A Small Scottish Chair

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The most absorbing challenge a piece of early furniture can offer is the exploration of its origins. The design, decoration and, especially in the case of early oak, the carving of inscriptions such as dates and initials can often provide sufficient information not only to reveal the object's age and geographical source but, very occasionally, to trace its original home and owner. Dating is usually a relatively straightforward process of studying changing styles of ornament, inscriptions and making comparisons with original woodwork in buildings whose history is well recorded. Recent decades have also seen great progress in identifying characteristics which are specific to particular areas of the British Isles. Much of the increase in knowledge in this field is due to the research and expertise which are the lifeblood of the Regional Furniture Society.

It is in the more peripheral areas of Britain where sixteenth and seventeenth-century furniture often bears the most distinctive and ancient regional forms of decoration. Notable examples of such characteristics are in Westmorland and the Lake District, where carved beds, press-cupboards and chairs commonly bear dates and initials. These wonderful vernacular objects, recently discussed in this Journal by Sarah Woodcock and Frank Wood, were mainly owned by a very unusual middle class of 'statesmen' or multi-generation yeoman farming families who held their farms under much more enduring tenancies than their counterparts in lowland regions. They therefore had some degree of wealth and felt sufficiently secure in their homes to invest in good furniture. The longevity of oak made its decoration a logical medium for the expression of their artistic, local and personal identity.

In other areas the inscription of such personal detail on furniture was less common, but the aristocracy had an exclusive means of linking themselves to their important property and valuable woodwork, metalware and decoration — the personal coat of arms. As a result the art of heraldry has been of immense value to historians and researchers in identifying the original owners of buildings and possessions.

The subject of this investigation is a small chair bought at auction several years ago (Figure 1). It was catalogued by the auctioneer as 'A small Scottish oak child's armchair, 17th century'. It was no doubt due to its weighty construction, along with a lack of use due to its size being unsuited to most adults, that the chair had survived remarkably well. The only real damage was that all four feet were greatly reduced in height, especially at the back, giving the chair a pronounced rearward tilt to the extent that the seat was only 34cm high at the front, sloping to 31cm at the back where the side stretchers were touching the floor. Bearing in mind the good condition of the rest of the chair, the shortening of its legs appeared to be more the result of many lifetimes of damp stone floors than of physical wear. There seemed little point in leaving the chair at such an impractical height, with an acute backward tilt, so a restorer sympathetically extended the feet so that the seat was level and a rather more useable 38cm high. This still leaves it an unusually small chair, only 95cm tall and the seat just 35cm deep,

¹ Woodcock (2010); Wood (2014).





I (left) Small chair, probably made for Janet Ogilvy, c. 1596. Oak. *Private collection*

2 (above) Chair, 1763. Softwood, probably Scots pine. *Private* collection

making the auctioneer's description of it as 'a child's chair' seem quite reasonable. Apart from the feet, it is in remarkably sound original condition, with the seat being the only part which might possibly be a replacement. If it is indeed a new seat it was replaced a considerable time ago, because the rearmost of the two boards has narrow fillets added to fill the gap where it joins the stiles. This is often found in old seat-boards which have been tightened up to compensate for many years of shrinkage. A rusted iron plate is fixed to the underside with iron nails, joining the two seat-boards.

As the auctioneer claimed, the chair is indeed of classical Scottish 'caqueteuse' form, very sturdily built with the typical narrow panelled back, while the seat and frame broaden out to the front. The particularly thick, flat and outwardly curving arms have a raised rib running along their outer sides, comparable in section to those of the tailor's chair, originally dated 1621, at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen.² The unusually low arms are supported at the front by the baluster-turned front legs. Many later seventeenth-century Scottish chairs had much thinner arms which have often been replaced. There is a shaped apron below the front and sides of the seat. Another characteristic shared by most Scottish chairs of this era is that the lower stretcher

² Jellinek (2009), p. 172, pl. 205.



3 Detail of Figure 1, showing the arms of Sir George Ogilvy of Banff.

joining the back legs is at a higher level than those at the sides. It is generally assumed that this positioning of the stretcher was intended to strengthen the lower part of the frame by cutting the mortises at different levels in the adjacent faces of the rear legs.

The heavy cresting rail overhangs the rear uprights at either side in a manner comparable to other early Scottish chairs dating from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.³ The upper profile of the cresting rail is centred by a 'fan', dipping at either side to end in small scrolls. As with much regional furniture, forms of decoration persisted in Scottish chairs over very long periods, as shown in a relatively crude pine armchair dated 1763, echoing the same decoration of the cresting rail, but around seven generations later (Figure 2).

The most striking feature of the chair is the back panel which bears a coat of arms and the initials IO carved in relief below (Figure 3). Very few chairs carry so much personal information, and usually such details are used to mark the donation of the chair to a civic or trade organisation. For example there are the walnut Council House chairs at Salisbury, one dated 1585, bearing the arms of the Corporation of New Sarum

³ Chinnery (1979), pp. 460–63, figs 4:94, 4:96, 4:98.

and the initials RBM, for Robert Bower, the mayor. There is also a near-identical chair dated 1622, given by mayor Maurice Green. At Trinity Hall, Aberdeen, several of the chairs presented to the incorporated trades bear the arms of the donor and his initials. Among these is the Wrights' and Coopers' chair, dated 1574, bearing the name and arms of Jerome Blak. The Barber-Surgeons' chair has the Guthrie arms and the initials HG. One of the Hammermens' chairs bears the arms of the Mercer family and LM, for Lawrence Mercer. The donors' arms and initials also appear on the chairs of the Fleshers, Coopers and Bakers. 5

While it is clearly impossible to identify every surviving example, it would appear that, in contrast to these public, ceremonial chairs, those with similar personal identity and intended not only to project status, but also to provide homely comfort for its occupant are extremely rare. Amongst the few recorded in the published literature which can be personally linked to their owner are that of Sir Richard Wilbraham (1579-1643) and the ancient example which, along with his bed, bears the Arms of Sir Rhys ap Thomas, dating from somewhere between 1505 and 1527.6

Because of its location on the chair's back, some of the finer carved detail has suffered minor wear from the backs of its occupants. The armorial panel of four quarters is centred by a small inescutcheon. The first and third quarters each bear a lion statant, guardant, coward.⁷ The second and fourth quarters each show a group of three birds, statant, sinister. The small inescutcheon is of a building

The Scottish form of the chair suggested that the first step in identifying the coat of arms was to consult the heraldic authority for Scotland, the Court of the Lord Lyon in Edinburgh. It emerged that the arms were those of Sir George Ogilvy of Banff, 2nd Laird of Dunlugus, who was born in 1537 and died in August 1621. The Court of the Lord Lyon explained that the rather solid birds represent 'papingos', or parrots. The word is derived from the old French *papegai*, better known in England as popinjay. This intriguingly exotic choice for sixteenth-century north-east Scottish heraldry may well be associated with the medieval sport of 'shooting papingo'. This archery competition was first recorded in 1483 and is still held today by perhaps the world's oldest archery organisation, The Ancient Society of Kilwinning Archers. The contest still involves the shooting of arrows vertically from the steps of Kilwinning Abbey at a wooden 'papingo' attached to a 3-metre pole projecting from the side of the tower, 35 metres directly above. An Archer's Register of the 1860s dryly explains that '... great care is necessary in the conduct of this pastime, or the upward gazers might make disagreeable acquaintance with the descending shaft'.8

The Court of the Lord Lyon explained that the lions statant represent the Ogilvy family while the papingos are for the family of Sir George's mother, Alison Home. They also identified the building shown in the inescutcheon on the chair as almost certainly being Fast Castle, the seat of Alison's powerful forebears, the Homes of Fast Castle. Both Sir George and his father Walter appear to have married into wealth. The

⁴ Chinnery (1979), p. 448, fig. 4:60.

⁵ Jellinek (2009), pp. 171–76, pls 203, 204, 207, 208, 212.

⁶ Bowett (2014); Chinnery (1979), p. 245, fig. 3:28.

⁷ www.heraldsnet.org

⁸ www.scottisharchery.org.uk

fragmentary ruins of Fast Castle, still perched high on the cliffs of the Berwickshire coast, must be one of the most spectacular sites in Britain. Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermuir* (1819) was based around this dramatic fortress. Sir George continued the family tradition of financially advantageous marriage by choosing as his bride Beatrix Seton who was born around 1533 into an important East Lothian family.⁹

Fast Castle featured during early research into the marriage chest believed to be that of King James IV of Scotland and Margaret Tudor, elder sister of King Henry VIII.¹⁰ There is a tantalising, tentative thread which may connect that chest and this chair: on the epic five-week journey north to her marriage, thirteen year old Margaret Tudor stayed overnight at Fast Castle on 2 August 1503, where the three-year-old Alison Home may well have met the family's royal guest.

The construction of this chair, made almost one hundred years later, shares some features with that early Scottish chest, again showing how regional design characteristics could persist through several generations. The simplicity of the full-depth plain chamfered mouldings around the panels of the chest lives on in those to the sides of the chair's back panel. The distinctive eastern Scottish capital letter form with its concave sides and mid-height 'dot' persisted in carved inscriptions throughout the sixteenth century.¹¹ This can be seen at Linlithgow Palace, the Howff Burial Ground, Dundee, King's College Chapel, Aberdeen and at the immediately-pre-Reformation sacrament houses at Auchindor, Cullen, Deskford and Kinkell.¹² The earliest recorded use of these capitals might be the monogram I&M of James IV and Margaret Tudor found on the chest referred to above, while the form of the I on the Ogilvy chair, albeit lacking the earlier indentations to the upper and lower serifs, must be among the last examples of the application of this unusual form of lettering.

The choice of timber clearly differs from that used in the earlier chest. While at least some fast-grown native oak was evidently still available for the chest's construction around 1500, a century later this chair was made from slow-grown, straight-grained oak. Without dendrochronological analysis we cannot be certain, but in view of the relative scarcity of native hardwood at the time, imported oak is likely have been the choice for a chair of high status. Many later seventeenth-century Scottish caqueteuse chairs were made from pine, not only because native oak had become scarcer still, but also because imported oak may have become too expensive during that less prosperous period in Scotland's history. The joints of the chair are held with conventionally-sized pegs of 7–8 mm diameter, compared to the much broader examples used in the earlier chest, yet there is still the ancient mason's mitre joint where the rail beneath the back panel joins the rear stiles.

Sir George Ogilvy was a wealthy landowner typical of the families whose Norman ancestors had steadily moved north to occupy the rich, fertile soils of eastern Scotland. He initially occupied Inchdrewer Castle outside Banff, as well as the long-gone Banff Palace in the town, but in 1575 he acquired the dramatic, but now-ruinous Boyne

⁹ Maitland (1829), p. 38.

¹⁰ Harrison (2012).

¹¹ Thomson (2009), p. 73.

¹² Richardson (1964), p. 47, pl. 86; Fawcett (2002), pp. 260-63, pls 4.16-4.19

¹³ Jellinek (2009), pp. 111–15, pls 118, 120, 122, 123, 124, 125.

Castle near Portsoy from another branch of the family.¹⁴ Although the Court of the Lord Lyon had linked the chair specifically to Sir George, it was clearly too small for it to have been used by a grown man, so attention turned to his offspring. The genealogical records of his six children are sparse, but there are two whose names could potentially relate to the I O initials on the chair-back. During the sixteenth century the letter I was used to indicate the initial J, so the search was narrowed down to James and Janet Ogilvy.¹⁵

Although no record of James's life appears to survive, there is one piece of physical evidence — his fine sandstone memorial set into the interior wall of the collegiate church at Seton, his mother's family home. Today the chapel, with its distinctive truncated spire whose completion was halted by the Reformation, stands next to the main East Coast railway in East Lothian, around ten miles from Edinburgh. It is one of a small group of such churches in the area which includes the famous Rosslyn Chapel. The memorial bears his father's arms with its lions and papingos and an inscription which marks James's death in 1617. His date of birth is not recorded, but he must have died relatively young because his father survived him by four years.

In contrast to James's tomb, there is no physical evidence of his sister Janet's life. Her dates are vague, but genealogical sources suggest that she was born around 1575. The most significant record of her life is that she married Sir William Forbes, eighth Laird of Tolquhon. No wedding date is recorded, but it appears to have been around 1596.

The quandary over whether the initials on the 'child's' chair related to James or Janet was resolved by a chance visit to Crathes Castle on Deeside. It was extremely exciting to discover Crathes harbouring an oak chair which, in construction, appearance and proportions, is essentially identical to the Ogilvy example (Figure 4). The coat of arms and lettering differ, while the profile of the frieze below the seat is also slightly different; it is dated 1597 and bears the initials KG. Alongside it is yet another oak chair, clearly its pair, only larger and considerably taller, again with an identical cresting rail (Figure 5). This chair bears the initials AB and a different coat of arms; the guidebook states that these are for Alexander Burnett, who built Crathes Castle, while the initials KG on the small chair are those of Katherine Gordon, Alexander's wife, together with her father's coat of arms. The date on Katherine's is one year after the date 1596 carved in the stonework at Crathes to mark the castle's completion.¹⁷

Neither chair is in such good condition as the Ogilvy example. The seats of both are obvious replacements. Along with other repairs to both, the tall chair has suffered a serious reduction in height. The only significant original constructional difference between the two smaller chairs is that the front legs of the Crathes example are 10 mm smaller in cross-section and the arms are raised 20 mm higher above the seat. The tall chair has an interesting variation in the curvature of its arms; unlike most of the caqueteuse chairs seen during this research which sweep outwards in an S shape, on this example they are C-shaped, curving out, then back inwards to join the uprights of the

¹⁴ Spence (1873), pp. 45, 57.

¹⁵ www.geni.com

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Scott (1971), p. 47.



4 (above) Small chair, made for Katherine Gordon, wife of Alexander Burnett of Crathes, 1597. Oak. *Crathes Castle. The* author

5 (right) Chair, made for Alexander Burnett of Crathes, c. 1597. Oak. Crathes Castle. The author



front legs. Two of the chairs at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen also share this unusual arm profile.¹⁸

The chairs are not the only furniture at Crathes made for Alexander and Katherine. In the Laird's Bedroom is a highly decorated bed, bearing their heraldic devices, the same 1597 date as on Katherine's chair, their entwined initials and two carved heads depicting husband and wife. Both the bed and the chairs probably record their marriage which appears to have coincided with the long-delayed completion of the castle which was begun by his grandfather in 1553.

For much of Scottish history, wives maintained their name and personal identity throughout their marriage, so that a sixteenth-century bride like Katherine Gordon would retain her own initials and her father's arms on the back of her marriage chair which, although smaller than that of her husband, effectively displayed her individual status. Thus Katherine Gordon's almost identical example shows that the Ogilvy chair was made for a wife of high status, bearing her initials IO. Taken together with the display of her father's personal coat of arms, this identifies it as having been made for Janet Ogilvy. The survival of its taller counterpart, which would logically have been

¹⁸ Jellinek (2009), p. 172, pls 204, 205.

| | IO chair | KG chair | AB chair |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Overall height | 950 | 970 | 1150 |
| Overall width | 610 | 610 | 660 |
| Overall depth | 480 | 460 | 530 |
| Cresting rail | 480×125×50 | 480×135×50 | 500 × 160 × 60 |
| Seat width (between front legs) | 470 | 460 | 500 |
| Back panel | 250 × 380 | 250 × 380 | 220 × 330 (upper panel) |
| Width across back | 380 | 380 | 340 |
| Back legs/stiles | 45×65 | 45 × 65 | 50×65 |
| Front leg section | 60×60 | 50×50 | 65×65 |
| Thickness of arms | 50 | 50 | 50 |
| Seat to top of arm | 160 | 180 | 230 |
| | | | |

Table 1 Dimensions of the Ogilvy and Crathes Chairs (in mm)

NOTE: because the AB chair has suffered serious losses to its feet and lower stretchers, it was originally around 150 mm taller.

made for her husband Sir William Forbes of Tolquhon and bear his initials WF, remains a tantalising possibility (see Table 1).

The similarity between the Ogilvy chair and those at Crathes suggests that they were made very close to the same date, and very probably in the same workshop in the nearest centre to both, Aberdeen (Figure 6). This, Scotland's major port at the time, was also an important economic centre and seat of learning with a population of 8,000, just eighteen miles from Crathes and fifteen miles from Tolquhon. The city was renowned a century earlier for the woodwork of John Fendour's workshop which included the outstanding interior of the city's King's College Chapel.¹⁹ It is also believed to have to have produced many caqueteuse chairs, including those at the city's Trinity Hall, throughout the seventeenth century.²⁰

Unlike the apparent coincidence of building construction and marriage dates at Crathes, it appears likely that the Ogilvy chair was made slightly later than the reconstruction of Tolquhon Castle (Figure 7). This had been carried out by her husband's father, the 7th Laird, between 1584 and 1590, which he makes clear in an inscription built into the castle wall. He lived there until his death in 1596, conveniently just after completing his remarkable tomb which survives at nearby Tarves Kirk. The exact date of the wedding of the younger William Forbes, the 8th Laird of Tolquhon, and Janet Ogilvy is unclear, but it appears to have been very close to the time of his father's death, his resulting elevation to Laird and their occupation of the castle. The probability is therefore that Janet Ogilvy's marriage chair was made in 1596 or 1597,

¹⁹ Geddes (2000), pp. 74-97.

²⁰ Cotton (2008), p. 148; Learmont (1978).



6 Map of Scotland, showing locations mentioned in the text.

KEY

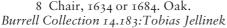
- 1 Boyne Castle
- 2 Banff Palace
- 3 Tolquhon Castle
- 4 Crathes Castle
- 5 Seton
- 6 Fast Castle



7 Tolquhon Castle,Aberdeenshire.Roddy Macleod









9 Chair, c. 1571?. Softwood, probably Scots pine. Provand's Lordship Collection 1927.12: Tobias Jellinek

very close to the same time and in the same Aberdeen workshop as the Burnett and Gordon chairs at Crathes.

There are a number of caqueteuse chairs from the late sixteenth and seventeenth century in Scotland and in collections further afield. The purpose of some, such as those already mentioned at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen which were made for the city's incorporated trades, is well known. There are also the Fife vernacular caqueteuse chairs with their low backs and distinctive carving. Although they don't bear initials or coats of arms, chairs such as those at St Monans were used for civic purposes, as discussed by David Jones.²¹ However, the survival of some unusually small chairs suggests that there was also a custom in north east Scotland of making pairs of chairs for the use of married couples of high status; one for the husband and a distinctly smaller one for his wife.

It is remotely possible that other complete 'marriage pairs' still survive, but it is statistically more likely that there are other chairs bearing two initials which, like that of Janet Ogilvy, may be the survivors of long-separated pairs. Notably tall, possible

²¹ Jones (1996).



10 Chair, made for Andrew Watson of Aberdeen, 1657. Softwood, probably Scots pine. *Provand's Lordship Collection* 1927.23: Tobias Jellinek



11 Chair, made for Andrew Watson of Aberdeen, 1661. Tropical hardwood. Trinity Hall, Aberdeen: Tobias Jellinek

'husband's' chairs include a fine example at the Burrell Collection, dated either 1634 or 1684 and initialled MH (Figure 8).²² There is another dated 1571 and initialled PK (on the reverse of the back panel) held in the Provand's Lordship Collection, also in Glasgow (Figure 9).²³

A tall pine chair in the Provand's Lordship Collection bearing the arms and initials of Andrew Watson and the date 1657 is particularly intriguing because it has a counterpart, thought to be made of mahogany, with the same initials and arms, dated 1661 at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen (Figures 10 and 11). Is it possible that Andrew Watson had the pine chair made for his home, along with a smaller one (now lost) for his wife and then commissioned the grander example in mahogany — an extremely early use of this wood — which he presented to The Fleshers' Company at Aberdeen, four years later?²⁴ It would be extremely unusual to have two such fine, personally identifiable

²² Jellinek (2009), p. 111, pl. 119. The chair is dated by Jellinek to 1634, but the carving is abraded; the baroque scrolls in the cresting suggest a later date, probably 1684.

²³ Jellinek (2009), p. 106, pl. 109.

²⁴ Jellinek (2009), pls 120, 212.





12 Small chair, c. 1670. Softwood, probably Scots pine. Provand's Lordship Collection 1933.61: Tobias Jellinek



13 Small chair, 1675. Softwood, probably Scots pine. Provand's Lordship Collection 1928.50: Tobias Jellinek

chairs made unless both were associated with highly important events in his life. As the Burnett chairs at Crathes show, it is possible to speculate that one may have part of a pair to mark his wedding.

The Provand's Lordship collection also houses some notably small pine caqueteuse chairs which, too cramped for an adult male to occupy with dignity, may have been made for wives, while their matching husbands' chairs have been lost (Figure 12 and 13).²⁵ Unfortunately, and possibly because their softwood construction indicated lower status, neither of these little chairs bears a coat of arms, making it virtually impossible to identify their owners.

Sir William Forbes, the 8th Laird of Tolquhon, and his wife Janet Ogilvy went on to produce four sons: Walter, the heir; George of Craigie; Thomas of Waterton and William of Finzies. They also had four daughters: Christian, Lady Streichen; Elizabeth, Lady Caskieben; Isobell, Lady Philorth and Janet, Lady Haddo.²⁶ Three generations later, along with many wealthy Scottish families, the Forbes of Tolquhon suffered a financial catastrophe. They were ruined by their large investment in the disastrous Darien scheme of 1698 which attempted to set up the Scottish colony of Caledonia in

²⁵ Jellinek (2009), pls 122, 123.

²⁶ www.famouskin.com

present-day Panama. The scheme collapsed through a combination of poor planning, bad weather, tropical diseases, opposition from England and hostility from Spain. Its failure swallowed up a large proportion of Scotland's already declining wealth, weakening the country and helping propel it towards the Act of Union with England in 1707.²⁷

To end on a more positive note, through her successors the Douglas family and then the Irvines who emigrated to Savannah in the eighteenth century, Janet Ogilvy, who once sat in this little chair, was an aristocratic forebear of Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States.²⁸ Under the care of Historic Scotland, little-known Tolquhon Castle, the home of Janet and her chair, survives as a beautiful and romantic ruin (Figure 7).

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²⁷ Prebble (2008).

²⁸ www.famouskin.com