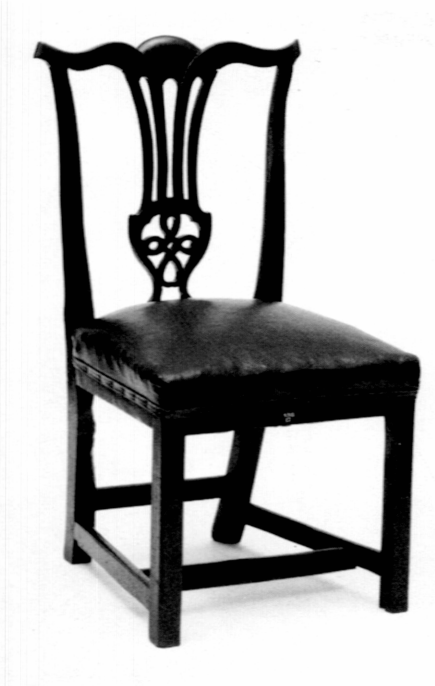
9. 'Director' style chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl



10. 'Director' style chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

Most of the chairs in the Blair Castle collection are in Chippendale or Sheraton (Fig. 12) styles. This may reflect 'antique dealing' taste, as they were purchased by James Murray from prominent dealers in Edinburgh and Perth. Regional chair patterns are represented by scattered examples in other collections such as Angus Folk Museum, Glamis and The National Museum of Scotland. The Angus Folk Museum possesses a striking laburnum chair (Fig. 13) with a back formed by four plain banisters between rails. This is related to a distinctive group of chairs from the Angus Glens, all with similarly stark, geometric back designs and including 'ladder back' chairs of similar construction. The National Museum of Scotland has in its collection a 'button back' armed chair (Fig. 14) which, apart from its wood type and seat construction, is curiously similar to the button backs which Bill Cotton has identified as being a strong East Anglian tradition. Button back chairs are in fact quite widespread throughout Fife and Angus, appearing in native woods such as ash and elm (Ulmus Glabra). Close social connections caused by the fishing trade and easy sea transport between these Scottish and English regions may provide an explanation for this stylistic link.

Returning briefly to Blair Castle, one last example deserves mention and that is a child's chair made from assorted pieces of laburnum, probably from different trees (Fig. 15). It is an excellent study piece, exhibiting many different qualities of the wood's appearance.



11. 'Director' style chair, eighteenth century
Trustees of the National Museum of Scotland

12. Sheraton style chair, eighteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl

Laburnum can vary greatly in colour and the nature of its grain but it is commonly thought of as a very dark wood with a quiet, slightly metallic figure. In practice, it can sometimes appear to be surprisingly light-coloured, with a wide grain. These characteristics seem to be due to the soil type in which the timber is grown. Loudon notes that laburnum is 'darkest when grown on poor calcareous soil; and lightest in the *C.(L) alpinus* when grown in deep rich soil',[8] and his observation is borne out by the fact that laburnum furniture of the same wood type from Fife, where the soil is very rich, is of a distinctly nut-brown colouring. Figure 16 illustrates a laburnum chair from the Fife coast, which is light-coloured and relatively wide-grained, but which displays familiar yellow streaks of sapwood. This pattern, in which the stay rail is shaped like a propeller, or sometimes curved to resemble a spokeshave, is common throughout Fife and the central Lowlands. In this case it possesses a more specific regional signature because of its laburnum construction and inset sea-ivory decoration.

Sarah Medlam in *Regional Furniture* v (1991),[9] raised the important question of the furniture maker as purchaser and his sources of supply. Some attempt should be made to address this issue in a study of laburnum furniture. In what circumstances was laburnum cultivated and how was it obtained by the cabinet maker? Most of the specimens of *Cytisus Alpinus* to which Loudon refers in *Arboretum et Fructicetum Britannicum* were either in nurseries or on private estates in Scotland, which might indicate that the trees were raised

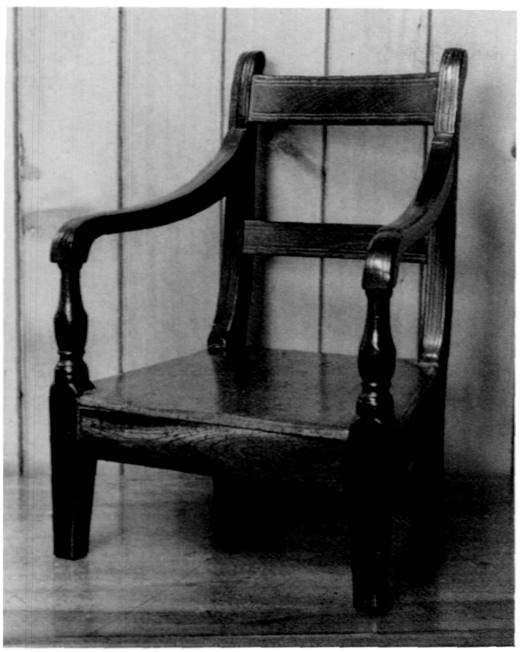
13. Armchair, early nineteenth century, *Angus Folk Museum Collection*
The National Trust for Scotland

14. Button back chair, early nineteenth century
Trustees for the National Museum of Scotland

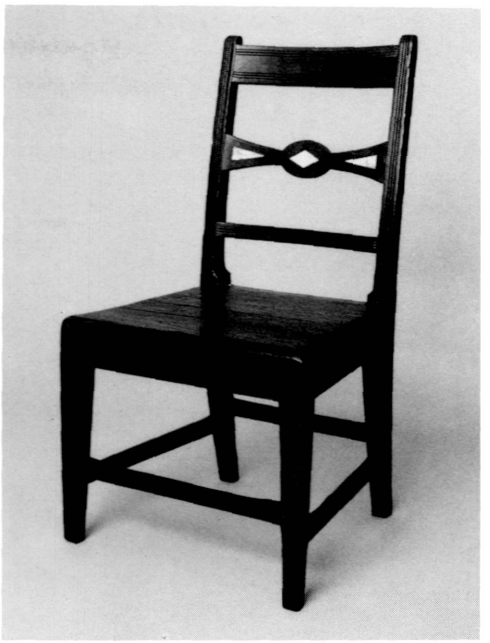
chiefly for either botanical or ornamental purposes and that they were not grown specifically for furniture making. There is certainly some evidence to show that laburnum furniture was commissioned to be made from estate grown trees of this type.

George Home of Paxton, for instance, engaged William Trotter of Edinburgh to make furniture from assorted pieces of his estate-grown laburnum in 1814.[10] But there is also good evidence of commercial planting of laburnum, which enabled production of furniture on a much larger scale. As early as 1775, William Boutcher recommended the fast growing qualities of *Cytisus Alpinus* as ideal for plantation and Loudon discusses this in practice, noting that 'it is much cultivated in some parts of Fifeshire and Forfarshire'. There are no laburnum plantations surviving today, but they are remembered. Local people in Forfar, for instance, recall a commercial plantation on Dunnichen Hill, which was set during the Napoleonic Wars.[11] Loudon's mention of laburnum sales during this period might indicate that standing timber was harvested then and new trees planted out in anticipation of a shortage of imported cabinet woods. Laburnum seems to have been a particularly valuable timber at this time.

The tradition of making furniture from Laburnum *Cytisus Alpinus* in Scotland enjoyed a peak of activity between 1775 and 1830. The wood was used in the solid, in the same manner as mahogany or other hard woods, and this differs from the use of laburnum as a showy banded or 'oyster' veneer in élite furniture of the late seventeenth and early



15. Child's chair, early nineteenth century, Blair Castle
The Duke of Atholl



16. Lowland pattern chair, laburnum inlaid with sea-ivory, nineteenth century, Fife coast
Private collection

eighteenth century.[12] After 1830, laburnum seems to have dropped out of fashion but was used for common furniture where locally available. In modern times, the tradition of working this attractive and functional wood is kept alive by turners producing small decorative items.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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