

SUSSEX CHAIRS

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The recent chance find of an article by Frederick Jones entitled *Old Village Industries in Easthothly*, in a 1929 edition of *The Sussex County Magazine*¹ has revealed welcome information about the nineteenth century manufacture of turned rush-seated chairs. These belong to an original regional tradition which inspired the celebrated 'Sussex Chairs' retailed by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. from 1864 (Fig. 1). The author of the article gives brief information about the chairmaker Henry or 'Harry' Rich, illustrating the workshop in East Hoathly and a pair of chairs (Figs. 1-3).

The village of East Hoathly is situated off the present A22 Eastbourne to East Grinstead/Croydon road in East Sussex, lying on a ridge of Tunbridge Wells sandstone in the Low Weald (see Fig. 3). Timber had been of great importance for the economy of the Wealden area since mediæval times and was still of economic significance until recently. A mid-twentieth century writer claimed that 'East Hoathly is one of the largest, if not the largest factory of wooden goods in Sussex.'² The Rich family appear to have been responsible for much of this production, including chairs and other articles, possibly for two hundred years, according to an undated interview with a Rich family member (c. 1955), which stated: 'East Hoathly's chief industry is this (Rich's) wonderful workshop, which was founded about the end of the seventeenth century by Mr Rich's great-great-great grandfather'.³

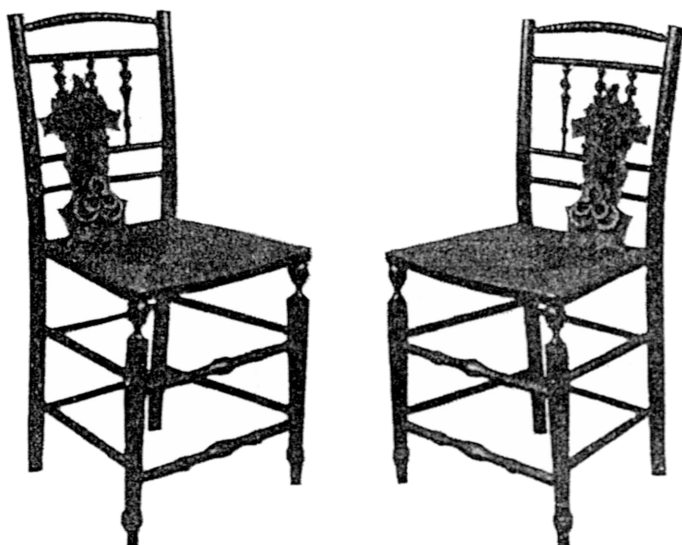
Documentary research reveals that the Rich family were relatively well known and recorded. From 1754 to 1765 a shopkeeper of East Hoathly, Thomas Turner, kept a diary and in 1759 he mentions 'a little boy of Riche's' and on:

May 17, 1761 — This day was buried at our church Francis Rich, aged forty-five years, who died after a few days illness, and has left a wife and seven children. What a moving spectral it was to see an industrious and sober man, the only support of his family, followed to the grave by his widow and fatherless infants, whose tears and lamentations bespoke their inwards and sincere grief!⁴

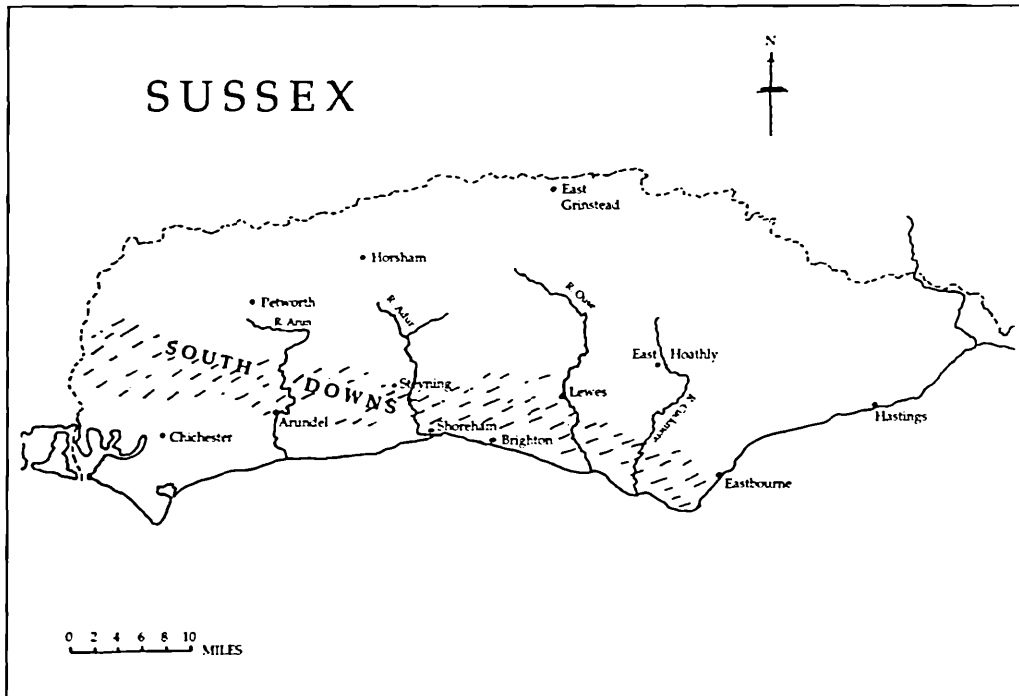
A recent visit to East Hoathly church enabled inspection of a group of Rich tombstones. One of these commemorates the life of Henry Rich, chairmaker, who was born in 1786 and died in 1867. He was clerk and sexton of the church for fifty-seven years, officiating at 142 weddings, 805 baptisms and attending 412 burials. Henry, or 'Harry' as he was known locally, was just as industrious as his forbear, working at his 'factory' in East Hoathly opposite The King's Head Inn (Figs. 4 & 5). The workshop site is easily identifiable today, although the building has been altered or possibly completely rebuilt.⁵ Frederick Jones states that Henry started his business here at the age of twenty-four (i.e. in 1810) but intimates that the manufacture of chairs had been carried on for generations before: 'Our distinguished manufacture was that of chairs and trugs'⁶ . . . the oak and ash chairs so strongly put together are no longer manufactured, but are still



1. Henry Rich, chairmaker, East Hoathly. From Frederick Jones, 'Old Village Industries in Easthothly', *Sussex County Magazine*, 1929



2. Two of Rich's chairs. From a photograph in Jones's article



3. Map of Sussex showing locations mentioned in the text

found in the vicinity'. He also mentions churns, platters, handles and rakes: 'For four generations this business has been successfully carried on; with the variations adaptable to modern times it is still a thriving trade'. It appears that chair manufacture ceased during the 1860s, perhaps on Henry Rich's death. A further insight into Henry is provided by the following character sketch made by Jones: 'A spare, active man, as may be seen by his photograph, he was always in the shop at six o'clock in the morning, and expected his son and his employees to be there too. A fine chairmaker employed by Rich was Pilley; in after life his (Rich's) son made good in Brighton.' The name Pilley appears to have been inaccurately quoted by Jones; the chairmaker is more likely to have been called Tilley, which was a local family name. The 1861 Census Return for East Hoathly lists a Walter Tilley, chairmaker, aged fifty, born in Petworth.⁷ As to Rich's son, a William Rich, carpenter and builder, is listed in a Brighton Trade Directory of 1866, but he cannot be linked conclusively with Henry.⁸

A vernacular tradition of chair manufacture in Sussex can certainly be said to have been identified, but the link between chairs from Rich's workshop (Fig. 2) and those sold by Morris (Fig. 6) is not straightforward. Aside from the clear features in common; they are dark-stained, rush-seated single-row spindle-back chairs with box stretchers, Rich's chairs are not identical to any of the Morris versions. It is regrettable that Frederick Jones did not illustrate further examples of chairs produced in East Hoathly.



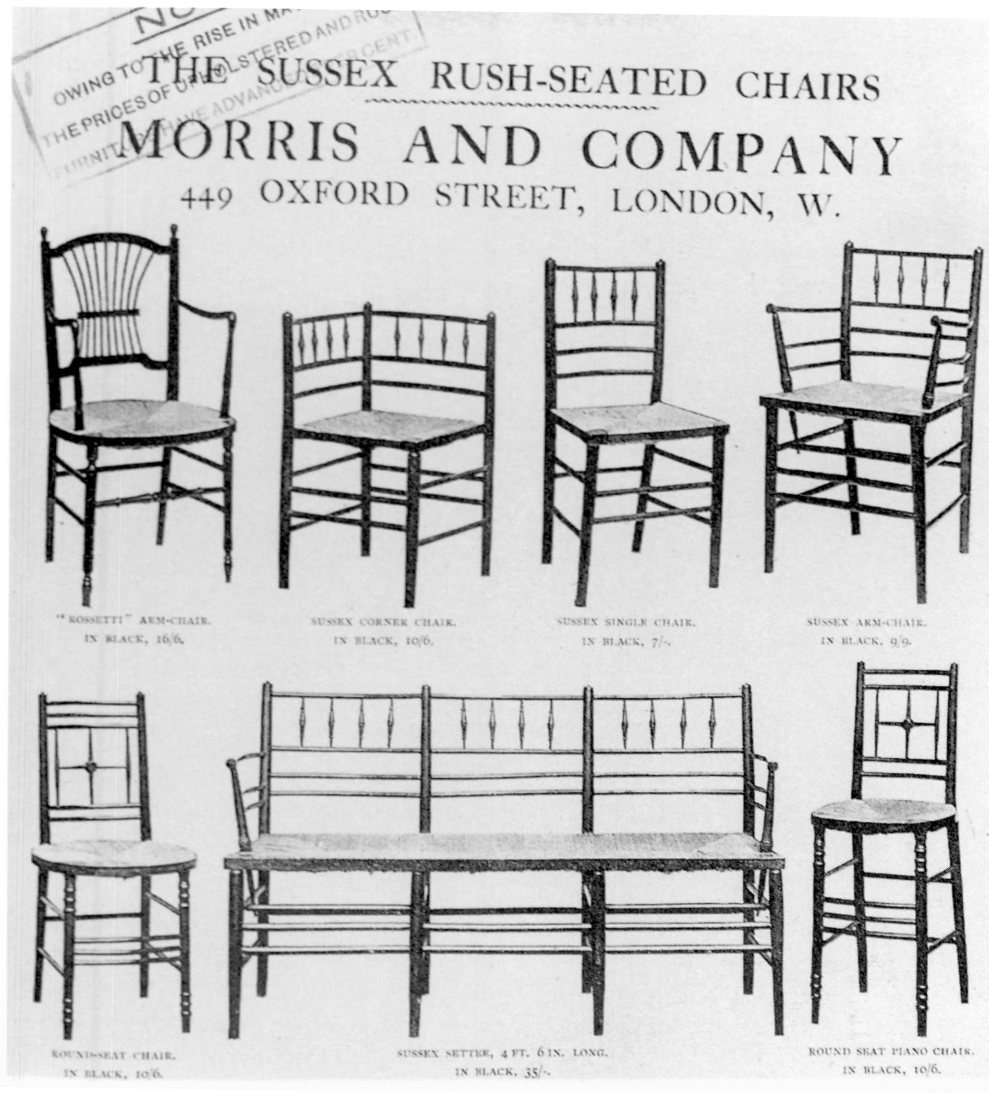
4. 'Rich's Chair and Trug Factory', East Hoathly. From a line drawing in Jones's article



East Hoathly.

Sussex.

5. Early twentieth century photograph of East Hoathly High Street showing former location of Rich's Workshop on the left



6. 'The Sussex Rush Seated Chairs', first manufactured by the firm in 1864. From a Morris & Co. catalogue of c. 1912

Other tantalising glimpses of possible 'Sussex' chair prototypes have been noted. Simon Jervis, in his 1974 article "Sussex" Chairs in 1820' states that 'The "Sussex" rush-seated chairs in their various forms were the most successful type of furniture made by Morris & Co.'. Ford Madox Brown apparently persuaded the firm to make the Sussex chair and Rossetti played an important part in the adoption of the idea. Jervis feels that the kind of chair which inspired Brown and Rossetti appears in an early



7. 'Londoners' Gypsying' by C. R. Leslie (Detail)

Courtesy of Thos. Agnew & Sons Ltd.

nineteenth century painting entitled 'Londoners' Gypsying' by C. R. Leslie, though his evidence for this seems fairly slim on comparison of this chair, partly obscured by the seated figure, with the 'Sussex' chairs in Fig. 6. The chair is indeed generally similar, but there is nothing to show that the painting is set in Sussex. 'Londoner's Gypsying' appears to depict a fairly well-to-do family, with an attendant serving tea, in a picnic situation.

It seems that the subject of 'Sussex Chairs' has only just been touched upon. Possibly the creeping fingers of London, which could be thought to have strangled the development of regional furniture in Sussex over the last two hundred years, might yet be prised apart a little to reveal a glimpse of what was produced in an area once rich in natural resources, native ingenuity and craftsmanship.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend keen thanks to Eric Gould and Jane Seabrook of East Hoathly who have helped in the research for this article, and to Ann Hughes of the King's Head Inn, for information and help with illustrations.

REFERENCES

1. Frederick Jones, 'Old Village Industries in Easthothly', *Sussex County Magazine*, Vol. III, no. 7, July 1929, pp. 464-469. Frederick Jones had been headmaster of the village school at East Hoathly. A portrait photograph dated 1902 is in the possession of the present churchwarden. Thanks to Mr Eric Gould, Churchwarden of East Hoathly, for information about Frederick Jones.
2. G. Pennethorne, 'Country Factory', *Sussex County Magazine*, pp. 90-92, n.d. (c. 1955). Thanks to Jane Seabrook of East Hoathly for this reference.
3. Ibid.
4. D. Vaisey (ed.) *The Diary of Thomas Turner*, 1995, CTR Publishing, pps 189 and 224.
5. It is possible that after Harry Rich's death in 1867 the premises became a saddlery. In an early twentieth century photograph an adjoining building is shown as such, run by Rice Bros. saddlers and harness makers, also dealing in bicycles. Pigot's 1839 Directory for Sussex notes a Henry Rice, chairmaker and turner, under Uckfield, which is not far from East Hoathly. It is possible that the surname might have been confused with Rice, the saddlers, and should, properly, be Rich. The village of East Hoathly is not mentioned in the directory, while the Uckfield entry covers five other adjoining parishes.
6. Sussex trug making is an ancient industry, still carried on at Herstmonceux in East Sussex.
7. Walter Tilley, Chairmaker of East Hoathly, appears in the 1841, 1851 and 1861 Census Returns. Thanks to Mrs Jane Seabrook of East Hoathly for this information.
8. Pages' (late Folthorp's) Court Guide & General Directory for Brighton, Hove and Cliftonville (1865), p. 409.
9. S. Jervis, 'Sussex' Chairs in 1820', *Furniture History*, Vol. X, 1974, p. 99.