

THREE MASONIC CHAIRS AT MINERVA LODGE ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE

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In the past, many large and magnificent ceremonial chairs were made for the Inns of Court, City Companies, the use of British diplomats abroad, Masonic Lodges and for the great occasions of state. The design of these chairs generally follows contemporary fashions, although some patrons favoured slightly conservative styles. Many skilfully incorporate traditional emblems in their decoration.

Of all the great chairs used for special occasions, Masonic chairs survive in the largest numbers. Because of their respect for tradition, many Lodges still have their original trio of a Master's chair, accompanied by the Senior and Junior Wardens' chairs. These are frequently spectacular examples of the chairmaker's craft. Furthermore, many Lodges have kept their old minute and account books which may well contain references to commissioning the furniture. For example, in 1768, Wright and Elwick, the leading Wakefield cabinet-makers, were paid £8 9s. 6d. for '3 Mahog Elbow Chairs with high backs' which still serve in the Zetland Street Lodge.¹ Since very few firms identified their furniture with a trade label or name stamp, usually the only way to establish a maker is through tracing relevant documentation.

Minerva Lodge, Ashton-under-Lyne, is fortunate to retain a set of three splendidly elaborate Masonic chairs. The mahogany frames have high tapering legs, united by stretcher rails, serpentine-fronted slip seats and well-moulded arms and backs. Decoration is concentrated on the finely carved openwork splats which centre on the Prince of Wales feathers with tied ribbons, classical paterae and acanthus foliage above. The compositions also feature the working tools of the Mason and other symbols such as a beehive cresting on the Master's chair. Many of these emblems are represented in outline rather than relief carving and were originally painted and gilded, although the colour is now sadly blackened. Apart from this, the condition of the chairs is remarkably good, some iron straps have been used to strengthen the top rails, but mercifully the legs have never been cut down which would ruin their carefully studied proportions.

A search of the Lodge account books by Mr J N Lees led to the discovery of several interesting payments, the first being under 22 January 1807: 'Expenses on inspecting furniture at different Lodges £2 5s. 9d.'. The Lodge of Minerva had been established in 1793 and presumably in the early years managed without its own ceremonial chairs. Here we have evidence of how the officers selected a suitable pattern of chair, the choice of a design incorporating the Prince of Wales feathers encircled by his coronet may have been a delicate compliment to the Grand Mastership of the Prince of Wales (later George IV) from 1790–1813, rather than being inspired by a plate in George Hepplewhite's *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 1788, which first included the three plumes in a chair splat.

The next payment, entered on 18 February 1807, was 'to William Walker for furniture



1. Master's chair (detail) made by William Walker in 1807 for Minerva Lodge, Ashton-under-Lyne, Cheshire; mahogany with a painted and gilt decoration

Courtesy of the Lodge Committee.

£60'. This sum almost certainly relates to commissioning the three extant chairs and probably also included supplying some steps or a dais. William Walker was an old-established cabinet-maker in Ashton-under-Lyne and it is extremely satisfying to have identified such distinguished examples of his work. Three more disbursements were made in July 1807: William Walker received £14 14s. 2d. to settle the bill of John Wych, a local timber merchant; he was paid 17s. 4d. being the final balance of his account, while H. Mills, painter of Oldham, received £8 2s., presumably for ornamenting the devices on the back splats. These chairs are accordingly uncommonly well documented.

The only mystery is the origin of the chair(s) on which the design was based. The prototype is likely to have dated from the early 1790's, because stylistically the Minerva Lodge chairs would have been rather old-fashioned by 1807. Confirmation that this particular design was popular comes from a set of three Masonic chairs which were sold by Sotheby's in January 1964 and acquired for the collection at Freemasons' Hall. They had been sent to auction by a non-Mason living in Sale, Cheshire, who had acquired them at



2. Junior Warden's chair (detail), ensuite with the chair in pl. 3

Courtesy of the Lodge Committee.

a local clearance sale. The design and detailing of these chairs is strikingly similar to those at Minerva Lodge, although they appear to have been carved by a different hand. Freemasons' Hall also owns a Master's chair and a Junior Warden's chair of unknown provenance, but virtually identical character.² Fortunately, the paintwork on these related sets is well preserved and would provide valuable evidence if it was ever decided to restore the old painted surfaces on the Minerva chairs.

Finally, it is rewarding to have discovered three sets of Masonic chairs of the same design type, although apparently by different craftsmen. While patchy, the evidence strongly suggests they could well embody a north-west regional pattern.



**3. Senior Warden's chair, ensuite with the two companion chairs in
pls. 1 & 2**

Courtesy of the Lodge Committee.

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REFERENCES

1. C. G. Gilbert, 'Wright and Elwick of Wakefield 1748-1824: a Study of Provincial Patronage', *Furniture History*, XII, 1976, pl. 13B.
2. E. Joy, 'Some unrecorded Masonic Ceremonial Chairs of the Georgian period', *Connoisseur*, June 1965, p. 162, Fig. 7.