

A VERNACULAR PROGENITOR FROM SUSSEX?



Fig 10 Sussex armchair with ebonised finish (early 19th C)

In this year's Journal, Janet Pennington identified an early 19th century vernacular chairmaking tradition in Sussex. Her article illustrated a pair of rush-seated side chairs made by the Rich family in their chair and trug workshop at East Hoathly during the period 1786 to 1867. However, after further discussion, Janet remains unconvinced as to whether these examples enlighten us as to the origins of the 'Sussex chairs' manufactured by Morris and Co. from the 1860s onwards (R. F. vol IX, page 85).

Members may therefore be interested in a recent discovery of an ebonised rush-seated ash armchair (figure 10) which I believe can be linked by design association to not only the chairs made by Henry Rich but the 'Sussex armchairs' made by Morris and Company. Features shared by figure 10 with chairs from the Rich workshop, include the use of ash, a curved beaded stay-rail (top-rail) arranged on a tilt, a similar type of seat construction, rake to the back legs and an ebonised finish.

Many early vernacular traditions employed a similar type of seat construction in which the turned front-legs were mortised into the underside of the seat rail. It is worth noting that although the form of seat construction used in the side chairs, made by Henry Rich's workshop, is relatively common in other regional traditions dating back to the 18th century, surviving armchair derivatives are rare. Within the context of English vernacular traditions, this form of arm construction was innovative and essentially pioneering. The use of a dark stain or an ebonised finish was not uncommon in other vernacular traditions during the first half of the 19th century. For example in N.W. England, customers were given two options.

Chair frames were either stained black or stained to produce a mahogany look.

The distinctive detailing of the arm construction, (figure 10) and the overall configuration of the assembled turned components provide further evidence of a convincing link to the 'Sussex armchairs' made by Morris and Co.(figure 12)

Is this another example of a vernacular chairmaking tradition providing a progenitor which was not only readily adapted and employed by the Arts and Crafts designers, but sustained popularity over an 80 year period?

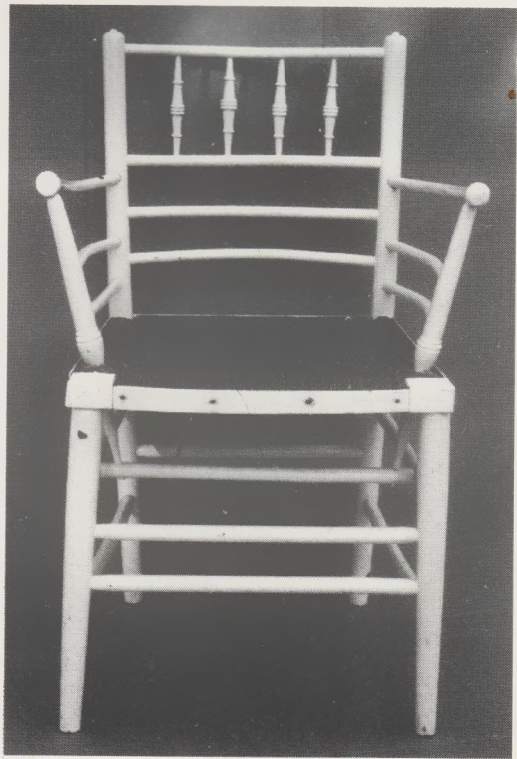
Well documented vernacular traditions, which appear to have inspired the designers of the Arts and Crafts movement, already include chairs made by Phillip Clissett of Herefordshire, Kerry of Evesham, and Robert Walker of Cumbria (B.D. Cotton, 'The English Regional Chair', 1990) & (S. Stuart, D. Jones 'Eskdale Chairs', RF vol IX).

Further research may reveal more about the evolution of, influence of and the extent of design transfer from the Sussex vernacular tradition. In this respect it is interesting to examine a side chair (figure 11) made out of beech which combines a faux bamboo structure with more obvious construction and turnery features, characteristic of the devices we now associate with the Sussex vernacular tradition. Features of note include a splayed spindle configuration, a curved beaded stay-rail (top rail) with a central section repeating the multiple ring turning to be found on the front stretcher of the Sussex armchair (figure 10), seat construction involving front legs mortised into the seat rail, a rake to the back legs and an ebonised surface finish.

John Boram



Fig. 11 Faux bamboo Sussex chair



**Fig. 12 Overpainted 'Sussex armchair'
made by Morris and Co. (1860–1940)**