

# UNCONVENTIONAL WINDSORS FROM THE COTSWOLDS

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Within the field of vernacular furniture making, it is perhaps surprising how little overlap there appears to have been between cabinet making and joinery, and the trades of Windsor or ladder and spindle back chair making. Certainly there is no known example of a Windsor chair maker in England producing ladder and spindle back chairs or vice versa, and there are few documented examples of Windsor chairs made by a cabinet maker or joiner. An exciting recent discovery of two Windsor arm chairs (Fig. 1) evidently made by a cabinet maker, has provided an illuminating insight into the results achieved by the use of cabinet making techniques applied to the Windsor form. The chairs are part of the Council furnishings of an ancient assembly of trustees of a Cotswold market town, and are believed to have formed part of a larger number. At first sight they appear to be classic Windsor designs from the 1740–60 period, and their regional origin might be casually placed either from the Thames Valley, or more likely, from the West Country tradition, since the back assembly has spindles alone, and lacks the flattened outer uprights conventional in Thames Valley Windsors.

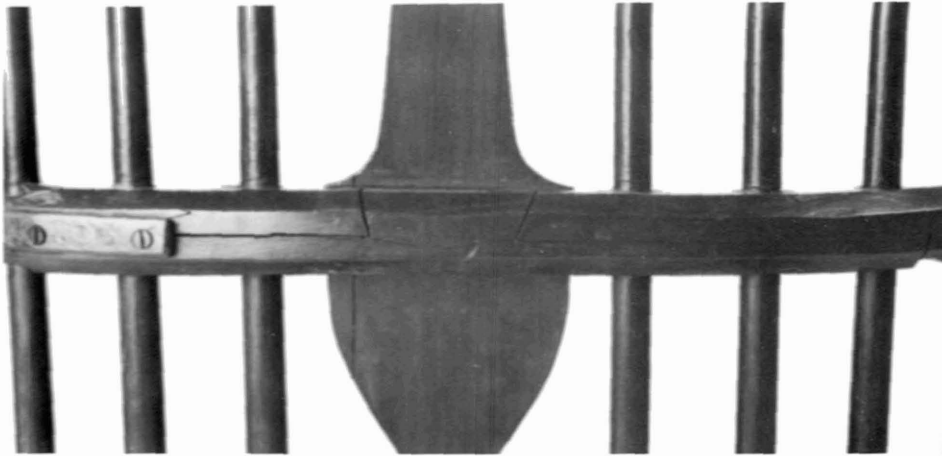
The chairs are of an imposing design, with large, saddle shaped seats, supported by four extraordinary bold cabriole legs, terminating in paw feet, giving the chairs a clear impression of an animalistic design. Although superficially conventional in constructional terms, on closer inspection, the chairs reveal themselves to have aspects of their structure which indicate that the maker had close familiarity with the processes of cabinet makers and joiners, rather than that of a specialist Windsor chair maker. The woods used in their construction are entirely congruent with chairs of this generic type, being made of Yew with an Elm seat, and the use of turned spindles and stretchers and sawn under-arm supports, vasiform splat and comb rail also follow conventional design and construction codes. However, the arm construction of a typical comb back chair of this kind would normally be made from a yew branch, steamed and bent, before shaping to a correct profile. In the case of these chairs, the arms are made from two sawn sections which are joined with a dovetail form of tenon to the rear (Fig. 2). The arms are chamfered with four corner facets in the 'Gothic' manner, and terminate with thin platforms of yew which are pegged to the arms to form a hand grip (Fig. 3). The seats were made with tremendous strength of contour with large dish-shaped areas flowing up to a pronounced raised border around the sides and back, and a distinctive shaped central pommel in the front. Typically, Windsor chair legs of this period mortice through the seat with round dowels which are then visibly wedged to secure them. Windsor chair makers specialising in making the cabriole legged form in conjunction with comb backs, were adept at creating flowing legs with refined curvatures, terminating in a round, flattened feet with a round underpads.

The form of the legs in these chairs is extraordinary, and may be unique in the English tradition, both in their feet design, and the jointing technique into the seat. The front legs have shaped knees which create a rather limited cabriole form, leading to turned tapered

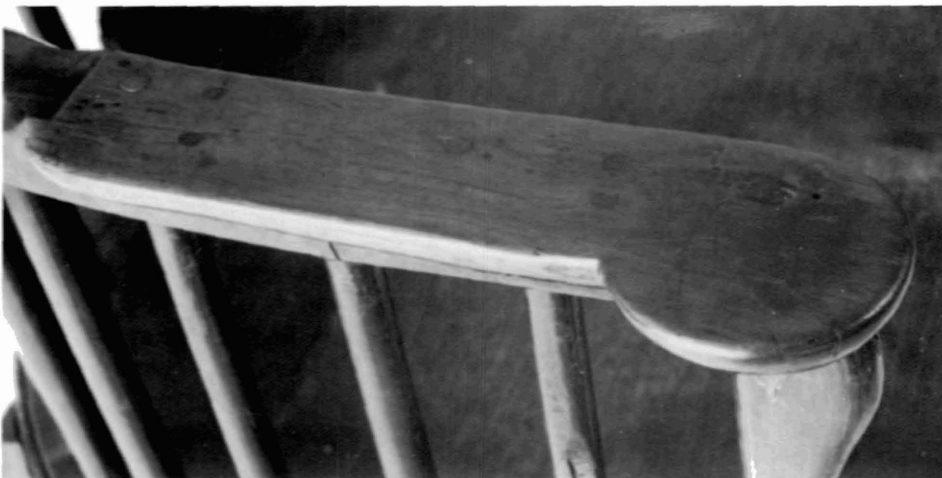
legs terminating in gouge-carved animal feet. The legs are morticed and tenoned into the corners of the square-fronted seat, and form an integral and exposed part of the seat design. The rear legs incline backwards, and similarly terminate in animal paw feet. In this case, however they mortice into the seat from below, without appearing on the surface. To the rear, a shaped section acts as a support between the legs and the seat (Fig. 4). The legs are connected by turned 'H' form stretchers, and notwithstanding some repairs, the unconventional morticing and tenoning device seems to have been both effective and aesthetically pleasing. The maker of these chairs is yet to be discovered, but the clue of the turned spindles in the back indicates that he was familiar with the West Country code of Windsor design, and may have interpreted this chair design within the practices of a cabinet maker who had considerable skills, including carving but was seemingly not equipped to steam and bend the hoops which form a traditional part of a Windsor design.



1. Comb back Windsor chair.  
Yew with elm seat, c.1750;  
100 h, 57 bh, 64 w, 44½ d.  
One of a pair of unusual  
Windsor chairs which show  
indications of being made by a  
cabinet maker who was also  
familiar with Windsor chair  
making techniques



2. Detail showing how the sawn arm sections are secured to the rear with a dovetail form. Note the chamfered facets to the arms, in the 'Gothic' manner



3. Detail showing the thin flattened sections of yew, pegged to the arms, to form hand-grips and a forearm rest



4. Detail showing how the rear legs are morticed into the seat from below, and supported with a shaped section