

# THE SHORT ARM EXPERIMENT

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1. Close up of short, set back arm configuration

This article makes an introductory study of the diverse solutions employed in the construction of short or 'set-back' arms employed in various English regional chair-making traditions.

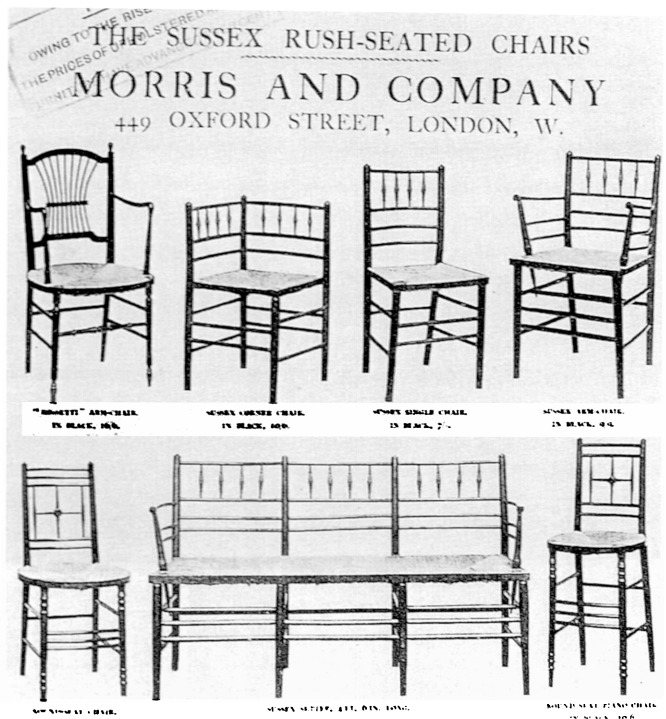
My curiosity about the origins of such design features used in 'Sussex Rush-seated Chairs' advertised by the London decorating firm Morris & Co. (Figure 2) was first kindled when I read Simon Jarvis's article 'Sussex Chairs in 1820' in *Furniture History* (1974)<sup>1</sup>, and Janet Pennington's subsequent article 'Sussex Chairs' in *Regional Furniture* (1995)<sup>2</sup>. What was of considerable interest was not only the relationship with specific regional chairs such as the rush-seated models originally made in the Sussex village of East Hoathly, but also the possible links with French regional traditions of design which can be traced back to the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Although these influences on English regional chair making appear to be intermittent, they led eventually to the designs that are now associated with the Arts and Crafts movement.

With regard to the latter, the most obviously French design amongst the Morris range was the so-called 'Rossetti' arm chair that resembled the distinctly regional Provençal

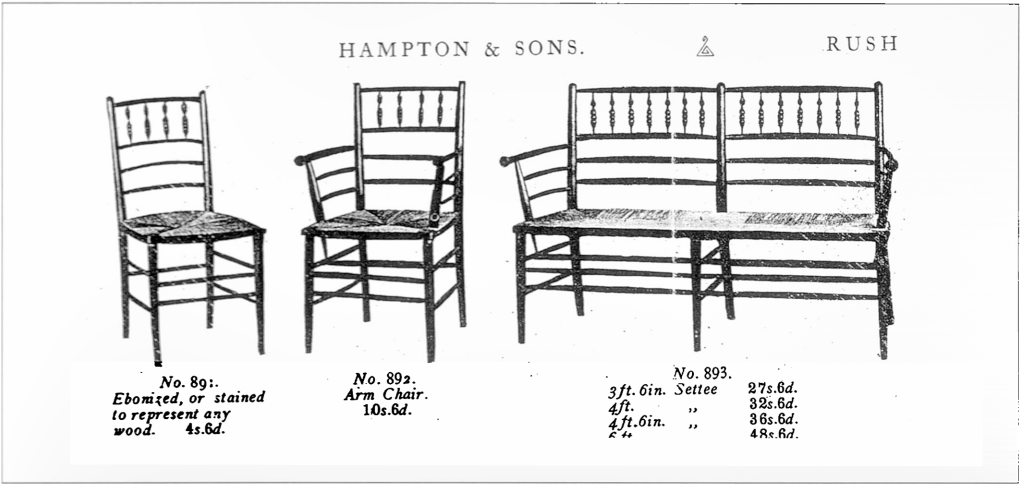
*chaise a gerbe* (sheaf of corn) chair pattern (top left, figure 2)<sup>4</sup>. By contrast, the 'Sussex' armchair (top right, figure 2) appears to be a hybrid that shares French and English regional construction. Further research into cross-Channel vernacular forms revealed a varied range of unusual under-arm support devices, some of which appear to have been transposed, by the eighteenth century, into English regional traditions of chair making. These occur in conjunction with distinctively short 'set back' arms. But the phenomenon is not restricted to Morris's chairs: – French-style under-arm details on shortened arms can be found in earlier English regional traditions, particularly in the midlands and in the north. A process of experiment, improvement and innovation can be traced; one that incorporates a clear improvement in efficiency and economy of production and which took place over at least two centuries. The 'vernacular' chairs developed for a middle class market and featured in the catalogues of urban firms such as Hampton & Sons (1894), Morris & Co. (1911), and Edward Gardiner (1929), represent only the concluding stages in an apparently widespread assimilation of French ideas applied to English vernacular forms.

The short arm device started to become widespread in England between 1800 and 1825, but occasional dated chairs show an early appearance. For example, a typical wooden-seated chair from the west midlands, inscribed with the date 1792 on the underside of the seat frieze, bears the remains of short arm supports between seat rail and side stretcher level. (Figure 5) An eighteenth century fretted low back fancy chair from Erddig, Wrexham (Figure 6) shows the short, set back arm configuration with turned, tapered arm rests. This is the type of decorative chair that one associates with late eighteenth century fretted ladder back chairs from the Thames Valley,<sup>5</sup> but suggests, also, a primary stage in the evolution of the special set-back arm rest used by the Kerry workshops in Evesham. (Figures 7, 8 and 11) For example, a rush-seated splat back chair stamped KERRY (Figure 7) made in Evesham, has set back arm supports that penetrate the side rails and taper towards the stretchers below. A related spindle back chair of around the same date shares the same features (Figure 8). Other instances exist of low-back chairs, with very similar arms, that originate from Worcestershire chair makers' or wood turners' workshops.<sup>6</sup> A common detail of all these chairs is the individualistic right-angled or 'inverted pipe bowl' conjugation of the arm and under-arm support. This shows a very basic understanding of contemporary French arm construction as shown in figures 9 and 10 – which illustrate a nineteenth century chair from Normandy. The so-called *motif de coquille* (shell motif) is a familiar signature feature of chairs from this large French region.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting, also, the similarity between back rails seen in figure 7 and those used on certain ladder backed chairs made in Flanders during the nineteenth century. Examples of such chairs are to be found in the Musée de Cassel.<sup>8</sup> It seems unlikely that this similarity is a coincidence, as other examples of Kerry-type Worcestershire low back chairs display different designs of French ladder backs. Two examples from the Anthony Belton Collection, sold in 1992 (Figure 11) display ladders that are distinctly Provencal in their designs.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it is worth noting their similarity to the ladders used on the Pass chair designed by Ernest Gimson in the early twentieth century. (Figure 15)

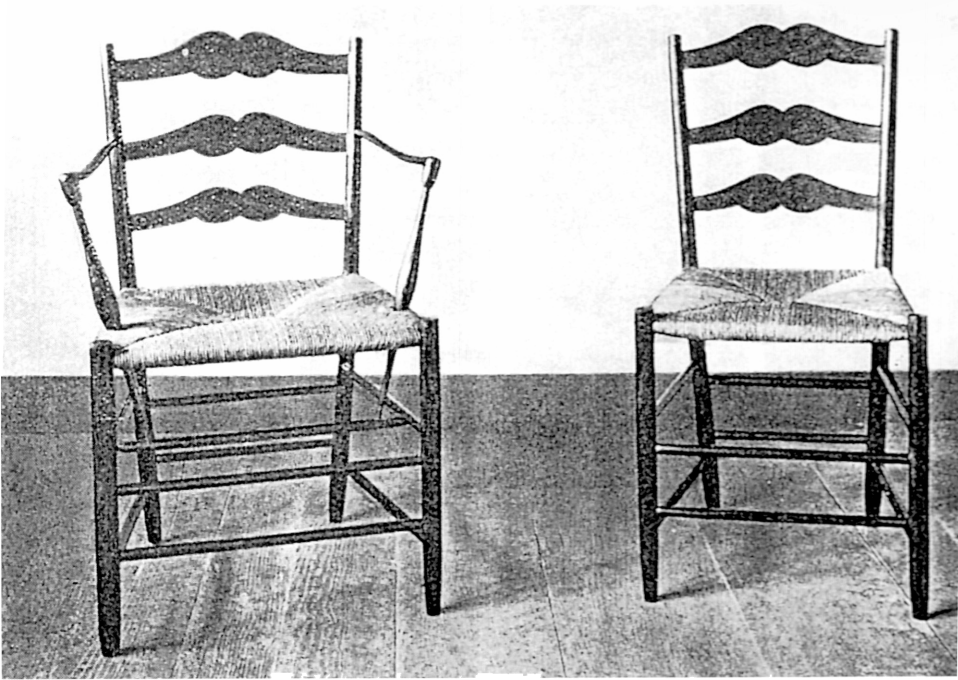
In Normandy during the second half of the nineteenth century, a tradition can be perceived towards a further-developed type of set-back arm device which, in due course,



2. 'The Sussex Rush-seated Chairs',  
first manufactured by Morris & Company in 1864.  
From a company trade catalogue of 1911



3. Rush seated chairs in trade catalogue issued by Hampton & Sons, London, 1894



4. The 'Pass' chair (armed and single versions),  
designed by Ernest Gimson, illustrated in trade catalogue issued by Edward Gardiner, 1929

became generally used in different parts of England. The high-back armchair (Figure 12) attributed to Philip Clissett of Bosbury, Herefordshire (1841–1913), with its over-sailing arms and tapering 'chisel point' under-arm supports, falls into such a category. This arm construction; in which the under arm spindles are not permanently fixed to the seat rails, but are wedged into a hole within the rail, then pegged to the upper side of the stretcher below; is very similar to the method used in French rush seated chairs, as described by J J Bourgeois.<sup>10</sup>

In the east of England, innovative versions of this arm formula, in which the underarm support was screwed or nailed to the side of the seat rail, began to appear as early as the 1790s. To illustrate this localised development, we can turn to two recorded examples of splat- or ladder back chairs that have boldly-turned front stretchers and refined pad foot details that are regionally-specific to Lincolnshire. Both these examples have innovative devices that house the set-back arms. In figure 13, the arm is secured by a spindle support that is screwed into the seat rail and pegged into the turned side stretchers. The tapering column underarm support is not only typical of many Lincolnshire armchairs, but the method of fixing to the upper side stretchers simulates the distinctive fixing used on early nineteenth century vernacular chairs from the Loire Valley.<sup>11</sup> The other chair (Figure 14) has a more curvaceous arm rail, supported by a bulbous under-arm spindle which is reminiscent of features to be found on the French vernacular type known as a *Bonne Femme*.<sup>12</sup> Although the right hand side underarm support spindle on this chair is original but fractured, the left hand side spindle is a replacement. The elongated underarm



5. West midlands cross splat backed chair, inscribed '1792' on underside of seat frieze.

Arms disappeared, underarm supports visible

*Courtesy of Barbara Pearce*



6. Fretted low backed fancy armchair from Erdigg, Wrexham, North Wales.

*Courtesy of the National Trust*





7. Cross splat backed rush seated armchair stamped KERRY, post 1821.  
*Provenance: CSK Auctions,  
12 Nov 2003, Lot 133*



8. Worcestershire spindle backed rush seated armchair, post 1821

9. Cross splat backed armchair from Normandy, bearing the *motif de coquille* (shell motif) on cresting rail and front stretcher  
Nineteenth century  
*Courtesy of Christopher Urquhart*



10. Armrests and spindle supports of chair in figure 9, showing conjugated joint  
*Courtesy of Christopher Urquhart*





11. Worcestershire  
low back chairs  
displaying different  
designs of 'French'  
back rails  
*Provenance: Anthony  
Belton collection,  
sold 1992  
Drewett & Neate,  
Newbury*



12. High backed armchair attributed to  
Philip Clissett, Bosbury, Herefordshire,  
post 1841



13. Cross splat back armchair, Lincolnshire,  
late eighteenth century



14. Cross splat back armchair, Lincolnshire,  
late eighteenth century



15. The 'Pass' armchair, designed by Ernest Gimson for the Pass family of Wootton Fitzpaine, Dorset  
*Courtesy of Woolley & Wallis, Salisbury*

16. North east Cheshire armchair with  
knuckle jointed rails and 'picking stick' arms  
*Courtesy of W A Pinn & Sons, Sible  
Heddingham, Essex*



17. North east Cheshire armchair with  
knuckle jointed rails and 'picking stick' arms  
*Courtesy of Bonhams, Chester*





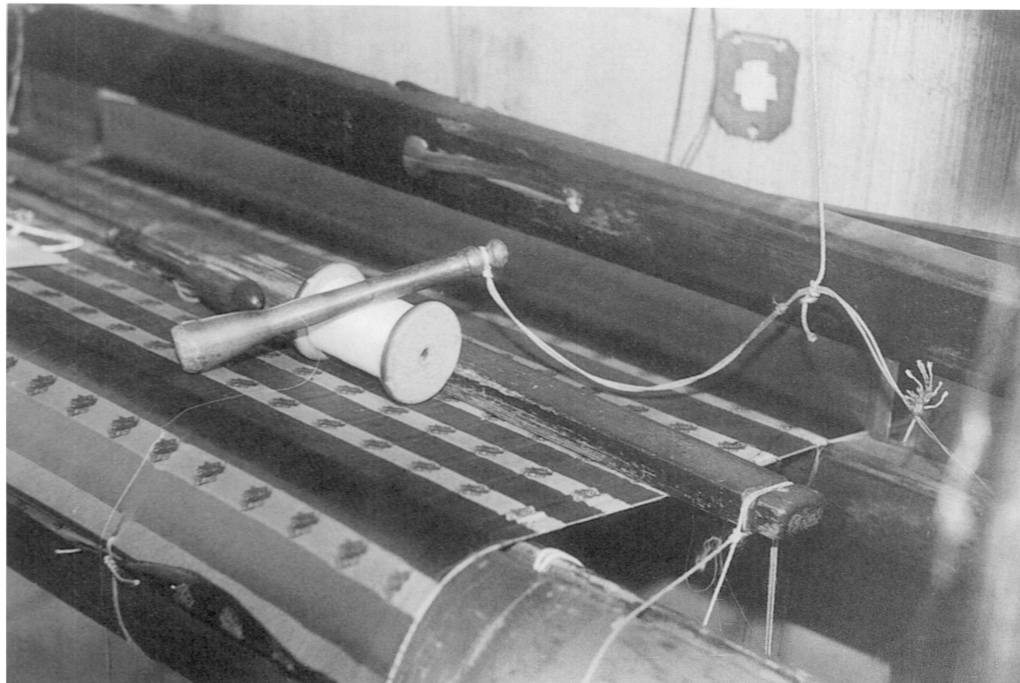
18. North east Cheshire armchair with knuckle jointed rails and 'picking stick' arms



19. North east Cheshire rush seated armchair with 'picking stick' top rail and arms

*Courtesy of Tim Brinton*





20. A picking stick on a Macclesfield silk loom, north east Cheshire



21. Empire style rush seated armchair  
attributed to R Simpson of Lancaster,  
(1848-87)

*Courtesy of Barbara Demaine*



22. Anonymous Sussex rush seated chair with paired front stretchers, probably mid nineteenth century



23. Anonymous Sussex rush seated armchair with paired front stretchers, probably mid nineteenth century



24. 'Sussex Rush seated armchair' sold by Morris & Company from 1864 and first illustrated by R W Edis in *Furniture and Decoration of Town Houses*, 1881

support spindle, piercing the seat rail and upper side stretcher, is a feature to be found on vernacular chairs made in Picardy, Normandy and the Basque Country, as well as Provence. Such spindles are referred to as *en baluster ou en navette*, which aptly describes their configuration. However, in the Lincolnshire example (Figure 14) the under-arm support not only pierces the seat rail in the traditional French manner but is housed in an innovative H stretcher, a device used later by Gimson and Morris and Company nearly one hundred years later. (Figures 15 and 24)

The Gimson design for the Pass chair (Figure 15), first made for the village hall in the Pass family's estate village of Wootton Fitzpaine, Dorset, and later illustrated in Edward Gardiner's furniture catalogue in 1929 (Figure 4), shows a great familiarity with French construction. Like the Lincolnshire armed chairs discussed, it has a bulbous underarm support but it has, also, an 'inverted pipe bowl' or conjugated arm joint, both features that originate from different regions of France. Whether Gimson derived these design ideas from English regional sources, or directly from France, is unknown.<sup>13</sup>

Turning now to the north west of England, four distinctive spindle back armchairs, made of ash, display regional design features indicating an origin in the textile towns of north east Cheshire.<sup>14</sup> The underarm support device varies from that seen in Philip Clissett's chairs from Herefordshire (see figure 12) and perhaps represents the latter stage in the evolution and wider use of such a detail in the English vernacular tradition.

But the regionally specific aspect of the four chairs seen in figures 16, 17, 18 and 19 is the 'picking stick' form of the top rails and arm rests. The picking stick was an implement associated with the silk looms in towns such as Macclesfield in Cheshire. It was a turned handle used to activate the flying shuttle on weaving looms and was typically fashioned in a bulbous, heavy-ended shape as seen in figure 20. Top rails and arm rests in this form were frequently used on splat back chairs made in the Macclesfield workshop of the Leicester family of chair makers (fl. 1815–1860). The Leicester family also produced chairs with knuckle jointed rails as seen in figures 16, 17 and 18. This striking decorative feature appeared also on the spindle back 'Liverpool' pattern chairs made by Gillow of Lancaster from about 1801.<sup>15</sup> Both these north western variants, the 'picking stick' and knuckle jointed rail chairs, have underarm supports that penetrate the seat rails and terminate in needle-shaped endings that are lodged into the upper side stretchers. The same device can be seen on miscellaneous north western chairs such as the 'Empire style' example attributed to R Simpson of Lancaster (1848–87), illustrated in figure 21.

The construction details and features used in north western English chairs, but particularly those from Cheshire (figures 16, 17 and 18), and to some extent those used in the midland chairs of the Kerry and Clissett workshops, provide a blueprint for the 'Sussex Armchair' made in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The type of H stretcher used on the Sussex chair and its variants seems to have been used first in eighteenth century Lincolnshire workshops on models such as the 'cross splat back' illustrated in figure 14. Taking into account the relative strengths and lasting qualities of different constructional features from a cluster of different regions, it seems that some of the best were chosen to create the hybrid that was the Sussex chair. A discernible route can be traced from the appearance of some French devices in the eighteenth century, through their adaptation in English regions, to a practical nineteenth century formula featuring short arms that were strong, attractively composed, but economical to manufacture.

Evidence also suggests that French cultural influences during the first half of the nineteenth century may have had an important impact on vernacular designs in the U.S.A. A study of North American chairs concluded by Charles F Hummel in 1968 revealed details of the manufacture of short armed chairs made by the Dominy workshop in Hampton, New York State. Hummel's publication *With Hammer in Hand*<sup>16</sup> illustrates versions of the short arm chair emanating from the workshop of Nathaniel Dominy V

between 1800 and 1825, which was the period when the short arm device started to become more widespread in its use in England.

In many respects, the short arm or set back arm used on the Dominy splat back chairs shares design similarities with nineteenth century vernacular chairs made in Picardy<sup>17</sup>, only differing in the exact positioning of the arm rest above the underarm support. The length of the Dominy workshop 'short arms' is usually twelve and five eighths of an inch compared to a seat rail length of sixteen inches. This is based on the evidence of surviving workshop templates.

Returning to English types, the celebrated chairs of the East Hoathly chair and trug maker, Henry Rich (1810–67), can be seen to represent a stage in the evolution towards Morris & Co's 'Sussex' chair.<sup>18</sup> But the products of this rural Sussex workshop were not alone in the chain of influence. Other, anonymous, chairs can be found which have a resemblance to Rich's models, but which show a hybrid assimilation of features from English regions. Two of these, a single chair and an armed version, are shown in figures 22 and 23. The paired plain front stretchers used on these chairs are usually associated with regional tradition in both the south west English midlands and the workshops of the Thames valley. The motif is, for example, featured on chairs illustrated on the letterhead of William Treacher of High Wycombe<sup>5</sup> and the trade card of Stubbs's manufactory, City Road, London, in the 1790s. It is interesting to note that some regional details from outside the capital were coalescing in London made chairs by the end of the eighteenth century. It is not known where the chairs in figures 22 and 23 were made, but the structure of the complete arm ensemble, including the 'picking stick' arm rest and the spindle support with needle shaped ending suggests a link back to earlier chairs from north east Cheshire, such as the example illustrated in figure 17. It appears that northern English chairs made a very definite contribution to the southern hybrid that evolved in Sussex and later, in London itself. Despite the lack of sophistication in some aspects of the design represented by the chair in figure 23, which appears to have led to the fracture of the underarm support spindles that were screwed to the seat rails, the overall design formula does anticipate the 'Sussex' armchair sold by Morris & Co. and first illustrated by the architect R W Edis in *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*, 1881. The thought is entirely speculative, but the close interest paid by members of the firm towards textile manufacture, and in particular silks, could have been a reason behind the retention of the silk loom picking stick motif in their own version of the hybrid Sussex chair (Figure 24).

One of the initial aims of this exploratory article was to identify the ways in which the 'Arts and Crafts' designers such as Edward Burne Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, William Morris, Philip Webb and Ernest Gimson contributed to a final coalescence of French and English regional features to form a successful and lasting type of hybrid chair. It is still difficult to do this with any precision, but some clues in *Memorials of Edward Burne Jones*, 1904, provide a glancing insight into the potential involvement of designers, such as Philip Webb, in the development of prototype models.<sup>19</sup> In *Memorials*, G Burne Jones records that, in the early 1860s, various designs by Philip Webb, including high back chairs, painted black and with rush seats, were being made up in the workshops of the Boys' Home (established 1858) in the Euston Road, London.<sup>20</sup> In the mid 1860s, this industrial training school had been rebuilt and expanded through

the personal involvement and financial gift of various people including Lady Truro, daughter of the Duke of Sussex. More research is needed in this area, but the reference to benefactors who supported an institution involved in the making of early or prototype chair designs may explain the application or invention of the generic term 'Sussex Rush-seated Chair' to describe quite diverse and disparate chairs, some of which were predominantly French designs, and others hybrids combining vernacular features from two cultures.

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3. See Jean-Jacques Bourgeois, *L'Age d'or du siege paille*, pub. C H Massin, Paris, 1997, figures 24-9, p28 and figures 42-3, p38.
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5. See John Boram, 'Eighteenth century Fancy Chairs from High Wycombe', *Regional Furniture* vol. XIII, 1999, pp7-16. There is a chair resembling the Erddig example in the Frederick Parker Collection at London Metropolitan University.
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