

CHAIR MAKING IN THE NORTHERN COUNTIES OF SCOTLAND AND IN NEW ZEALAND

David Hutchinson

Robert Sutherland, a shoemaker to trade and the son of a wright from Berriedale on the north east coast of Sutherland, travelled to London in January 1853. This was to be the first step of a journey that would take him half way round the world to New Zealand. The ship 'Rajah' on which he was a steerage passenger arrived in Port Chalmers, Otago on 6 October 1853 after a perilous voyage that included severe gales off the Tasmanian coast. Some three years later Robert married Elizabeth in the house of John Hill, Dunedin's first cabinet maker (from Leith, Scotland) and settled eventually at Waitipika, south of Dunedin.

Robert made two chairs for himself and Elizabeth that are now part of the collection at Otago Settlers Museum in Dunedin. The first (Figure 1), is a stick back in the tradition of Ross-shire and the Western Highlands. This chair, similar to one in the Highland Folk Museum documented by Ross Noble,¹ is identical in its form to examples found in Highland long or 'black' houses. Over time the chair seat has seen some wear and Robert had fitted a patch to the front, cleaved from a Kauri tree.² The three original legs have been supplemented by a fourth, this time in a stopped socket joint, unlike the other three that are through pegged and wedged in the usual manner. It is clear that Robert had taken with him some knowledge and skill from his Highland background. This is also clear in the case of another chair (Figure 2), which had no arms and which was probably made for his wife. The style of this chair is much more evocative of his Caithness homeland. The back follows the established form of a Caithness chair and the pattern of rails is that of the Parish of Latheron (Figure 6); many parishes had their own pattern of chair back. Close inspection of the back shows that the rails and spacers were made of European Beech, not a timber native to New Zealand. They were also made with a greater degree of skill than the rest of the chair appears to indicate; the most likely conclusion is that Robert brought these out with him and that they were made either by or under the supervision of his father. The chair is in essence based on the Caithness tradition. There are two major variations, the most obvious is the seat. Caithness chairs have a seat made from a board set into slot housings and between round stretchers fore and aft (Figure 4). Inspection of the underside of Robert's chair shows the front and aft bars but no slot housing to take the seat board (Figure 3). Instead he has chosen to fit close fit boards and surface mounted them in the manner of a Scotch chair or one of Glasgow pattern.³ It has to be remembered that Robert and Elizabeth were friends of John Hill, cabinet maker; Robert may even have worked for him at some time, and John Hill's chairs in the Otago Settlers Museum share the same seat construction (Figure 5). Prior to leaving Caithness it is doubtful that Robert would have seen many chairs other than local styles. Though he clearly lacked confidence to vary from the round wedged stretchers of the Caithness chair he did attempt an improvement in the seat boarding.



1. Stick back chair made by Robert Sutherland c1865
Otago Settlers Museum, New Zealand

The other and major variation in construction is the use of a single board to create the upright and side rails. There are no joints, the board has been carefully selected to replace joints with natural variations in grain direction. Selecting such a board is a combination of skill and good fortune. Close examination of the chair showed that he had been more successful on one side than on the other, where a metal support had been added. This is a singular construction technique that departs from the usual Caithness tradition, but it does relate very closely to one chair in the collection of the National Museums of Scotland. This chair (Figure 8) was a favourite of John Hall of Scribercross. A plaque on the chair reads John Hall, Scribercross, Died April 1871. Mr Hall was a noted breeder of Cheviot sheep. The chair was made by a local wright probably working for the Sutherland Estate and was displayed for many years in Dunrobin Castle. Scribercross was one of the largest sheep farms on the Sutherland Estate and the Hall family had been its shepherds since the land was cleared and the sheep brought in by James Hall, John's



2. Chair made by Robert Sutherland c1865
Otago Settlers Museum, New Zealand



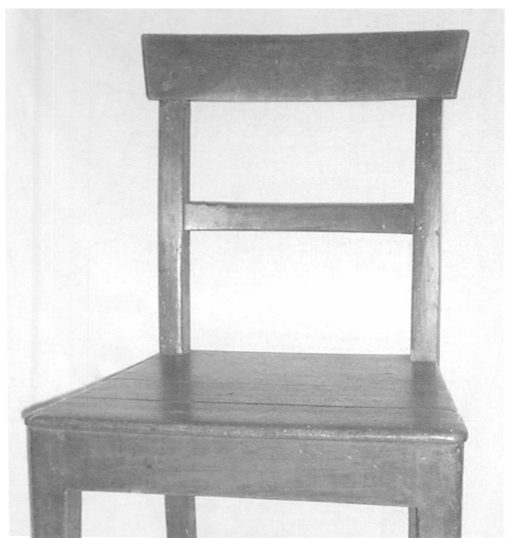
3. Underside of chair in figure 2
Otago Settlers Museum, New Zealand



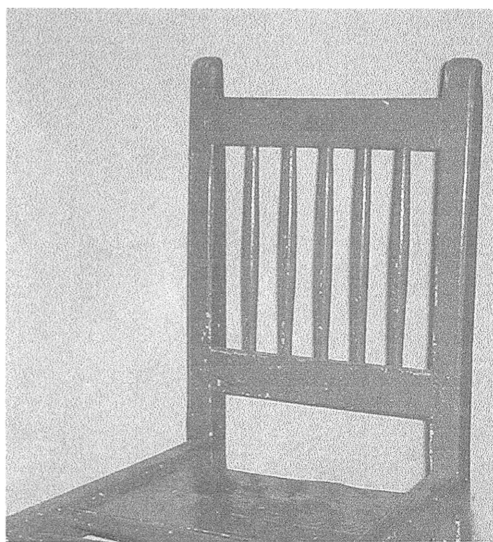
4. Caithness chair,
Laidhay Croft Museum, Caithness



5. Caithness chair seat
Private Collection



6. Chair by John Hill c1860
Otago Settlers Museum, New Zealand.



7. Caithness chair,
Laidhay Croft Museum, Caithness



8. This chair belonged to John Hall of Scribercross who died April 1871.
Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland

father. There were also close historical links between the Parish of Latheron and Scribercross. The back of the John Hall chair follows the earlier Latheron pattern as can be seen in a chair, (Figure 7), from the Laidhay Museum, Latheron. Both have a single stay rail, a cresting rail and a number of turned spindles. The seat of the Scribercross chair is atypical, being made of stretched hide, probably deer, but then this was a memorial chair. The notable point of its construction is the use of a single board to create the back uprights and the seat rails, here the front leg have been mortised into the seat base. Whilst there is recorded provenance about John Hall the estate wright who made it remains anonymous. The Sutherland Estate had a number of wrights in its employ along the coast from Golspie to Latheron.

The term 'wright' refers in Scotland to a worker in wood. In addition to the very specific trades of wheelwright, millwright or shipwright there were craftsmen who did general work including the making of furniture. The term cabinet maker came much later to Caithness and Sutherland; here the traditional term was a wright and included the usual progression of apprentice, journeyman and master. Alongside traditional practice they were known for the creative use of the natural strength of timbers, often making use of natural bends rather than shaping or steaming, trunk and limb or limb and branch instead of joining timbers.

It is an entirely logical and functional technique to use either a naturally occurring T shape, or one cut from a large board, to create the sides of a chair. The discovery of such a chair in New Zealand led to further investigation of examples known to exist in the mother country. Very few vernacular chairs of this general type survive from the Northern Counties, partly because people have seen them as a shabby reminder of the past. They are frequently found relegated to outbuildings or turned into kindlers. But enough evidence survives to demonstrate that this particular sort of wright-made chair is a distinct variant of the Sutherland/Caithness tradition. A third chair from a northern museum collection must be mentioned as a member of this sub-group.⁴ Instead of using a naturally bent knee to form the back stiles and seat, the L-shaped component has been cut from a board using natural changes in grain direction. There is no provenance to the chair and it may not be related to the pair discussed here, but it does offer another indicator of the practice of using particularly-shaped timbers in order to avoid the making of joints.

REFERENCES

1. See R. Ross Noble, 'The Chairs of Sutherland & Caithness: A Northern Tradition in Highland Chair-making?' *Regional Furniture*, I, 1987, figure 8, p. 38.
2. Kauri, a New Zealand pine species noted for its even texture and straight grain.
3. See David Jones, 'Scottish Chair Making: The Case of Francis East & Co. and East Brothers, Dundee' *Regional Furniture*, X, 1996, figure 1, p. 101.
4. Caithness chair in collection of Laidhay Croft Museum, Caithness.