

SOME WINDSOR CHAIRS AT TRINITY HOUSE, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

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The supply of turned chairs to institutions including churches, schools and meeting houses during the eighteenth century is still a relatively under-explored subject.¹ Since surviving sets are rare, the large original group of comb-back Windsor chairs in the Banqueting Hall of Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne, should be worthy of furniture historians' attention. From the evidence of inspection and comparison with documented examples of the type, these twelve chairs appear to be of mid to late-eighteenth century date. As might be expected, they have no maker's mark or stamp. There are well documented groups of chairs in other Trinity House establishments such as the foundation at Leith, which has '48 chairs and Two Armed Do.' supplied by William and James Hamilton at a cost of £38 12s. 9d. in 1774.² These have been recorded by David Jones and are of genteel, cross splat back design, not turned chairs, which are the subject of this article.

'Trinity House' probably originates in a fraternity founded by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the reign of King John and refers to four similar but self-governing Houses around the coast of Britain, (Leith, Newcastle, Hull and London), working to safeguard shipping and to make the life of the mariner more secure. Under royal authority, (the Newcastle Trinity House, for example, was made an incorporated body by Henry VII in 1492 and granted the first of a series of royal charters by Henry VIII in 1537), they administered harbours and ports, providing lighthouses, beacons and buoys as well as the carefully regulated system of licensed pilotage from which most of their income was derived. The Houses supported retired and disabled seamen and their widows; that at Newcastle also ran a school, founded in 1712.³ Newcastle's Trinity House is in the secluded Broad Chare ('chare' = alley) near the Quayside, on a site it has occupied since at least 1505. Its buildings, grouped around a courtyard, have been much altered and extended over the years and include a Chapel (1636), Banqueting Hall — 'a large room for the Company to meet in' — (1721), Almshouses (1787) and Board Room (1791); the Entrance Hall was remodelled in 1800.⁵

The records of Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne, including accounts, journals and letter books, are remarkably detailed and fairly complete, even though divided, apparently at random, between the Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Newcastle, and Trinity House itself.⁶ Careful examination of these for the period from c. 1750 to the late nineteenth century, while providing an absorbing insight into the Company's conscientious administrative and philanthropic work, has not, alas, yielded a definitive identification of these chairs.⁷ Moreover, during this period comparatively few references to furniture occur and only four specifically to chairs (two each to two purchases). From time to time a number of small payments were made to various 'upholsterers', e.g. to George West in March 1766;⁸ to Ralph Brown in July 1783,⁹ December 1789,¹⁰ June 1792,¹¹ July 1792¹² and again in August 1792;¹³ and to Bartholomew Kent in August 1784¹⁴ and October 1791.¹⁵ All these were for unspecified work. More substantial



1. Comb
back Windsor
armchair

*Trinity House,
Newcastle upon
Tyne*

payments of £23 7s. 3d. and £23 6s. 7d. respectively were made in December 1769 to Thomas Wilkinson, 'joiner', and to Bartholomew Kent for 'furniture for the low lights'¹⁶ (a lighthouse on the north bank of the Tyne). In October 1800, the upholsterer John Dobson, not to be confused with the prominent Newcastle architect of the same name, was paid £4 9s. od.¹⁷ for 'new chairs for the two lodging houses at the low lights'.¹⁸ Yet the chairs with which we are concerned are surely too impressive and numerous to be these. More probably they are to be identified with a 'sett (sic) of new chairs . . . for the Hall' ordered on March 3rd, 1766,¹⁹ when a scheme of beautification of the room was under way, and for which a certain Jo. Merryman was paid £20 14s. od.²⁰ Also in the possession of Trinity House, however, is a set of Chippendale-style dining chairs to which this order might equally well refer. Indeed, the Windsor chairs might never have been made for the Banqueting Hall, especially in view of the large size and comparative splendour of this room, but instead for one of the committee rooms. In this context the fact that the Company's constitution nominated twelve Elder Brethren may be significant.

The Board Room or 'Election Room' was substantially reconstructed in 1791, the work being largely complete by September of that year.²¹ It is probable that the records of payments to Bartholomew Kent in October 1791 and to Ralph Brown in June, July and August 1792, mentioned above, were in connection with this, but, as explained earlier, these make no mention of chairs.

'Jo. Merryman' is not identified in the accounts as a tradesman.²² Nor does his name appear in the first Newcastle Directory, that produced by Whitehead in 1778.²³ This lists no chairmakers as such, but records no fewer than thirty-one 'Cabinet-Makers and Carpenters' (including Thomas Wilkinson), five turners and seven upholsterers (Thomas Brown, Ralph Brown, Jos. Curry, Bartholomew Kent, Geo. Sanderson, Thomas Sheen and Jos. Watson),²⁴ suggesting a pattern of activity commensurate with the city's acknowledged status as an important centre of trade and consumption at this time. Never as exclusively industrial as is sometimes thought; much of the development associated with the Industrial Revolution taking place south of the river or further along the banks of the Tyne, Newcastle had always been a historic port and regional capital, its prosperity founded largely on the coal trade. Already known for the quality of its shops,²⁵ its growing cultural and architectural sophistication was symbolised by the construction of the elegant Charlotte Square (1770), Newcastle's first residential development of this kind, and the Assembly Rooms (1774-76); both were designed by the local architect William Newton (1730-98).²⁶

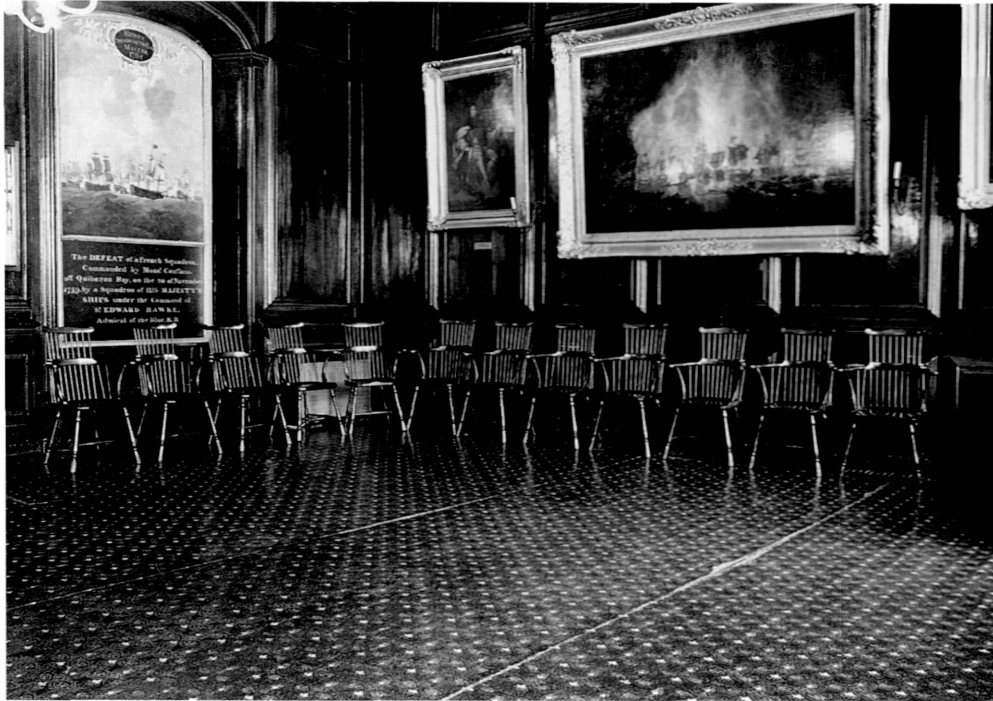
In view of all this, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Windsor chairs were made locally. Certainly Trinity House always employed local tradesmen and, almost invariably, local artists, architects (including Newton) and craftsmen as well. However, as B. D. Cotton has pointed out, chair making was first noted as a specialist craft in this area as late as 1801, there being one chair maker recorded in Newcastle upon Tyne in that year and only two in 1824.²⁷ Although it seems unlikely for an important organisation in a centre of activity like Newcastle upon Tyne, with its considerable market for commodities, chairs such as these could have been imported from further south, or by sea from London.²⁸ And even if they were those supplied by Merryman in 1766 and the latter was, presumably, a local man, then he may have been merely a supplier, rather than a maker of chairs.



2. Detail, front



3. Detail, rear



4. The set of twelve chairs in The Banqueting Hall

Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne

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REFERENCES

1. B. D. Cotton and C. G. Gilbert have done most work in tracing individual examples of regional turned chair styles in the British Isles, but few large groups supplied for institutions have been recorded.
2. Scottish Record Office GD 226/4/6, Vol. of Minutes 3rd August, 1774.
3. For an account of Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne, see J. C. Moffet, *Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne, Past, Present and Future* (1970), Tyne and Wear Archives Service (TWAS) Pamphlet no. 1186.
4. Quoted in G. McCombie, 'The Buildings of Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne' in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, Fifth Series Vol. xiii, 1985, p. 172.
5. For a detailed account of the architecture of Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne, see McCombie, op. cit.
6. See also *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Charters, Deeds, Property and Records Belonging to the Master, Pilots and Seamen of the Trinity House of Newcastle upon Tyne* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1854) and the *Appendix to Description Catalogue* (1855).
7. A 'Schedule of . . . Property in the possession of and belonging to the Master, Pilots and Seamen of the Trinity House, Newcastle upon Tyne' of 1868 (TWAS GU/TH/35/5) makes no mention of specific items but values all their 'furniture, silver, plate, books, bookcases, prints, oil paintings, charts and other articles' at

£1,500.0.0.

8. TWAS GU/TH/21/16, March 3rd, 1766: £3 6s. 2d.
9. TWAS GU/TH/21/19, July 7th, 1783: £2 11s. 10d.
10. Ibid., December 31st, 1789: £5 3s. 6d.
11. Ibid., June 4th, 1792: £12 8s. 9d.
12. Ibid., July 2nd, 1792: £8 18s. 9d.
13. Ibid., August 6th, 1792: £7 16s. 0d.
14. Ibid., August 2nd, 1784: £16 1s. 5½d.
15. Ibid., October 3rd, 1791: £7 8s. 0d.
16. TWAS GU/TH/21/16, December 4th, 1769.
17. TWAS GU/TH/21/20, October 6th, 1800.
18. Apparently the decision to order the chairs was taken on June 3rd, 1798; see Trinity House Manuscripts (THMs), 'Journal, 1793-1810'.
19. THMs., 'Journal, 1762-1772'.
20. TWAS GU/TH/21/16: June 2nd, 1766.
21. McCombie, op. cit., p. 176.
22. The *Newcastle Courant* for March 3rd, 1798, reported the death 'on Saturday last' at Boldon, near Sunderland of 'Mr John Merryman, aged 93' but made no mention of his trade or profession.
23. *Whitehead's Newcastle Directory for 1778*; this was reprinted with an Introduction by J. R. Boyle (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1889).
24. These figures remained more or less consistent for the rest of the century. Whitehead's fourth and last *Directory*, now including Gateshead, listed 38 'Cabinet-Makers and Carpenters' and 3 upholsterers, while *The Newcastle and Gateshead Directory for 1795* by William Hilton and 4 upholsterers and 27 cabinet makers, the latter now listed separately.
25. In the early eighteenth century the traveller Celia Fiennes commented that Newcastle upon Tyne 'most resembles London of any place in England' with shops that 'are good and are of distinct trades'; see C. Morris (ed.), *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (The Cresset Press, 1949) pp. 209-11.
26. For more information about Newcastle's architecture at this time see G. McCombie, 'A House in Town: Newcastle Houses to 1824' and P. Lowery, 'William Newton — An Eminent Architect?', both in *Northern Architect*, 5th Series No. 1, 1994/95, pp. 11-14 and 15-17 respectively.
27. B. D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair* (1990), p. 210, citing *Mitchell's Directory of Newcastle* (1801) and the *Directory of Newcastle* (1824).
28. John Stabler has recorded a set of six Buckinghamshire Windsor chairs imported by sea into Gateshead. See J. Stabler, 'A New Look at the Bow Back Windsor', *Connoisseur*, December 1974.