DARVEL CHAIRS

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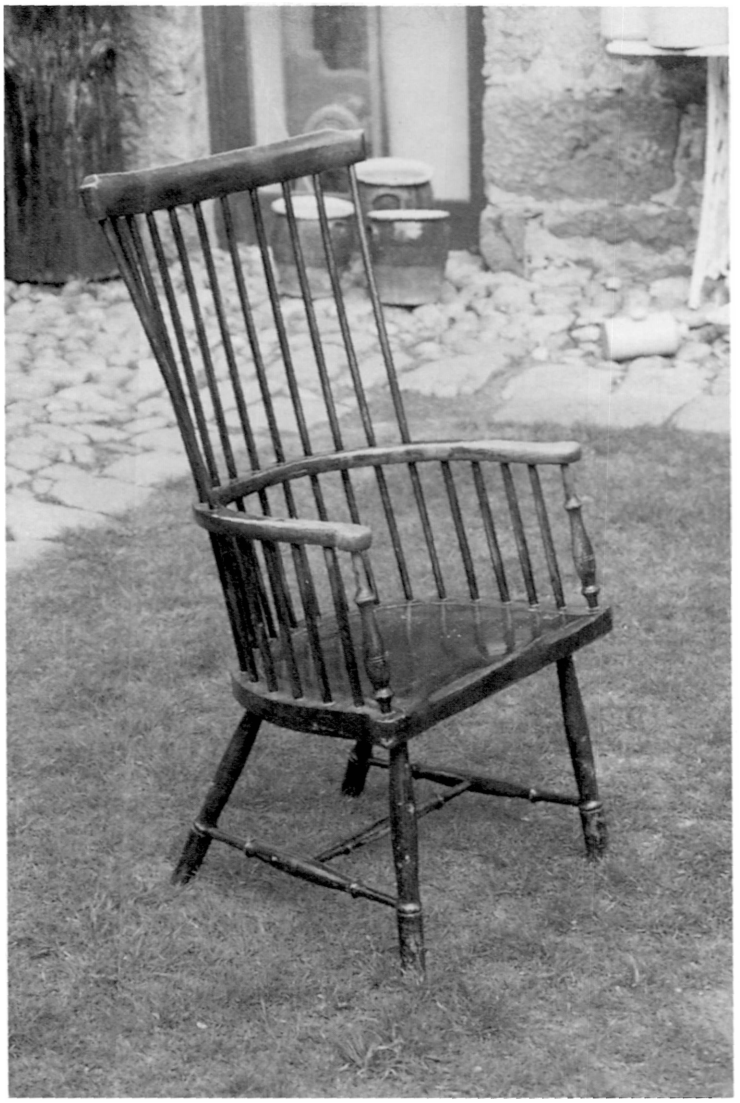
Nothing has been written about turned chairs in Scotland, perhaps because the so called 'Windsor' chair has never enjoyed the dominance here that it has in other countries. Nevertheless, the making of turned chairs has been firmly established at various centres, the most prominent of which was the manufacturing town of Darvel, in the Irvine Valley, Ayrshire.

The West Country experienced a textile boom in the late eighteenth century which had specific effect in the small weaving towns to the south of Glasgow. Darvel, twenty-four miles south of the city, was engaged in the production of linen cloths and fine plain-weave cotton muslins which were produced on hand looms and sold on to Glasgow merchants. The steady development of this trade and increasing concentration upon muslin production allowed the town's population to increase by seventy-five per cent between 1792–1821.[1] In the following period, until the introduction of power-driven Jacquard machines in 1875, the three small towns of Darvel, Newmilns and Galston in the Irvine valley had nearly two thousand hand looms in operation. Successful industry provided the steady income necessary to foster the emergence of local chairmaking, but there were other particular local circumstances which were to encourage the craft. The first requirement was a good supply of suitable materials for making chair components. Although the Irvine valley had been relatively well-wooded in the seventeenth century, it was not until the early years of the eighteenth century that proper forestry management was introduced to intensify and improve the production of native timber in the area. The instigator of these new methods was the improving landowner John, Earl of Loudoun, who succeeded to the Loudoun Estates in 1731. In *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, 1792, The Rev. Dr George Lawrie described the silvicultural activities of this Earl:

> . . . he is said to have planted above one million trees. The trees are mostly ash, elm, oak and many of them are of a good size . . . The weeding and thinning the plantations of elm and ash, etc., yield from two to three hundred pounds annually. Many ash and elm trees fell at one, two and sometimes three guineas. They were all planted from the year 1733 progressively, to the year 1775.

By the late eighteenth century, Darvel had a readily available supply of excellent timber which had reached a good state of maturity. Lawrie indicates, in his valuation of the 'weeding and thinning' operation, that in 1792 the controlled harvesting of elm and ash stocks was being operated on a considerable scale. The resilient qualities of ash, and to a lesser extent, elm were ideal for turned chairmaking and it was these woods which were in greatest demand in the valley.

A second factor, the existence of a tradition of water powered milling, provided a favourable foundation for the establishment of chair turning. There were nine water powered mills in the immediate vicinity of Darvel, each using the motive power of the River Irvine. Climbing demand for textile products, and a dramatic increase in corn



1. Comb-backed turned armchair, by J. K. Black, Darvel

Courtesy of Roger Milton Esq.

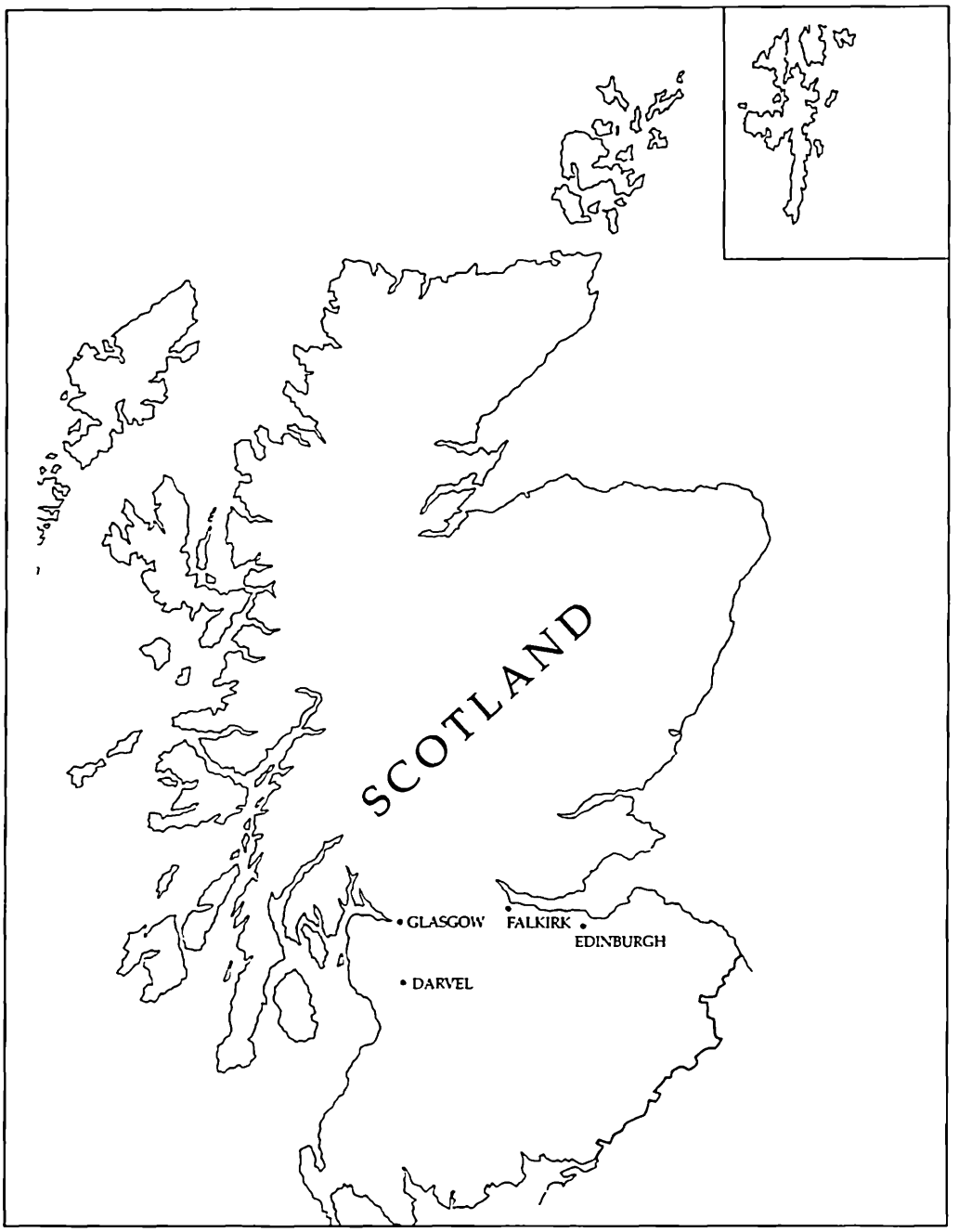
2. Maker's stamp

yields during the second half of the eighteenth century had seen the number of mills multiply and, associated with this, an increased number of local millwrights. Their knowledge of water-driven machinery was presumably easily transferred to production of the geared lathes used in chair component manufacture. The handlooms used in the area were made by local wrights, and were constructed entirely of wood. Two old established firms involved in this manufacture were those of Hood[2] and Mair.[3] Thus woodworking skills in Darvel were developed to a high level. If the market for an item such as turned chairs did happen to diminish, there were other opportunities for wrights seeking employment. At least until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 there seems to have been no reason for the local market to have diminished and it was only after this date that there was a downward pressure upon the wages of Darvel textile workers.

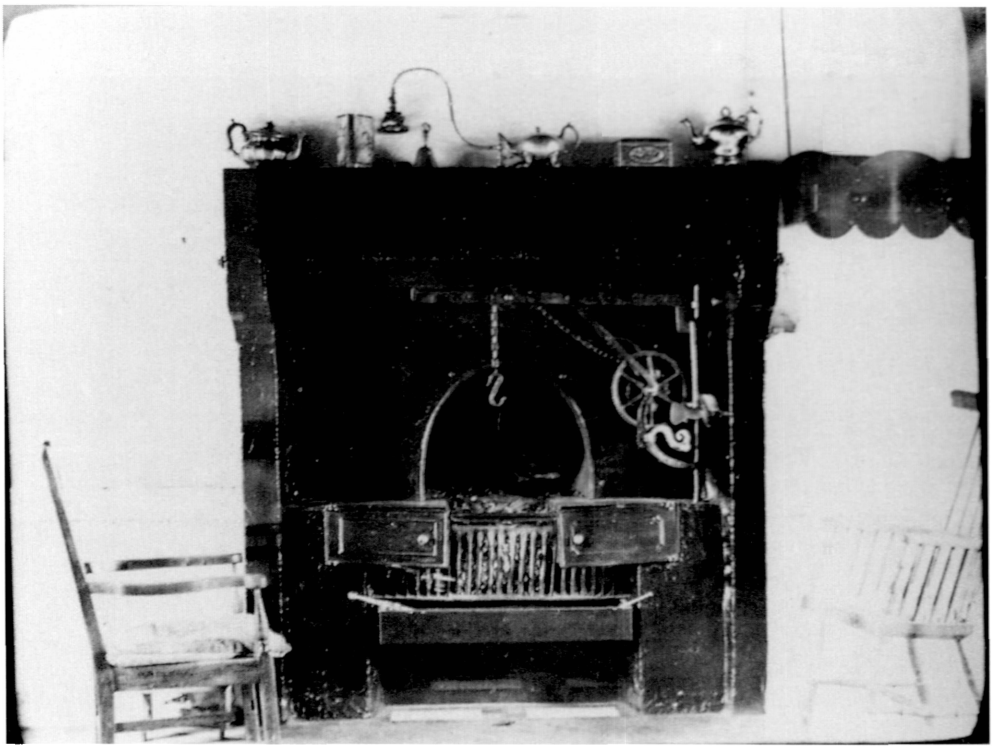
No evidence of a chair 'mill' exists in the area today, but large numbers of tall comb-backed chairs within a ten-mile radius of the town bear testimony to the vigour of the chairmaking trade in Darvel from the late eighteenth century onwards. The chairs are of a consistent design. They have idiosyncratic seats, which correspond exactly with the shape of the arm bow, creating a peculiarly boxy and enclosing effect which is unlike anything so far identified in the English tradition. The seats have 'ears' at their front corners which echo the shape of the out-turned ends of the chair arms and the whole seat has a marked backwards tilt. The 'ears' and arm terminals are joined by characteristic turned spindles which are similar in shape to lace-making bobbins. The outermost spindles of the chair back flare outwards to support a broad curved-comb top rail with notched ends. Legs, too have a pronounced flare and each are united by turned stretchers in an H shape. Examples of these chairs are made in ash or elm with seats of elm or gean (cherry).

The only local maker to have stamped his chairs appears to have been J. C. Black, whose impressed mark J. C. BLACK, MAKER, DARVEL appears on the side of his seats (Fig. 2). Black's chairs are also of ash and elm construction. Despite changes in the industry of the area and inevitable periods of depression during the nineteenth century, chairs of this pattern continued in constant production. Darvel mills provided employment for a number of immigrants from England and Northern Ireland during the middle of the century, some coming to work for the successful company of Alexander Morton and Co. (est. 1867)[4] producing high quality woven textiles and carpets for retailers such as Morris & Co., the Arts and Crafts decorators of London. A present day Darvel resident recalled that her grandparents had come from Cornwall in 1870 with no furniture and had bought Darvel chairs, which the granddaughter still has, to provide best seating in their new home. Most of the mid to late nineteenth century Darvel chairs are anonymous, but documentary evidence and local reminiscences have provided some maker's names. For instance, the local schoolmaster in 1904 recalled some aspects of Darvel furniture making in earlier times;

> The joiners were John Mair, Hugh Rankin, Andrew Mair and John McMath. The last named was famous for sharpening shears of the cloth cutters, and for making 'Windsor Chairs'. I remember him telling me how he knew almost every tree that had a suitable curve in its branches for such chairs.[5]



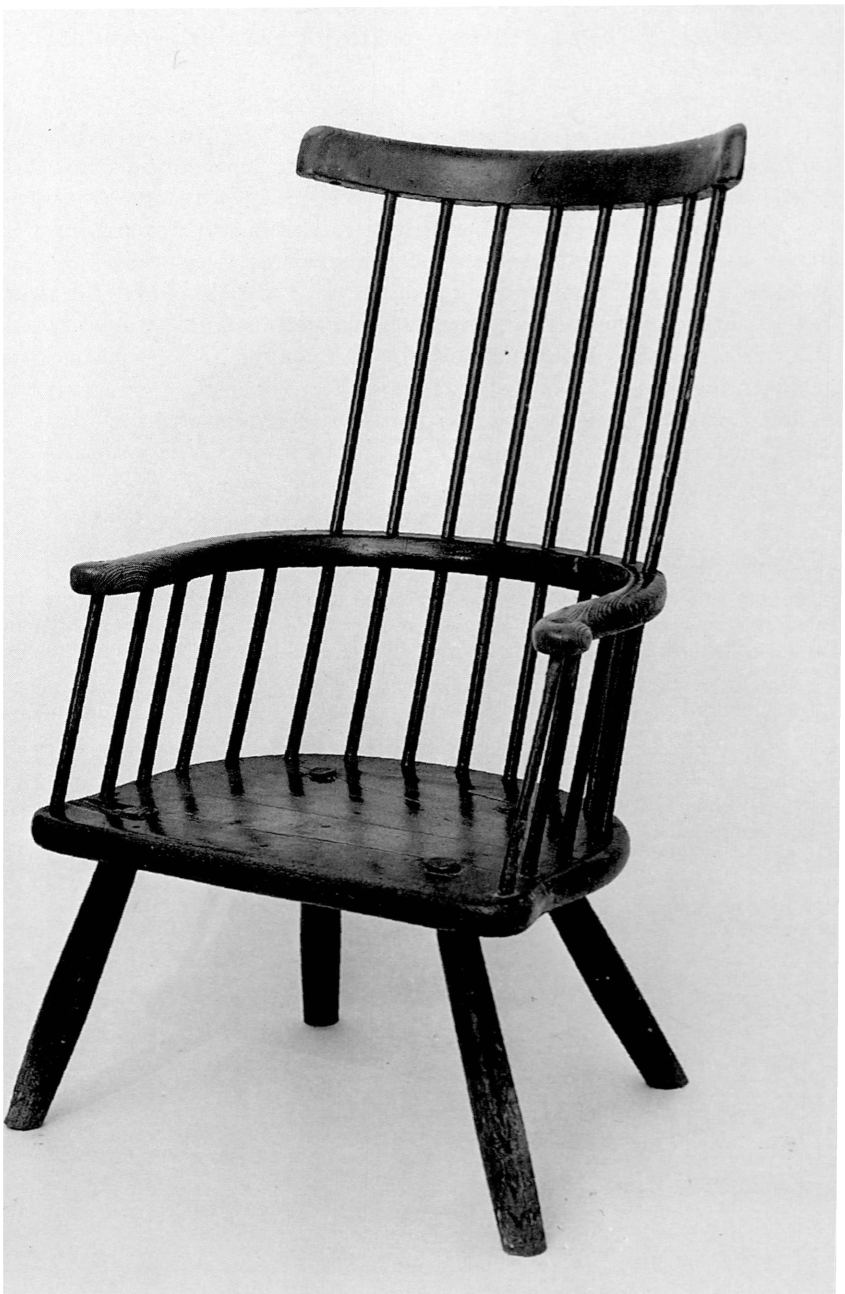
3. Map showing location of Darvel in relation to Glasgow, Falkirk and Edinburgh



4. Kitchen hearth of Darvel Mill House in the mid nineteenth century. This view shows a Darvel chair identical to that by J. K. Black in Fig. 1 and, on the other side of the hearth, a Scottish kitchen chair of more common type, with dyked seat and out-turned curving arms

Courtesy of James Mair Esq.

This memory can be placed in time by the reference to cloth cutters' shears. By the mid-nineteenth century these long-handled shears had been replaced by machinery in specially designed clipping mills. John McMath can indeed be found in the first half of the nineteenth century; he is described in the Parish of Loudoun Census returns for 1841 as a wright aged forty, born in Darvel. It is rare for craftsmen to be singled out as chairmakers in Scotland, as the term wright covers all the woodworking trades. With two identified makers, Darvel can be seen as a centre for the production of these characteristic chairs, but there is evidence that the tradition stretched further afield. An interesting well-provenanced turned chair[6] now in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland suggests that related types were made to the east of Glasgow. Although less sophisticated in construction when compared to its Darvel counterparts, the chair in fig. 4, from Mumrills Farm, Falkirk, bears definite similarities. The chair has the same very broad, curving top rail, backward tilting spindles and arm bow which echoes exactly the outline of the seat. These features create a boxy, upward-thrusting look to the design, which is unmistakable in the Darvel and Falkirk chairs. Falkirk is as



5. Comb backed turned armchair with plain spindles and without stretchers, from Mumrills farmhouse, Falkirk. Upper spindle missing

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far east of Glasgow as Darvel is south west of the city, but it is part of the same belt of industrial towns which straddles Lowland Scotland. Work in foundries and collieries here provided stable markets for chairs as did textile mill employment in Darvel and the east Ayrshire towns.

The Darvel turned chair is one of the most readily-distinguished of its type in Scotland, which supported few turned chairmaking traditions, but it is also of importance for another reason. It is a carefully-made common chair design which corresponds well with the eighteenth and nineteenth century comb backed 'Windsor' chairs of the English regions, but without its comb and upper tier of spindles it corresponds equally well with, and indeed probably owes its origins to, the low stick-backed chairs which have an ancient pedigree in The Highlands and along the west coast. These characteristic chairs, sometimes referred as 'cutty stools' because of their small size, have arm bows which follow the seat outline and a row of spindles which continue up to the front edge of the seat, creating an enclosing 'box' structure. Thus, the Darvel chair provides an intriguing link between fashionable turned chair types of the eighteenth century and the much older turned chairs of the Celtic tradition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. See *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (ed. Sir John Sinclair) No. X, Parish of Loudoun, 1792 and the *Census Report* for 1821.
2. Joseph Hood was established in Newmilns. Parish of Loudoun Census Returns for 1851 record him as employer of two men and a boy.
3. R. Mair & Son are still trading and were established in Darvel c. 1870.
4. See John Woodburn, *A History of Darvel*, pp. 30–44.
5. Richard Tarbert, Reminiscence published in *The Kilmarnock Standard*, July 16th, 1904.
6. Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland.