

A DUG OUT CHAIR FROM THE SOUTH LAKE DISTRICT

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In the saloon bar of the Ship Inn, Piel Island, off the southeast corner of Furness, Cumbria, is a dugout chair of some interest. Today it is accompanied by a number of faded press cuttings describing its association with a tradition of island hospitality.

Piel Island itself has a long history as a strategic centre for trading and smuggling in Furness. The island is not accessible even at low tide by foot and so a small private ferry from Roa is the normal way to reach it. In summer it is a popular place to visit in order to view the motte and bailey castle, which dates from the early fourteenth century. The only other buildings on the island, the Pilots' houses and the Ship Inn, were built in the late eighteenth century.

The 'old oaken chair' (information from a current tourist brochure) is supposed to have come from the castle and has a tradition that anyone who sits in it becomes the Knight of Piel'. The landlord is regarded as the King of Piel and he performs the knighthood ceremony. The newly dubbed knight must then carry out his duties, which include buying everyone present a drink. This knight ought to be of good character, a moderate smoker and a lover of the opposite sex. Subsequently, should he find himself shipwrecked on the island he can claim a night's free lodging and as much as he can eat or drink. This tradition is believed to date from the time of Lambert Simnel, who landed at Piel in 1487, claiming to be the rightful King of England.

The main part of the chair itself is constructed from a single piece of timber, probably a piece of hollow tree trunk, which may have been driftwood. The arms, supports and stretchers are additional, not carved from the whole. It is re-inforced on the outer face by four iron bands, the two lower embracing the seat and stretchers.

This chair should join the published body of dugout chairs in order to develop a regional corpus of style, materials and date. In this context, Christopher Gilbert described another local chair from Maryport, Cumbria, constructed in one piece in elm and dated c.1696.² A dugout chair is known from Caldbeck, slightly further north in Cumbria, the seat and back carved also in one piece but with narrow splayed legs, as described by S.H. Cole.³ He calls it a 'whittle-gate' chair, relating it to local practice where a special seat was provided for the visiting parson at the head of the table. Cole refers to the parson's "whittle-gate, the right to take his 'whittle' or knife (it was not usual for forks to be used in the houses of ordinary people) and eat at the tables of certain of his 'bettermer' parishioners". Two further English chairs, dated between 1760–1830, are described by Victor Chinnery (1986).⁴

There appears to be a greater body of knowledge about the use of dugout chairs in Brittany, where eighteenth and nineteenth century chairs from Cornouaille are associated with the status of elderly members of the family.⁵



1. Dug-out chair made from the shell of a hollow oak bound with iron bands.
The Ship Inn, Piel Island, Cumbria

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. See a photograph of the ceremony in Garbutt, J, and Marsh, J, *Around Barrow-in-Furness in Old Photographs*, Sutton Publishing, 1993.
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3. Cole, S H, 'The Whittle-gate chair', *The Countryman* 55(4), 1958, pp621–2.
4. Chinnery, V, *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition: A History of Early Furniture in the British Isles and New England*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club, 1986: 69–74.
5. Information from object labels, Musée Departemental Breton, Quimper, September 2005.