

COUNTRY CHAIRS

by
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Figure 1. Wavy line ladder back.

Country chairs have formed a familiar and comfortable part of the more humble dwelling in this country since the 18th century, and probably earlier on a more limited scale.

However, until quite recently collectors and others have tended to take these chairs rather for granted, with the result that the importance of their relationship with the social life of the country is often diminished. The aim of this article is (a) to attempt to redefine what is meant by the term "country chairs", (b) to relate these chairs to their economic and social background, and (c) to examine in some detail the range of north country chairs.

In an earlier, more rural, Britain it is perhaps not difficult to visualise the development of localistic styles of architecture, furniture, iron work, stone walling, hedging and all of the other observable dimensions of a culture which looked to its immediate surroundings for both its design and materials.

Both the strong traditionalism and the generally poor communication systems mitigated against a great intermixing of styles until the late 18th, and in many areas, the early 19th century so that the flow of both ideas and design developed little momentum in much of Britain. In such a restricted social system the development of local styles of chairs flourished and formed

a wide and powerful source for innovation, for several generations of chair-makers. Genuinely native designs emerged, having such clearly identifiable features that they could be related not only to specific areas but also to particular craftsmen, centred in particular areas. Often these craftsmen joined together as family groups, and the history of some of these families can be traced over several generations. In some areas chair-makers formed teams, each member making a part of the chair, seats, legs, stretchers etc. These parts were collected and the completed chairs assembled in a central workshop.

Often chairs were produced for local consumption, being made to order or for sale in the local market town. (The output from a typical small rural workshop would probably have been around twelve single chairs and four carver chairs, each week.)

Considering how poorly developed the transport system was, these early craftsmen would have been concerned not only with marketing locally but also in finding a source of raw materials in their neighbourhood. The features which link these early chair-makers together are their choice of materials and their production processes. Traditionally the majority of country chairs are made of ash, although almost all of Britain's hard and semi-hard woods are found in chairs,

including yew, sycamore, birch, oak, beech and fruitwood.

Ash is particularly suited to the structure of chairs because the legs and stretchers need to be sufficiently light to allow the chair to be moved about easily, but also strong enough to withstand hard use. Ash is particularly strong and pliable and fulfils these needs. It also has the added advantage that it can be cleft, or split down its grain, producing a section of wood which can be turned into the required part, having the full length of the grain. In contrast, sawn timber tends to have the "short" grain running across it and is therefore less strong. Cleaving wood is an ancient device for securing lengths of wood without having to saw it, and provides a highly efficient source of initial chair segments. The cleft sections had the sharp edges removed from them with a flat-sided axe, called a side axe, and then were roughly rounded by being held in a foot operated vice called a "shaving horse", and shaped with a two-handled draw-knife. The chair part was centred and turned to shape in a foot operated "pole" lathe, which used a bent sapling as its source of power. The turning process was aided by the use of green freshly felled wood which, being relatively soft, was easier to turn than harder, seasoned timber. There is clear evidence to show that the early chair-makers moved from one woodland

site to another, felling and turning the wood *in situ*, making temporary workshops, and moving on when the timber supply was exhausted. The chair components may have had a short period of seasoning after turning but it is probable that the chairs were assembled from relatively unseasoned parts. The simple joints remained firm because both parts of the dowel joint became oval in the seasoning process. (The difference between the radial and tangential drying of the annual rings thus ensured a tight fit.) Early "green" turnery can be recognised by this ovalling.

It is doubtful whether the chair frames were stained but it is possible that they were given a coat of linseed oil. Finally, the chair would have been rush-seated in the typically geometric pattern. This craft continued to use a material which has a long history of domestic use, as floor covering, and as lighting and seating material. Much of the early rush seating is beautifully executed by using a very thin "twist" of rush. One imagines that the rush was gathered locally, and certainly evidence exists to show that the Herefordshire chair-makers, Peter and William Clissett, used rushes from the river Lugg, which flows through that county, for their chair seats. However, if local rush was used, then the flora of British rivers must have altered, for the freshwater rush, *schoenoplectus lacustris*, is found on relatively few rivers today, being confined chiefly to the Eastern Counties.

Of course not all country chairs were rush-seated; many have either a



Figure 2. North Country ladder back.

thin seat of elm supported by side stretchers, or are made of solid elm with legs and back supports morticed into it.

At this point we may ask how so many ladder back, spindle back and other designs of rush and wooden seated chairs could have been produced from the small country workshops which we have described. The answer to this seems to relate to the advent of the Industrial Revolution, which began in the mid-18th century

and developed rapidly from that point. The northern counties of England and, in particular, Lancashire and Yorkshire, were important centres for industrial development, and many towns underwent rapid building programmes to accommodate the new work force.

The formation of these conurbations meant that large numbers of people who had previously worked in agriculture moved into these towns and created a steadily increasing demand for utilitarian furniture, including



Figure 3. North Country ladder back.



Figure 4. "Wigan" ladder back.

chairs. It is clear that in order to produce the vast quantities of chairs needed to supply these towns that the old style of workshop, employing very few men, must have given way to a more mechanistic approach to chair-making, with workshops becoming more related to industrial processes than to rural crafts. This is not to say that in other areas less concerned with the growth of industrialisation, the rural chair did not continue to be made in the traditional manner. They certainly were. But there is considerable evidence to show that, although the new chair-makers of the towns continued to supply a local community, many more chairs were produced than necessary to meet local demands, so their products were marketed over a much wider area than the rural products. The new demand also brought a rise in the number of chair-makers having their own workshops. Evidence exists to show that in Lancashire alone twenty known workshops existed in 1790, situated in the towns of Ormskirk, Rochdale, Ulverston, Warrington, Wigan, Goosnargh, Sedbergh and Kirby Lonsdale, the main chair-making centres being Liverpool and Manchester. By 1816 the number of known workshops had risen to 41 and had spread to Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Bury, Chorley, Colne, Lancaster and Preston.

These chair-makers were not wealthy men although they seem to



Figure 5. "Wigan" ladder back.

have enjoyed a fairly high social status. There is evidence to show, for instance, that between 1764 and 1812 seventeen chair-makers were made Free Burgesses of Lancaster.

Regrettably very few chair-makers left wills, so that detailed lists of their possessions are largely lost to us. The letters of Administration left by James Harvey, chair-maker, of Witton in Cheshire, who died in 1800, show that he left less than twenty pounds to his widow. Possibly his tools and devices were left to his son, George Harvey, who is known to have been a chair-maker in Frodsham, Cheshire, in 1834.

It is supposed that with increased mechanisation the chair-maker's craft

moved away from its rural origins in a number of important ways, viz (a) the output of chairs was increased by employing larger numbers of chair-makers, (b) the use of pole lathes gave way to treadle and belt driven lathes, (c) timber was brought to the workshop rather than vice versa, (d) much more sawn, seasoned timber was used, with the result that cleaving and shaping became redundant parts of the chair-making process, (e) as more sawn timber came to be used the close-grained timbers, including beech and to some extent mahogany, came into greater use. Ash was still used extensively but by no means exclusively. The range of designs at this time is interesting because we can trace a direct transition during the 18th and 19th centuries from chairs which can be said to have had truly native origins to those in which the influence of the celebrated furniture-makers such as Sheraton and Chippendale can be seen.

Without doubt the northern counties of England produced both the widest range of design and the greatest quantity of rush and wooden seated chairs. Often these chairs are described as "country chairs" with little justification, for it can be demonstrated that many of them are related to both an industrial economy and society as well as to industrial production techniques.

Much individuality was expressed in



Figure 6. Macclesfield ladder back.



Figure 7. "Nipple top" spindle back.

terms of distinctive turnery detail within the major design types. A detailed examination of all these turnery and other specific differences related to geographic areas is too wide a subject to be encompassed within the scope of this article but some of the major north country designs can be examined.

The ladder back chairs produced in the north of England fall into two broad categories, (a) those chairs which have an arrangement of "ladders" of various shapes and varying in number, but typified by not having a rail joining the top of the back legs, and (b) those ladder back chairs which have, again, an arrangement of ladders of various shapes but typified by having a rail joining the top of the back legs.

The first category includes the classic wavy line ladder back, see Figure 1. This chair is perhaps the finest design amongst ladder back chairs and is a true native design. An early reference shows a similar chair in a Hogarth print of 1730. There are a number of other north country ladder backs falling into this first major group which have different ladder designs. All of them have the robust, hard wearing quality which typifies the north country chairs. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate some of the major variations of these chairs. The second major division includes a number of designs of ladder back chairs which are typified by having a rail joining the top of the back legs, and are sometimes known as Wigan



Figure 9. "Sunburst" spindle back.

ladder backs. There is a great deal of individual turnery and ladder differences between these chairs, which are thought to originate in the Wigan and Preston areas of Lancashire. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate examples of these chairs.

A chair which in some ways is similar to the Wigan chair, but which originates in a completely different area is the Macclesfield chair from Cheshire, which is illustrated in Figure 6. It is established that this design of chair was made by Charles Leicester and probably the other chair-makers who worked in the Chestergate area of Macclesfield. This centre of chair-making in Cheshire is particularly interesting because the craft can be seen to have flourished over a period of about a hundred years and to have declined gradually towards the mid-19th century. In 1834 there were five chair-makers working in Macclesfield, by 1855 only Charles Leicester still made chairs there and he then combined his trade with the then more fashionable trades of upholstery and gilding. Probably the rise and decline of the industry in Macclesfield is a microcosm of the northern chair-making industry. The extended production of chairs indicates why a number of north



Figure 8. "Chippendale" spindle back.

country chairs appear to be in such good condition today.

The so called "Lancashire spindle back" chair provides another major dimension of northern chairs and



Figure 10. "Billinge" spindle back.

again seems to be a native style indigenous to that part of England. In practice, this style of chair was made in both Cheshire and Yorkshire as well as in Lancashire, although there is evidence to suggest that they were most extensively made in certain towns in Lancashire.

There is some evidence which relates certain designs of spindle back chairs to specific towns and some of these are illustrated below.

Figure 7 illustrates the most common general design of spindle back chair. Note that the carver chair has three rows of spindles and the single chair, two rows. This particular design is relatively short in the back, with double, deep indentations in the turning of the spindle, and has a "bobbin" turned front rail. It is believed that this design was predominantly produced in North Cheshire and South Lancashire. It is thought that the further north the chairs were made in Lancashire the thinner the spindle turnings became.

Another design of spindle back is shown in Figure 8 and is less commonly found than the type illustrated in Figure 9, and may show a Chippendale influence in the top rail.

Figure 9 shows a less common form of spindle back chair, displaying the typical sunburst or fan carving in the top rail and having the inner rail assembly in the base. These chairs are usually light and elegant in design and are believed to have been exclusively made in Liverpool and Manchester. Strangely there seem to have been very few carvers of this type made.

The spindle back chair illustrated in Figure 10 is perhaps the least common of all this group of chairs. Note the



Figure 11. Low back Windsor.

flattened and raised top rail, round front legs and inner rail assembly which typifies this chair. There is strong hearsay evidence that these chairs were made in the village of Billinge in Lancashire, but the author can find no record of a chair-maker having lived there.

Various types of wooden seated chairs were made in the north of England including the so called Windsor designs. Amongst these designs are high and low backed chairs, broad and narrow armed chairs, crinoline and 'H' stretchered chairs, and a great variety of splat carvings and turnery differences. The majority of these

chairs were made in ash with elm seats, but many were made with yew with elm seats. Figure 11 shows two examples of low back chairs with crinoline stretchers and *fleur-de-lys* splats. The two most common leg turnings are also shown. These extremely comfortable chairs gave great service wherever hard wearing chairs were needed, in offices, factories, schools, public houses, farmhouses and cottages.

There is some conjecture about the exact point of origin of these chairs but it seems likely that many were made in Rockley, which is a small parish a few miles from the major Windsor chair making centre of Worksop in Nottinghamshire.

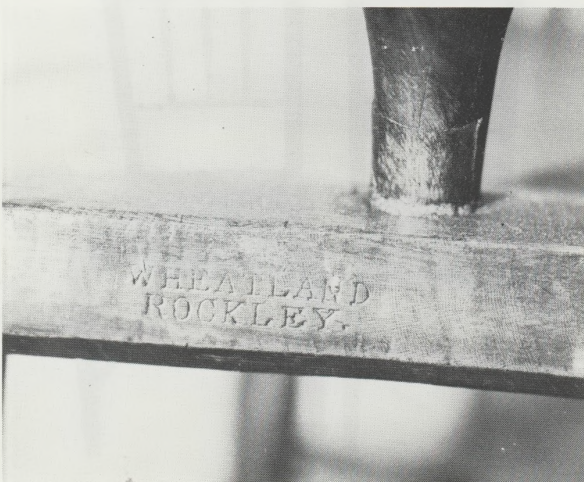


Figure 12. Rockley stamp.



Figure 13. "Empire".



Figure 14. "Ormskirk".



Figure 15. "Dales".

shire.

Figure 12 shows a chair-maker's stamp from Rockley, taken from the seal of a low back Windsor chair. The author has seen a number of other maker's stamps from this place.

With the onset of the 19th century and the steadily increasing prosperity of Victorian times many of the chairs produced seem to have been influenced by other styles. For example the so-called Empire style chair which was made in North Lancashire, see Figure 13, seems to have been strongly influenced by an original Sheraton design. These chairs are interesting in that a high proportion of them are made of fruitwood, and they reflect a growing demand from the working class of the time for more sophisticated furniture.

One of the Ormskirk chair varieties is illustrated in Figure 14. This, and other related designs of chair, are thought to have originated in the Ormskirk and Preston areas of Lancashire. They are extremely robust chairs and show signs of extreme mechanisation in their production, the legs and stretchers being made from sawn sections of beech and birch. These chairs no doubt represent one of the last designs of chair in a long tradition of specifically northern chairs.

No description of north country chairs can be complete without refer-

ence to the Dales spindle-back chairs, which originated in Westmorland, Cumberland and the North Yorkshire Dales. There are a great number of specific varieties of these chairs, and Figure 15 illustrates a common variety. Note the lighter construction and single row of spindles compared with the Lancashire spindle back.

This group of chairs seems to have appealed to the later chair designer William Morris, for many Morris chairs, although smaller and lighter in con-

struction, seem to have received direct inspiration from the Dales chair designs. Figure 16 contrasts a slightly larger, earlier Dales chair with a smaller but clearly related William Morris chair.

The story of rush and wooden seated chairs is by no means complete, and the author would be pleased to hear from anyone who feels that he has information which would add to the stock of knowledge on this subject, related to chairs in Britain generally.

Right: Figure 16. William Morris and "Dales".



Photographs: P. Morse.