

JOHN PITT (1714-59), THAMES VALLEY WINDSOR CHAIR MAKER

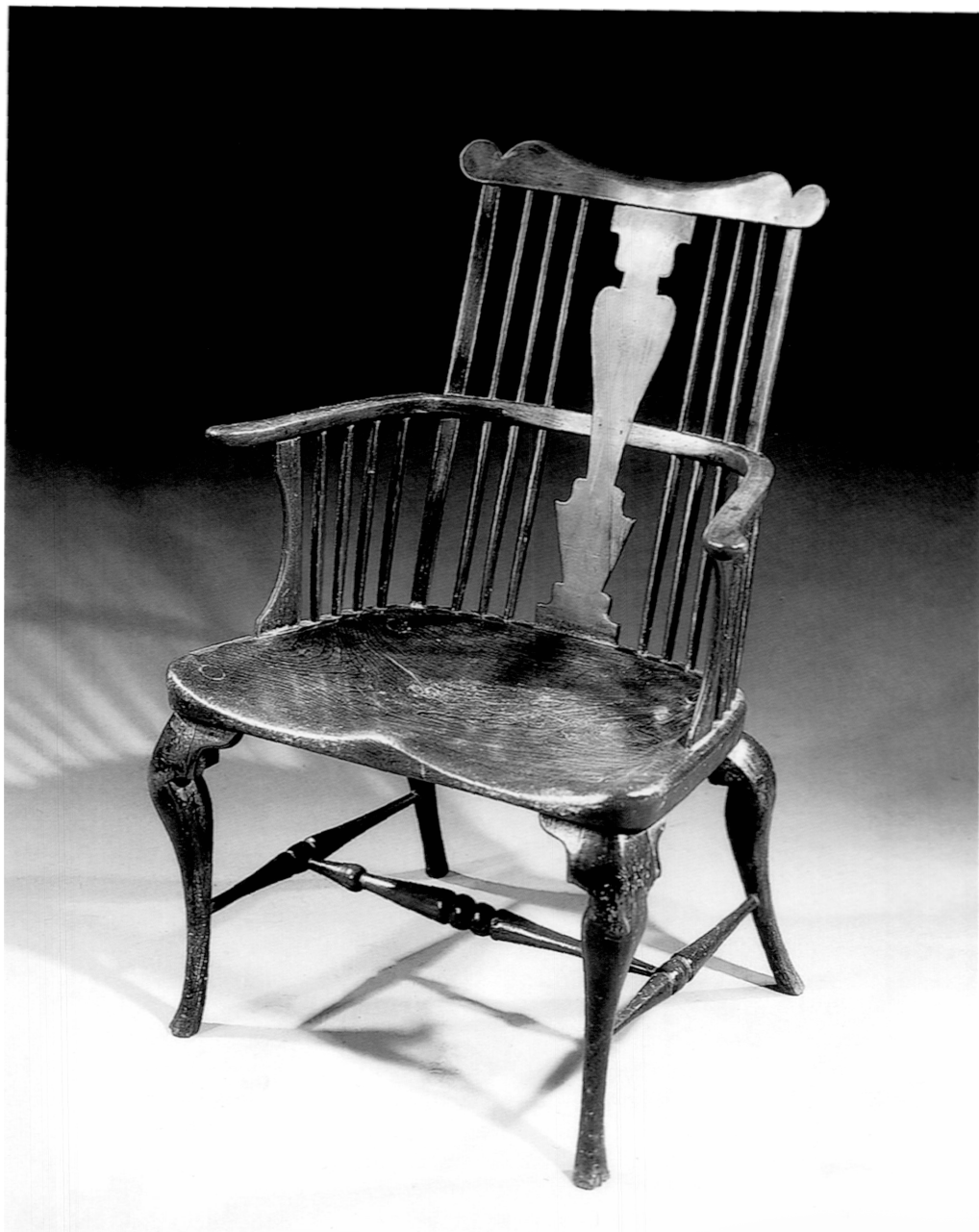
Robert Parrott and Michael Harding-Hill

In 1976, a letter to *Country Life*¹ illustrated and described an eighteenth century comb-back armchair bearing the remains of its just discernible original trade label beneath the seat. This identified the maker as 'John Pitt, wheelwright and chair maker at Slough, Windsor'. It was subsequently discovered, by John Stabler, that 'John Pitt, wheelwright' was buried on 13th January, 1759 at Upton-cum-Chalvey, a parish that is now part of Slough, located about two miles from Windsor.² This important finding established that the Pitt Chair (Figure 1) was, and still remains, the earliest English Windsor chair that can be attributed conclusively to a particular maker and location. It was suggested, also, that John Pitt practised the two trades because similar woodworking techniques, albeit on a different scale, were involved in the making of wheels and Windsor chairs. Since then, though, there has been no further information reported about John Pitt and his chairs. Recently however, three more comb-back armchairs have been identified by their design characteristics as possible products of his workshop. In addition, further information has been obtained about the Pitt family using parish registers at the Buckinghamshire record office and the International Genealogical Index database³. These new findings present a unique opportunity to review our knowledge of this important eighteenth century chair maker.

There are many 'Pitts' recorded over several centuries in the Upton parish registers. Fortunately, the will of John's father, William Pitt, has been preserved⁴ and it contains a wealth of useful information. There were three 'Williams' christened at Upton in the second half of the seventeenth century, the most likely date for John's father's baptism being 4th March, 1681. William's wife was called Elizabeth, although her maiden name is unknown as the record of the marriage cannot be traced. However, they had the following seven children all of whom were baptised at Upton:— Ann, 18th March 1713; John, 15th March 1714; Elizabeth, 25th Aug. 1717; William, 28th Dec. 1719; Thomas, 1st Mar. 1726; Peter, 21st Sept. 1729. It is also recorded that 'William Pitt, wheelwright was buried January 16th 1735 £40 in debt' and that Elizabeth Pitt, widow of Upton, was interred Jan 4th 1739.

William Pitt's will, proved 5th May 1736, reads as follows:—

...And likewise I give unto my said wife all that my stock of timber and all manner of stuff belonging to me whatsoever and wheresoever to take to her own use during her natural life and after the decease of my said wife I will the said stock of timber household goods and all other my stock whatsoever to be appraised and to be equally divided amongst my children which shall be alive at that time only my son William Pitt not to have any share and my will is that my son John Pitt shall have five pounds out of my stock when valued and then to have his equal share with the rest of my children...



1. Labelled comb-back armchair made by John Pitt (before 1759), cherrywood with walnut arm-bow and elm seat.

Courtesy Christie's

This suggests that John was the favoured son who followed in his father's trade as a wheelwright and whom, as is now known, was also a maker of Windsor chairs. John married Mary Hayes at Clewer in Berkshire, now part of Windsor, 29th Sept. 1743 but died at the early age of 45 ('John Pitt, wheelwright, buried 13th January 1759, Upton-cum-Chalvey). From the parish register, however, John and Mary appear to have had eleven children, two of whom were born out of wedlock and three of which must have died as infants as their names are duplicated in later christenings⁵. It seems that their youngest son, may have followed his father's trade because a 1790s trade directory⁶ lists a 'Paul Pitt' as a (previously unrecorded) chair maker in Windsor and a 'William Pitt', perhaps their eldest son, as a carpenter. However, John, the first son to be born after their marriage, did not become a chair maker. He was a landowner and farmer who married a Mary Baldwin, the daughter of a wealthy London merchant. They lived at Upton House, a large detached property, but, like his father before him, he died early (aged 41, in 1786)⁷. After his death, his widow married William Herschel, the personal astronomer to George III. To what extent John's prosperity and social connections reflect his father's success as a local businessman is uncertain.

According to R. Symonds⁸, the earliest Windsor chairs had turned legs but at some time around 1730 the cabriole leg was introduced, i.e. about thirty years after its appearance on fine furniture. Surviving English cabriole leg Windsor chairs are not common and those with four cabrioles, considered to be the earlier type, are rare.⁹ The comb-back chair preceded the bow-back¹⁰ and the cabriole leg comb-back is believed primarily to be a product of Thames Valley makers¹¹. It would seem, therefore that John Pitt's working life, say 1730-1759, coincided with the main period of production of the four cabriole leg comb-back Windsor. Furthermore, it is the idiosyncratic form of the leg that he used that without documentary evidence such as trade labels or receipts, a maker attribution based solely on stylistic features, however probable, cannot be regarded as being conclusive.

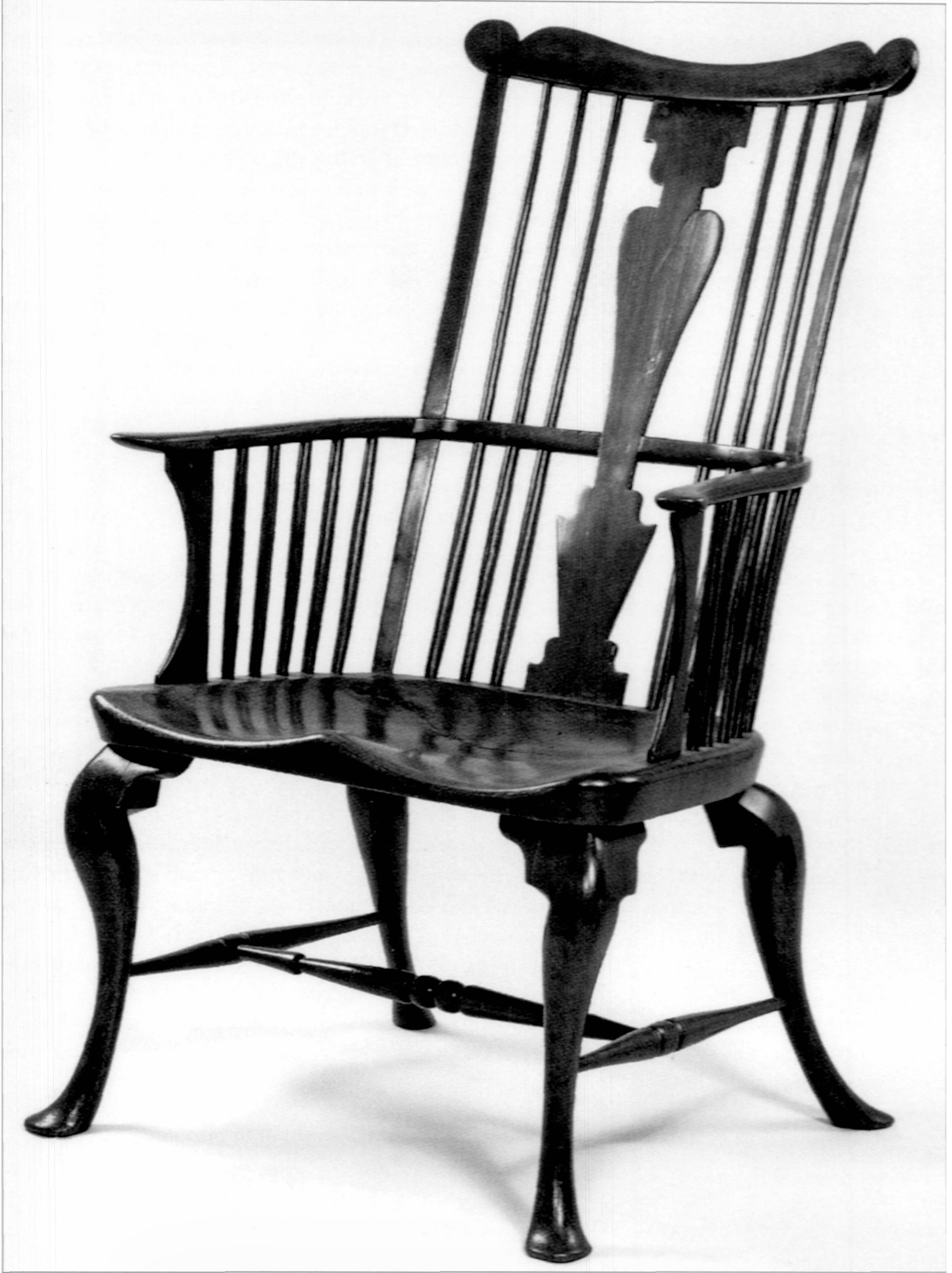
The Thames Valley Windsor chair cabriole leg is shaped from a single block of wood. It has a cylindrical projection at the top, usually about one inch in diameter, that is morticed into the seat and held in place with one or more wedges driven in from above. On the better chairs, the top of each front leg is usually flanked by a pair of solid, or occasionally pierced, ogee-shaped corner brackets (spandrels) that are nailed to the side of the leg and also to the seat. As a design element, these link the vertical shaft of the leg to the horizontal plane of the seat and, from a distance, appear to be part of the leg. Towards the lower point of attachment of the spandrels the leg swells outwards to form a 'knee' below which it tapers downwards, usually, to terminate in a pad foot, although other types (hoof, scroll, Spanish, ball and claw) are known. Viewed from the side, the Windsor chair front cabriole leg exhibits a characteristic double curvature, the profile of which varies between makers and chair types. Moreover, this s-shape is much less obvious as the leg becomes straighter towards the end of the century and the later chairs also often dispense with the spandrels.

The shape of the cabriole legs on the labelled Pitt chair (Figure 1), especially those at the front, is unlike that on other Thames Valley chairs. A search of published illustrations of Windsor chairs in books, magazines and journals from the 1930s to the present day has failed to provide any examples of chairs with the same leg form. If they exist, then

they are not published. Also, in more than thirty years of dealing in Windsor chairs the co-author (M.H-H) has not, until very recently, seen a comb-back armchair with the same front leg design. The precise form that the leg takes, once recognised, is unmistakable and likely to be peculiar to this particular maker. It is distinguished by a pronounced knee behind which there is a deeply carved and chiselled notch encircling the back of the leg; the knee also has two facets that meet at the corner, giving the top of the leg a squared-off appearance. The notching is done in such a way that when the chair is viewed from the front the inside part of the leg above the central stretcher appears to curve down and inwards towards the middle of the chair whilst the region below the stretcher sweeps outwards towards the foot in the usual manner. This highly curvaceous profile gives the chair a 'bandy-leg' appearance which is enhanced on the labelled chair by the positioning of the front legs slightly inside the outer edge of the seat. Moreover, the sophistication of John Pitt's four cabriole leg design is particularly apparent when the chair is viewed from the side. As befits the defining characteristic of the cabriole form (Italian, *cabriolare* – to leap in the air), the shape of the front and back legs with their deep notches, together with the rake of the comb back, convey a sense of potential movement that served to enliven the appearance of what is actually a rather large piece of seating furniture.

A characteristic feature of very many Thames Valley Windsors, but only rarely seen on chairs from other regions, is the presence of a continuous deep groove around the top edge of the seat. This is apparent in early eighteenth century chairs with turned legs, many mid-eighteenth century cabriole leg chairs, and also in those with turned legs made in the nineteenth century. However, although this feature cannot be seen on the photograph of the labelled chair there may be an explanation for this apparent anomaly that will be discussed later. Nevertheless, the chair does have a number of stylistic and constructional aspects found on other comb-back chairs from the Thames Valley region. For example, these mid-eighteenth century chairs usually have very large saddle-like seats with a chamfered lower edge, shaped lath-like underarm supports and an arm bow that splays out at each end to form a rounded hand-rest. Also, the vasiform splat and 'eared' comb-rail are the most common designs for these components, although other forms have been recorded. Stretchers with central bobbin turning are unusual but do occur occasionally. Furthermore, in his original description of the chair, Stabler mentioned that the comb-shaped back was held together with dowel pegs joining the stiles (side laths) and the comb-rail and also with three dowels joining each long central spindle to the comb-rail, arm bow and seat. In addition, there were dowels holding the underarm supports in place and linking the splat to the arm bow. An examination of other mid-century comb-backs, however, indicates that these construction methods seem to be standard practice at that time in the Thames Valley.

The Pitt chair was purchased at a Red Cross sale in Norfolk at the end of second world war. It was first brought to the attention of furniture historians in 1977 and has subsequently been illustrated in three books on Windsor chairs¹⁴. Unfortunately, it was sent to auction in 1998, after which, in spite of its historical importance, it went to a private collector in America. The following description of this chair is based on information and a photograph provided by the auctioneers (Christie's South Kensington; Figure 1) as attempts to find out more information from the owner have been unsuccessful. The chair is in rather poor condition, possibly attesting to heavy usage. It



2. Comb-back armchair attributed to John Pitt, mid-eighteenth century, cherrywood with elm seat.



3. Comb-back armchair attributed to John Pitt, mid-eighteenth century, yew with walnut arm-bow, fruitwood legs and elm seat.



4. Decorated armchair attributed to John Pitt, mid-eighteenth century, beech with walnut arm bow, fruitwoods legs and elm seat.

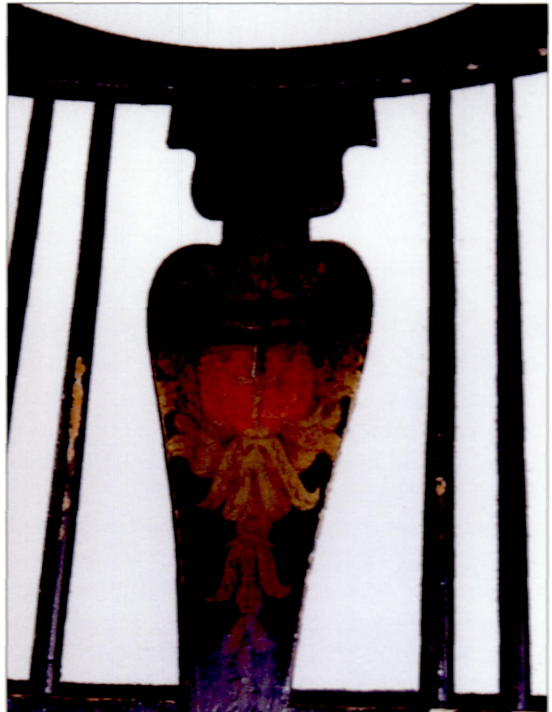
Courtesy D. Swanson

has a distressed seat, a repaired splat, a damaged underarm support and missing pad feet; it also shows signs of having been coated with black varnish, a common nineteenth century practice. It has the usual large elm seat into which the six long spindles are morticed, although they do not pass the whole way through. The arm bow is walnut but, somewhat unusually for a comb-back the rest of the chair is constructed from cherrywood, a timber that was plentiful in this part of Buckinghamshire until recently¹³. As previously mentioned, the chair has bandy legs that are inset from the seat edge, although these seem to be of rather slender proportions when compared with the stretchers. In addition to the large glued-on maker's label, there is a non-contemporary brass plate attached to the underside of the seat which states 'THIS CHAIR WENT WITH CAP. COOK AROUND THE WORLD'. Although doubt has been cast on the validity of this claim the chair has certainly had a particularly hard life, as might be consistent with use in a working environment. It is a rare survivor and is one of the most historically important extant eighteenth century English Windsor chairs.

The second chair (Figure 2) recently returned to England following its discovery in a United States garage. Like the labelled chair, it is also constructed of cherrywood and is very similar in design, although the back is higher and the arm bow is, atypically, also of cherrywood. It has the same type of faceted front legs placed just inside the edge of the seat and the arrangement of dowel pegs is identical. However, although the underarm support and most of the long spindles are morticed right through the seat there are five instead of four short spindles between each underarm support and stile. Somewhat unusually for a Thames Valley chair, the groove around the top of the seat is absent and the lower edge of the seat has not been chamfered. Close inspection reveals that there are two continuous scribed lines encircling the seat. One is on the top surface of the seat and can be seen passing around the outside of the spindles; the other, which is set in by about the same distance from the edge on the side of the seat, comes to a point below the centre of the saddle. These fine scribed lines seem to have been used by some chair makers in the eighteenth century as an alternative to the obvious grooves seen on most Thames Valley chairs; it may be the case that the labelled chair is similarly marked although this is not visible in the auctioneers' photograph (Figure 1). Interestingly, the second chair shows signs of probably having had a trade card, measuring about 3" by 2", tacked off-centre below the seat.

The third chair (Figure 3) was obtained from a London dealer but its provenance is at present unknown. Although there are many similarities between this armchair and the previous two examples, there are also several differences, the most obvious of which being the unusual shaping of the comb-rail. The arm bow is walnut but the remainder of the top half of the chair is made of the yew, whereas the legs and stretchers appear to be of fruitwood. The legs are of the same distinctive profile as in the labelled (Figure 1) and unlabelled (Figure 2) cherrywood chairs but seem to be slightly less curvaceous and are neither faceted at the top nor set in from the seat edge. Also, like the previous example (Figure 2), this chair has five short spindles on either side, no groove around the seat, the same two continuous scribed lines around the seat and a similar placement of dowel pegs. However, as in the labelled chair (Figure 1), the long spindles do not pass completely through the seat. In addition, to give extra rigidity, there are horizontal dowel pegs passing through each seat corner into the upper wedged projection of the front leg and

5. Upper part of splat decorated with crossed maces and the coat of arms of the city of Bath. (From chair in Figure 4).
Courtesy D. Swanson



6. Lower part of splat with gold foliate decoration. (From chair in Figure 4).
Courtesy D. Swanson



the underarm supports are morticed through the seat and wedged from below. Beneath the seat are two impressions of a serifed capital letter "E", one partial and the other complete, made with a fine branding iron; this presumably denotes some previous owner. Interestingly, this chair also appears to have had a trade card, 6" by 3", affixed underneath the seat in a central position at the back. It can be seen that this was attached with four square iron tacks with large (half-inch diameter) domed heads that have made circular indentations.

The final chair (Figure 4), has recently been brought to the authors' attention in a private British collection. It is unique in being the only currently known comb-back armchair to retain its original overall painted and decorated finish, a characteristic also shared with the Perceval/Compton low-back in the Victoria and Albert Museum which bears the date '1756'. (See *Regional Furniture*, 2004). This low-back appears to be one of a group of similar chairs with painted armorials¹⁴ although a comb-back and two bow-backs with armorial shields are also known. These chairs with family crests may have been used for servants and visitors in the halls of large private houses, in the same way as the more familiar solid-seated mahogany examples. However, due to its large size and the nature of the armorial (see below), the comb-back illustrated here is unlikely to have been used in this fashion. Possibly, it may have originally been made for outdoor use, like other painted eighteenth century Windsor chairs.

The chair conforms to the same basic design as the labelled example but differs in having five short spindles on each side. Although the front legs are inset from the seat edge they are not faceted at the knee and have never been fitted with spandrels. It is possible to identify most of the woods used in its construction from the few areas where the black paint and its white (lead?, gesso?) undercoat/grain-filler have been rubbed away. The seat is elm, as usual, the arm bow is walnut, the spindles appear to be beech and the legs, fruitwood. The front legs are raised up on their original one inch high blocks and the back of the stiles have, at some time, been reinforced with strips of wood. One side stretcher has been replaced and the other is broken but both the original stretchers have central bobbin turning, as in the chairs previously described. Likewise, the arrangement of the pegs on the underarm supports and rear spindles is the same. The seat lacks a groove around the top but is chamfered below and a scribe line seems to be discernible on its front edge below the paint. There are a number of circular white patches around the top of the seat where the paint is missing, caused by the removal of a tacked-on fabric cushion. The underside of the seat has black paint applied directly to the wood and there is a large scribed square marking out the centres for the legs. The long spindles are completely through morticed, although the underarm supports are not, and there is a pair of holes, their purpose unknown, under the seat.

The chair has original gold foliate decoration across the comb-rail, on the splat, and also on the knees of all four legs. There is a gold circle on the front edge of the seat beneath the apex of the saddle. The top section of the splat is decorated with crossed gold maces inside a lined border, the central field of the splat consists of an heraldic shield surrounded by stylised gold floral and foliate decoration (Figure 6) and the lower part of the splat has a central spray that may be in gold leaf (Figure 7). Although artistic licence has been used in the interpretation of colours in the coat of arms, the latter has been identified as that of the city of Bath. One heraldic description of this is as follows:— 'The

upper half of shield is azure with two silver wavy bars; the lower half represents a battlemented stone wall of silver; over all is a sword erect, point upwards, the hilt gold and the blade gules'.¹⁵ The arms are on record at the College of Heralds and they exist in another differently coloured version with a key placed on the blade of the sword; this refers to the Abbey church of St. Peter and St. Paul. The walls and water illustrate the Roman bath and commemorate Bath's origins as Aqua Sulis. The crossed maces might indicate some mayoral connection, although the mace features large on the arms of Somerset and may simply refer to the county. Searches of information held at the Bath record office regarding the purchase of furniture for various official and public buildings or rooms in the eighteenth century have so far failed to find any dealings with John Pitt and no Windsor chairs are illustrated in old photographs.

The auction catalogue does not provide any information on the dimensions of the labelled Pitt chair (Figure 1). However, measurements (imperial, to the nearest $\frac{1}{4}$ inch) were made of the other three chairs (Figures 2, 3 & 4) that are also believed to be by this maker; these details are given below.

<i>Chair Illustration</i>	<i>Figure 2</i>	<i>Figure 3</i>	<i>Figure 4</i>
Comb-rail (Maximum Height)	$2\frac{1}{2}$	$2\frac{1}{2}$	$2\frac{1}{2}$
Comb-rail width	$21\frac{1}{4}$	$21\frac{1}{4}$	$20\frac{1}{2}$
Stile width	1	1	$1\frac{1}{4}$
Distance from seat to comb-rail	25	$21\frac{1}{2}$	$24\frac{1}{2}$
Seat width (Maximum)	25	$24\frac{3}{4}$	25
Seat depth	17	$16\frac{3}{4}$	$17\frac{1}{4}$
Seat thickness (Maximum)	2	$1\frac{3}{4}$	$1\frac{3}{4}$
Seat height (Saddle Point)	$17\frac{1}{2}$ *	$17\frac{1}{4}$	18
Arm bow thickness (Top to Bottom)	$\frac{3}{4}$	$\frac{3}{4}$	1
Distance across arm bow (Maximum)	27	27	$26\frac{1}{4}$
Arm bow height (Above seat top)	10*	$9\frac{1}{2}$	$10\frac{3}{4}$
Splat width at seat entry	$4\frac{3}{4}$	$4\frac{3}{4}$	$4\frac{3}{4}$
Seat base to side stretcher	$8\frac{1}{2}$	8	8
Side stretcher length	15	15	$14\frac{1}{2}$
Chair height	$42\frac{1}{2}$	$38\frac{3}{4}$	$42\frac{1}{2}$

(*estimate)

The authors are not aware of any other comparative measurements of eighteenth century English Windsor chairs so the extent to which dimensions were standardised by or amongst makers is unknown. However, the above findings show that the two larger chairs (Figures 2 & 4) were the same height and that most of their other measurements were fairly close. Also, whereas seat heights (measured at the front) can be expected to vary due to wear on the feet or the presence of uncut blocks, the actual size of the seats of all three chairs was very similar. This may be because chair makers were working to a well-known or published set of proportioned measurements. What is perhaps more interesting, though, is that the dimensions of some of those stylistic elements that might be expected to vary between makers were identical or remarkably close. For example, the comb-rail heights and splat widths were the same and the side stretcher lengths, which

would have been determined by the shape of the cabriole legs, were very similar. These findings, therefore, seem to reinforce the view that these three chairs probably came from the same workshop. However, without information about the dimensions of the labelled chair, the possibility that they were also made by John Pitt cannot be confirmed, even though the stylistic evidence suggests that this is highly probable.

John Pitt probably learned the trade of wheelwright by working with his father. He described himself on the paper label firstly as a wheelwright and secondly as a chair makers and the record of his burial indicates that he was known locally as a wheelwright. It has been pointed out that the services of wheelwrights would have been much in demand in Slough at that time as the town was a major staging post on the coach route between London and Bath¹⁶. As an indication of how busy this route was a 1790s index states that nineteen coaches to and from London to Bath passed through Reading daily, together with four mail coaches and numerous wagons to Bath and Bristol. Apart from some similarity of techniques, why he should also have practised as a chair maker, a craft for which he would surely have had to serve an apprenticeship, is unclear. Clearly wheelwrighting would have involved providing a rapid service to keep the coaches running on time whereas chair making, especially of cabriole leg chairs, would have been a slow and deliberate exercise of craftsmanship. There may have been a variety of reasons, e.g. financial or personal, for his involvement in the two trades. However, this seems to have been common practice at the time because at least four other eighteenth century Buckinghamshire chair makers had alternative occupations and another, Abraham Meade of West Wycomb(e), was also a wheelwright¹⁷.

Travellers going by stagecoach between the capital and the newly fashionable spa town of Bath would have stopped in Slough either for a change of horses or overnight accommodation. Because of this, it is quite possible that John Pitt may have displayed an example of one of his latest style chairs in the lobby of a coaching inn to attract orders. Indeed, the painted chair described above (Figure 4) might have been just such a commission from a Bath resident or official. These highly crafted artefacts would not have been as expensive as the more familiar upholstered walnut or mahogany armchairs but their practicality and relative cheapness would, no doubt, have made them attractive for informal usage. There was clearly business of this kind to be had as another Windsor chair maker and wheelwright, Richard Hewett, was working in Slough from the 1750s. He was buried at Upton in 1777 and a labelled example of one of his comb-back armchairs, of differing design and with front cabriole legs only, is known. The seat of this chair is chamfered below and does not have an obvious deep groove around the top. Interestingly, however, there is a find scribe line on the top of the seat but no additional line on its vertical edge¹⁸. To what extent Pitt and Hewett were competitors or, possibly, associates remains to be determined.

The four cabriole leg chair that John Pitt designed and made may be derived from the early eighteenth century large-seated Windsor comb-back with turned legs. However, the vasiuform splat, cabriole legs and the use of walnut are all characteristics of fine early eighteenth century armchairs with upholstered seats that would have been used in the saloons and dining rooms of grand houses. The design therefore represents a hybrid between high fashion and everyday practicality. Whether John Pitt was the first to combine the two elements is unlikely ever to be known but his conceptual and

constructional expertise is indisputable. Also, whereas Richard Hewett's trade label indicated that he made several types of chair the likelihood that John Pitt did the same can only be assumed. Similarly, if his chairs were made to order, speculation suggests that he could, with help, have made as many as a hundred during his short working life. Many of these will, of course, have been lost due to breakage, fire, beetle attack and war damage over the two hundred and forty six years intervening since his demise. Nevertheless, because they would have been originally bought by the well-to-do and, presumably, well cared for, the possibility remains that there may be others waiting to be discovered in country house collections.

The Windsor chair, in its various forms, has proved to be a highly successful seating design in both Britain and America over the last two hundred years. Much has been written on this topic in the past but interest has recently been revived by the publication of books that allow the range of stylistic and regional variation of the Windsor chair to be fully appreciated. However, as there is still so little known about the skilled craftsmen who made these chairs in eighteenth century England, the emergence of any more examples that can be attributed to makers such as John Pitt would be of considerable interest.

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