

## THE BRITISH REGIONAL FURNITURE STUDY CENTRE

Many members are already familiar with the British Regional Furniture Study Centre; many indeed have attended one or both of the first two annual lectures organised jointly with the RFS. Many know of the services which we are developing from our base at Wycombe Museum in High Wycombe. For those who are less aware of the Centre, and the work we do here, I will explain what the Centre is and what it does before describing recent developments and acquisitions.

The Centre has been established to promote the study of British regional furniture by providing a collection and archive resource and to establish a museum of national standing dedicated to regional furniture based in High Wycombe. Dr Bernard Cotton is making available over four hundred regionally provenanced chairs to the Centre representing all six English regional chair making traditions. Our long term ambition is to develop the collection to encompass seating furniture from Scotland, Ireland and Wales as well as all types of British furniture. This will be the first nationally representative collection of British Regional Furniture.

Dr Cotton is the Centre's Research Director and also sits on the board of Trustees along with Ian Barker, Prof Floris van den Broecke, Cllr Mrs Kathleen Peatey (Chairman), Cllr Mrs Pam Priestley, Christopher Gilbert, Rod Giddins (Secretary) and Sarah Medlam.

Day to day funding for the Centre's work is currently supplied jointly by Wycombe District Council and Buckinghamshire College.

The Centre has recently moved into buildings to the rear of the museum which have been specially adapted. The buildings now house office space, a study and preparation room, storage space and a gallery dedicated to the principle of open storage. Based on a system developed by the MAK Museum of Decorative Arts in Vienna, chairs from the Cotton collection will form a 'chair wall' in a spectacular display which will combine accessibility and compact storage.

We gradually intend to offer courses, some of which form part of higher and further education courses such as the BA in furniture restoration at Buckinghamshire College, or as part of professional training for those who work with antique furniture. Other courses are recreational and will be available to NADFAS and adult education groups.

Permanent and temporary exhibitions and displays are fundamental to the Centre, making the collection accessible to a wider audience. The 'chair wall' will take pure design as its theme and is due to open this summer. As the Centre develops further, we will curate exhibitions in the museum, both permanent and temporary, some of which will tour other museums. Space has been set aside on the first floor of the museum and this will explore the social context of chair-making in England.

Also central to our project is the creation of a database of British Regional Furniture. We are drawing together information and images relating to vernacular furniture and its makers. This is to be an on-going project of data collection and data entry, and we hope that as this develops further, RFS members and other researchers will come to the Centre to use the facility, or indeed, visit our Internet site which will become available. We do not intend to charge for this service but we hope our relationship with the RFS will be a symbiotic one:

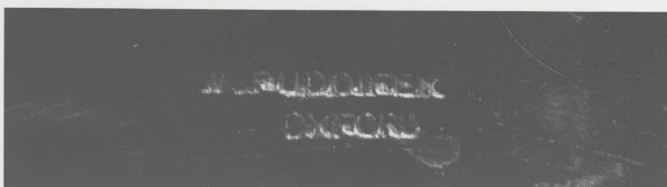


**Fig. 2 One of a set of six chairs made by Walter Puddifer of Oxford**

members can help us enormously by keeping an eye open for regional furniture with name stamps or labels and contacting us if they come across any unusual pieces. The greater number of regionally-provenanced pieces we are able to identify, the more we can build up an overall picture of where the different styles originated.

### Recent Acquisitions

A set of six chairs made and stamped by Walter Puddifer of Oxford recently came up for auction in Oxford. Walter Puddifer was trained by his father who was a beer retailer and chair maker from Stokenchurch near High Wycombe. On the death of Stephen Hazel, a well-known Oxford Windsor chair maker in 1898, Walter Puddifer moved to Circus St, off Magdalene Bridge, Oxford, where he worked for the next forty years as the last of the traditional Windsor chair makers in Oxford. Dr Cotton had waited many years to see chairs by this maker come up for sale and the decision was made to attempt to raise the required £1,000 in the very few days available. Thanks to the hard work of the trustees, the money was raised and the chairs were bought through the generous financial help of four members of the antiques trade, Christopher Baylis, Christopher Clarke, Michael Harding-Hill and Andrew Jenkins, and Buckinghamshire College, (figs. 2 and 3).



**Fig. 3 Each of the chairs are stamped by the maker**

Recently we were given archival material relating to a chair maker from Sidmouth in Devon. One of the Centre's volunteers is currently translating the manuscripts into typed script in order to make them more accessible to users of the Centre. These remarkable documents were donated by an RFS member, Robert Nash and include a receipt from the Honiton branch of the Phoenix fire office dated 25 March 1796, insuring a building, on behalf of Mr William Rugg, chair maker, for £350; a tripartite indenture between John Robbins of Topsham, William Rugg, chair maker and his wife Elizabeth and James Pady of Colyton.

The indenture lays out the terms and conditions of a loan of £150, a large sum to be borrowed by an 18th century chair maker. As the document states that Elizabeth is the sole heir of her grandfather's estate, it may be possible that this is how they hoped to repay the money. We also have the bond agreeing the loan and recording two repayments of £140 and £150 in 1799 and 1800.

These documents, along with the Centre's other resources will be fully available to researchers, and we hope very much that members of the RFS will make use of the Centre.

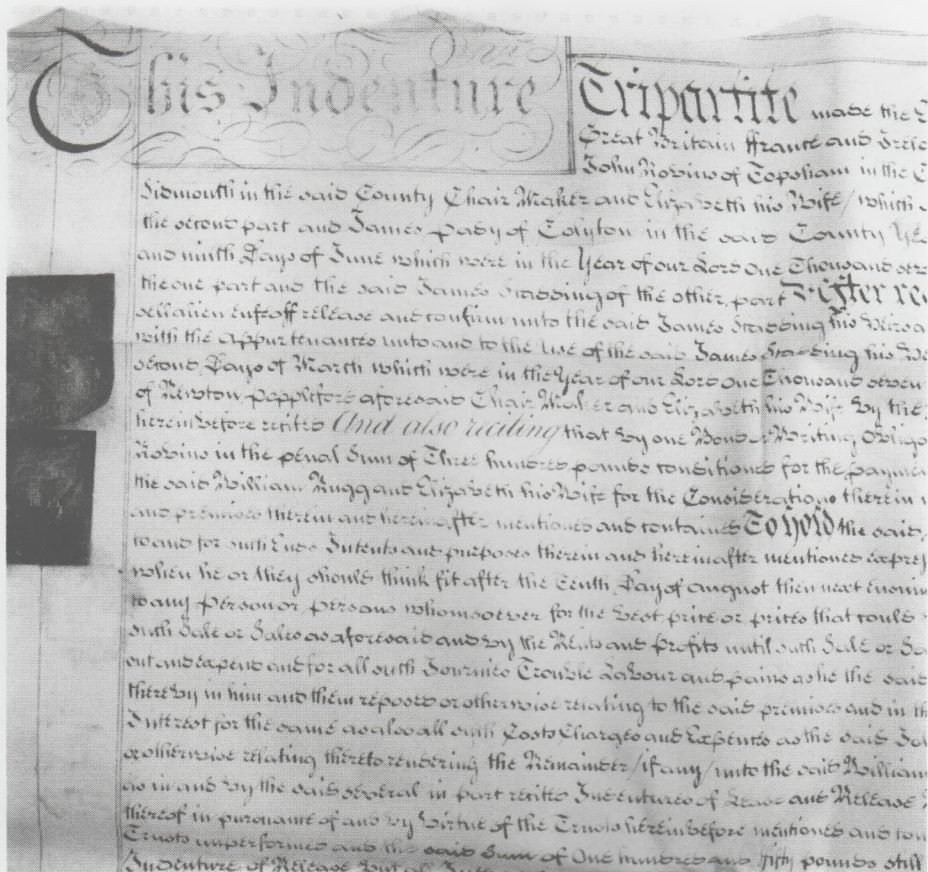


Fig. 4 The tripartite agreement