

ROBERT LORIMER'S USE OF TIMBER

David Jones



1. Sir Robert Stodart Lorimer, architect and furniture designer (1864-1929).

This article is about Robert Lorimer's use of timber in his furniture made in Scotland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Chairs that were inspired by local country models have been chosen as a good vehicle for discussion.

As he spent much of his time in the Kingdom of Fife, the young Lorimer was aware of the sixteenth and seventeenth century tradition of *caquetouse* chairs made in oak. These had wide, flaring seats, curved, pincer-like arms on column supports and decorated backs, sometimes with elaborate crestings. Examples survived in domestic collections, but also in official roles, such as councillors' or *baillies*' chairs used in Fife's coastal Burgh towns.¹ In 1904, working for the Earl of Crawford in the building of a new Estate Office at Balcarres, Fife, Lorimer had made a facsimile of a *caquetouse* from the old Baillies' offices in nearby St Monans. (Figure 2). Several things are interesting about this chair. Firstly, Lorimer was making a nod to tradition in reproducing an old east coast favourite, a type that had been brought to the attention of designers in 1878 by John Small, in his ground breaking work of Scottish furniture history, *Scottish Woodwork of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*.² Such a historical quotation was appropriate for new furniture made for an ancient estate with an impeccable pedigree and the carved motifs employed were very much part of a local vocabulary. He had the new chair left 'in the white', that is not stained or artificially darkened to appear old, but presented in a clean state, unadulterated apart from a very light oiled finish. He wanted there to be no doubt that this was new work. But he went further in his wish to create a very particular appearance,



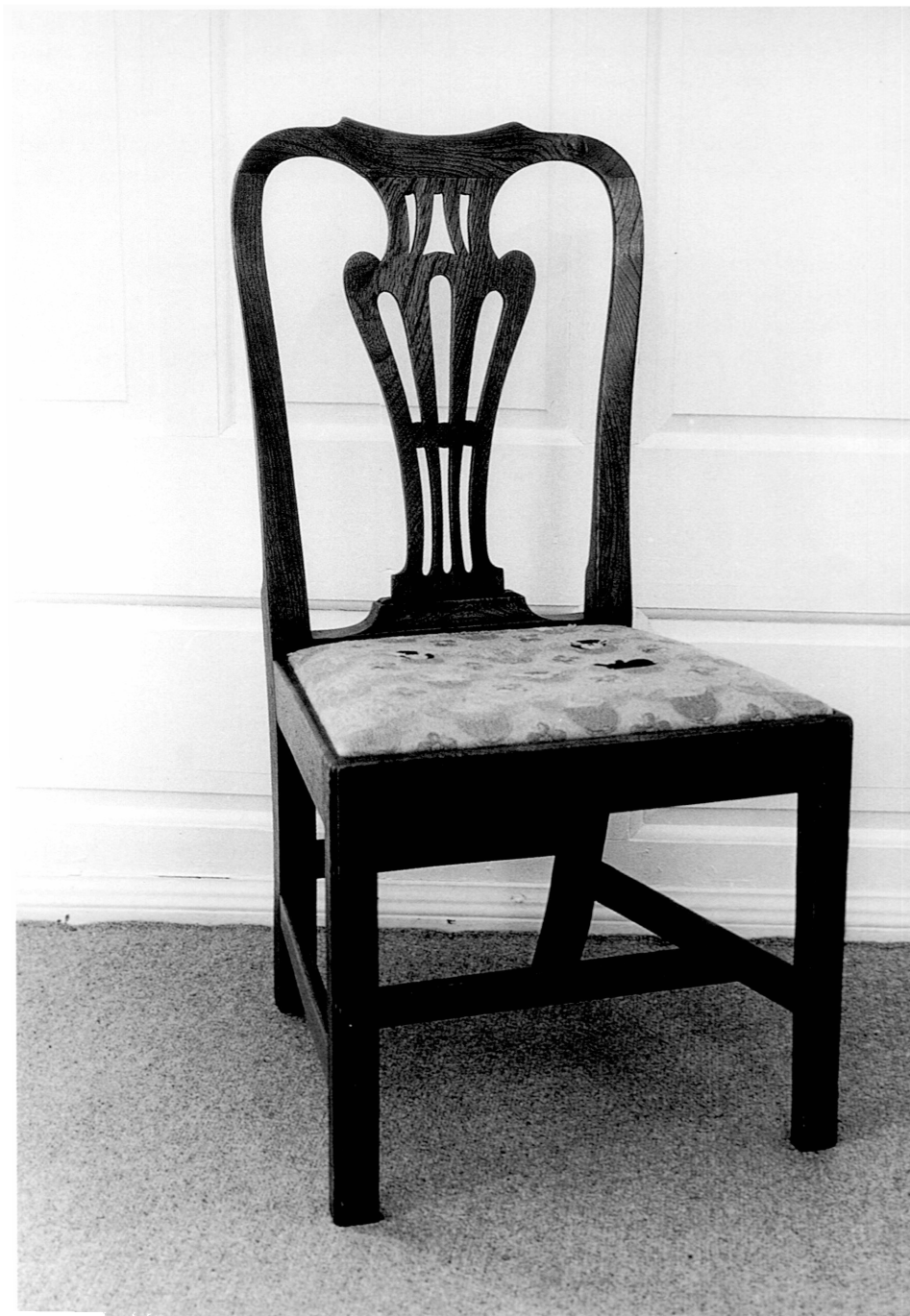
2. *Caqueteuse* chair, Scots Oak, made for the Estate Office at Balcarres, Fife, 1904.
The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres

and specified the use of Scots Oak. Oak grown in Scotland, *aik* in Scots, is of the same species that is widespread in England and the rest of Europe, but has a tendency towards slower, and more crooked, growth. The figure, which has striking, and sometimes swollen, medullary rays appearing in swirly patterns, is more interesting than that from oaks with a tall straight bole. Lorimer called this the *chamf*; a recognisable Scottish feature that resulted from the tree's fight with severe elements. It was an essential timber personality trait that the designer wished to show off in his furniture.

Common *wright* made chairs from the eighteenth century, or made in eighteenth century style, caught his attention too. They survived in cottages, farmhouses and some country houses. Like its Scandinavian counterparts, lowland Scotland had a dominant tradition of squared, not turned, timber used in furniture construction.³ This lent itself very well to the adaptation of fashionable printed designs, which began to make an impact around 1760. Lorimer was beguiled by the plain, straightforward qualities of these rural chairs and was particularly interested in the fact that they were usually made from locally grown timbers.

Scots Elm was probably most ubiquitous; in planked form, it could be adapted very well to pierced splat designs. He used this timber in such a chair for Kellie Castle, Fife, again, because he was aware of the regional tradition of doing so, but also because he wished to exhibit the qualities of the wood. (Figure 3) Scots Elm is, nowadays, a rather disregarded cabinet wood, certainly little used but also little recognised in old pieces. The timber is often difficult to identify beneath years of dirt and dark patination, but it is very different from elm found elsewhere. This is because the timber of Scots, or Wych Elm, is white, as opposed to the red colour of the once common English, or Field Elm. Furniture made from it, when new, has the same pronounced figure, featuring dark lines with feathery interstices, but this shows up so much better against a contrasting light coloured background. Before the age of satinwood, pale whitish yellow timbers would have been unusual in the English household but in Scotland, light elm chairs were relatively common. In Lorimer's version, shown in figure 3, the colour has darkened, but the designer's choice of a pronounced elm grain can still be seen. Scots Elm came in two other distinctive forms, a weeping version attained by grafting a rootstock upside down on to a bole, thereby achieving curled and contorted branches in the upper part;⁴ or as a burr timber, a naturally occurring growth caused by disease. The weeping elm was rarely used in furniture making, but was a decorative specimen tree commonly found in churchyards, or planted in the policies of the manse. The elm burr, on the other hand, was highly prized, particularly in the early nineteenth century, and was used as a veneer for table tops and the like.⁵ Joseph Shillinglaw of Darnick made a notable library table from this timber for Sir Walter Scott at Abbotsford in 1820.⁶

Scots Ash is the third significant furniture timber that was promoted by Lorimer. A frost hardy, wind firm native, this tree was common in the lowland agricultural landscape, but it was to be found in the care of the farmer rather than the forester, and used when needed for tool handles, framing components and common chair making. It could be successfully coppiced, producing long, straight-grained stems that converted into slender components, such as banisters, for the likes of the *brander back* chair. These had been common in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and good examples can be seen in local folk museum collections throughout eastern Scotland.⁷ Thomas Sheraton,



3. Mid-eighteenth century style chair, Scots Elm, c1900, now at Kellie Castle, Fife.
The National Trust for Scotland



4. Scots Ash growing at a Perthshire roadside.

Lorne Gill

in his *Cabinet Dictionary*, 1803, noted that: 'Ash is reckoned in strength next to the oak, and is much in use amongst wheelers, plow makers, and country wrights'. William Boutcher, in *Forest Trees*, Edinburgh, 1775, observed of ash: 'when it is young it is as strong and lasting as the timber of old trees'. It was certainly the case that relatively quick grown ash stocks could be used for chair making to good effect; they had resilience and suppleness, which meant that the wood was not easily broken. Robert Lorimer recognised these qualities, but aesthetically, Scots Ash did not differ in appearance from any other. He simply appreciated the light, clean, regular grained look of the wood and used it in his repertoire of traditional timbers alongside oak and elm.

Figure 5 shows an example of Lorimer's twentieth century response to the traditional use of Scots Ash. It is a designer's hybrid of the *brander back* and *caqueteuse* forms, combining a square framed back of closely ranked banisters with serpentine arms that enclose the sitter. Some traditional methods, such as through wedged arm supports, have been used. Other features, namely the turned stretchers and raised seat rails intended for a squab cushion, are innovations. For decorative effect, the designer has relied upon the very linear grain of the Scots Ash, but has enhanced this with thicker dotted lines of black inlay, thus giving the old material a contemporary lift. ,

This interest in 'the home product' led the architect to air his feelings in a *Country Life* article published in April, 1916.⁸ Prompted by the need to re assess supplies during



5. Hybrid caquetteuse and brander back chair, Scots Ash, c1900, now at Kellie Castle, Fife.
The National Trust for Scotland



6. Seventeenth century style chair with serpentine banisters, Scots Ash and Oak,
c1900, now at Kellie Castle, Fife.

The National Trust for Scotland

wartime, Lorimer's aim was to draw attention to the traditionally used but endangered types that could still be found in the Scottish countryside. 'The Neglect of Home Timber' was concerned with Scots Oak, Elm and Ash, timbers he had used in his own repertoire, but extended its reach to cover other Scottish furniture woods that had notable qualities. European Larch, for example, had enjoyed particular success in Scotland since the mid eighteenth century. The 'Mother' larch, planted in 1746 by the second Duke of Atholl at Dunkeld, Perthshire, provided seed for tens of millions of trees planted on the Atholl estates, some of which were used to make furniture. Most famously, between 1814–19, George Bullock had made for Blair Castle a group of furniture pieces including a pair of side cabinets that made ravishing display of the timber's buttery grain.⁹ The castle collection includes, also, common chairs made from the wood, again displaying an attractive, bright colour. During the later nineteenth century, the most significant champion of larch was Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, who planted hundreds of thousands of the trees at his Ross-shire estate, Novar.¹⁰ His encouragement of the use of this timber resulted in a small amount of larch furniture of a common type being made to the north of Inverness. Lorimer did not employ larch in his furniture repertoire, but he did recognise its qualities in a Scottish context and specified the timber for use in such interior features as floorboards, where the grain and colour would lend vitality to a room.

'Scots Pine' was a great favourite of the architect; he referred to it, as most Scots do, as *Fir*. This title, whilst not botanically correct, has a much older history than 'Scots Pine'. It is the term used by furniture makers to denote the specific tree, *Pinus sylvestris*, with its beautiful orangey red bark and blue-green needles. Interestingly, on the occasions that Lorimer did use the name 'pine' to describe this tree, he called it 'Rannoch Pine'. Nomenclature aside, he valued the timber for its stunning colour and thought it particularly suitable for interior panelling. He quoted the panelled rooms at Rosslyn Castle, Midlothian, as being the finest examples of the use of this timber.¹¹ Scots Elm and Ash too, he recommended for panelling, and for floorboarding in estate offices or garden rooms, areas that required, presumably, a lighter, more utilitarian finish.

Sycamore¹² was once widely used for furniture making in eastern Scotland, possibly following the tradition of using the related, but native tree, the Field Maple, but more plausibly because the Central European Sycamore *Acer pseudo-platanus* was so adept at growing and surviving on the most exposed and windy parts of the east coast. Again, Lorimer referred to the timber by its Scots name, *Plane tree*, which was a little confusing to Londoners, but in constant daily use on the architect's home ground, and particularly in the East Neuk of Fife, where he had lingered as a child and later lived, on his own small estate of Gibliston, by Colinsburgh. He employed the wood for its clean look and hygienic qualities in the kitchens of his houses, for example, Monzie Castle in Perthshire, where a dresser, with large Plane tree slab top survives. But he appreciated, also, the many tightly bunched and shining medullary rays of the cut timber that produced a shimmering effect when polished. For this reason, he recommended the wood for making veneers or curls with interesting waved or 'fiddle back' markings.¹³

Amongst the more neglected furniture timbers he championed was Scots Laburnum, *Laburnum alpinum*, as opposed to *Laburnum anagyroides*.¹⁴ Like Plane tree, this species was particularly well suited to growing in the east of Scotland, and, because it reached a good height and girth with a reasonably straight trunk, it could be planked and used for

making furniture. Because of its even density and smart, ebony-like appearance, it had been used to make bagpipes, but this specialist role declined around the middle of the nineteenth century due to the increased imports of Cocus and African Blackwood. In contrast to the predominantly pale furniture timbers of the traditional Scots interior, *Laburnum Alpinum* furniture possessed a colour that ranged from nut brown to almost black, depending on the fertility of the soil in which it was grown.

Lorimer was not a planter himself, but he mixed in a society of keen aboriculturalists; landowners who planted and experimented with tree breeding. Men such as the young Sir John Stirling Maxwell, (1866–1956), who developed new strains of Scots Fir on his estates at Corrour, Inverness-shire,¹⁵ and the aforementioned Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson of Novar, were fellow members of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society (founded 1856). The Society motto was ‘Ye may be aye sticking in a tree; it will be growing while ye’re sleeping’.

It horrified Lorimer that home timber had become so little used at the beginning of the twentieth century and, indeed, so little planted. The designer noted that forty two million pounds went out of the country in 1913 to import foreign timber.¹⁶ Particularly at time of war, he suggested, this situation could be turned around by re-discovery of Scotland’s natural and traditionally used assets. In sourcing his own timber, Lorimer went to the old established firm of James Jones and Sons, Larbert, Stirlingshire. The firm began trading in 1838. Unlike many merchants, who considered it not worth laying down or sourcing home grown hardwoods, this company had Scottish sawmills that were able to process native timber and they were sympathetic to Lorimer’s point of view. It was probably not coincidental that Jones and Sons are recorded as having done more, in the supply of timber for the combined British war effort, than any other operator in the United Kingdom.¹⁷

In terms of detail, Lorimer was keenly interested in the qualities of cabinet timber. This is demonstrated not only by the furniture he designed, but also the pieces he collected. For example, the French ‘country’ armoires of his own that now belong to the National Trust for Scotland at the former Lorimer home, Kellie Castle, Fife, show his appreciation of the look of Continental fruitwoods and the rather pared down pieces of domestic furniture that he designed for the Drawing Rooms of houses such as Hill of Tarvit, Fife, Monzie, Perthshire and Hallyburton, Angus, display his interest in the French technique of ‘quartering’ panels to achieve decorative effect. In common with some eighteenth century makers, he allowed the figure, or grain of his chosen woods to provide the leading visual impact. Although many of his pieces let us know that he favoured hand carving as decoration,¹⁸ it was Lorimer’s clear aim that the customer should appreciate the timber and not its embellishments. Beneath his aesthetic concern there existed a profound respect for the common craftsman’s understanding of the capabilities of native timbers, something that he learned about by visiting country workshops and talking to the makers, observing their work and the materials they used.

In his own words, and referring specifically to the use of wood, it was Lorimer’s intention to be ‘the architect who believes in local colour, the home product, the stuff with the tang of the soil about it.’¹⁹



7. The swirly figure, or *chamf* of Scots Oak
on the back of the Balcarres Estate Office *caqueteuse* chair.
The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres

REFERENCES

1. See David Jones, *The Vernacular Chair in Fife*, Kirk Wynd Press, Cupar, 1996.
2. John Small, *Scottish Woodwork of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Eneas Mackay, Stirling, 1878.
3. See examples in David Jones, *Looking at Scottish Furniture, A Documented Anthology, 1570–1900*, St Andrews and Glasgow, 1987.
4. J. C. Loudon, *Arboretum et Fructicetum Britannicum*, (second edition, 1854), pp.322–3.
5. The most costly timbers in the 1825 *Supplement to The Edinburgh Cabinet Makers' Book of Prices* were fine oak and elm. Elm, presumably burrs, although the specification does not say so, was priced at four shillings per pound.
6. Library table at Abbotsford, Roxburghshire, by Joseph Shillinglaw. See David Jones, 'Scottish Furniture at Abbotsford', in: *Abbotsford and Sir Walter Scott: The Image and the Influence* ed. Iain Gordon Brown, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh, 2003.
7. See examples in the collections of Fife Folk Museum, Ceres, Fife and Biggar Museums Trust, Biggar, Lanarkshire.
8. 'The Neglect of Home Timber', *Country Life*, 8th April, 1916.
9. Anthony Coleridge, 'The Work of George Bullock Cabinet Maker in Scotland' *Connoisseur*, volumes CLVIII & CLIX, 1965.
10. *Forest Books*, Novar and Raith muniments.
11. *ibid.* 'The Neglect of Home Timber'.
12. Native throughout Central Europe, but not introduced to Scotland until at least the fifteenth century. Sycamore is referred to as 'Maple' in the *Edinburgh Cabinet Makers' Books of Prices*, 1805–25.

13. *ibid.* 'The Neglect of Home Timber'.
14. David Jones, 'The Laburnum Tradition in Scotland', *Regional Furniture*, volume VI, 1992, pp.1-10.
15. See Sir John Stirling Maxwell, *Loch Ossian Plantations, an Essay in Afforesting High Moorland*. Privately printed, 1929. Stirling Maxwell was appointed to the Acland Committee in 1916, a sub-body of the War Reconstruction Committee that had the brief 'to consider and report on the best means of conserving and developing woodland and forestry resources in the Kingdom, having regard to experience gained during the War'. He became chairman of the newly formed Forestry Commission in 1929, until 1937.
16. *ibid.* 'The Neglect of Home Timber'.
17. Nigel Watson, *Timber and much more... A Family History of James Jones & Sons*, St Matthew's Press, 2005.
18. The caquetteuse chair in figures 2 and 7 is an example of his regard for carved work. This was produced in the local workshop of William Wheeler, Arncroach, Fife, but more ambitious woodcarving was done for him by the brothers W & A Clow. His most elaborate designs for carved wood were realised by the Clow brothers at the Thistle Chapel, St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh and Dunblane Cathedral, Dunblane, Perthshire, using Scots Oak.
19. *ibid.* 'The Neglect of Home Timber'.