

MINIATURE CHAIRS

Now and then one comes across small or miniature pieces of furniture, beautifully made and sometimes in perfect proportions. What purpose did these miniatures have? Many theories have been put forward, the most popular explanation being travellers samples, followed by apprentice pieces. My theory, however, is that most of them were, in fact, made for children and sold as dolls' furniture. Most dolls' house furniture, as we know it today, is very small indeed, perhaps between one and three inches high, so to find a chair or chest of drawers at between 8" and 15" high may be confusing.

Illustrated in fig.1. is an armchair of perfect proportions, retaining its original rush seat which has been painted like the rest of the chair with a black varnish applied at the time it was made. It has regional characteristics which suggest it was made in the Dales in the North of England.

The chair in fig.1. has a feature which enhances the theory that the chairs were made for dolls to sit in, and to be played with by children, this being that both of the front legs have flats worn on them by being pulled across the floor with the back of the chair being uppermost. Even the front stretcher's central turning has a small flat surface at the front. This type of wearing down has also been noticed on full-sized children's chairs and suggests that the furniture in question formed part of the child's fantasy world, perhaps transforming the chair into a make-believe horse's cart with the doll not now

perched on the seat but wedged between the back stretchers and seat rail. Closer inspection of the chair shows further wear on the top and bottom of the rear stiles, now a sledge perhaps.

Fig.2. shows a highly sophisticated miniature armchair made of ash and exactly the same height as fig.1. being exactly 12" - this example was almost certainly made in Lincolnshire in the first half of the 19th century. Similarities between this chair and the ladder-back side chair (37" high) illustrated in fig.3. are evident, especially the shape of the ladders, and the turned front stretcher.

Fig.3. is illustrated on page 35 in "The Chair in the North East Midlands" by Bernard Cotton. Dr. Cotton attributed this chair to the Ashton family of chairmakers of Spilsby, Lincolnshire. The miniature chair is a nice honey colour and has not been stained, which is a feature of chairs made in that region. The chair also has wear marks or flats on both the front and back legs.

Fig.4. is a different kettle of fish altogether, being made with no turning on it at all, component parts being crudely shaped segments, but, nevertheless, nicely pegged together with dowels and the arm support going through the arm itself, being fixed with a split wedge joint, the seat on this example is made of woven willow. It has a stained and polished finish and the characteristics of a French or continental chair. It stands 14" high, perhaps something to do with the metric system, being 2" higher than the previous examples. But, in common with both others, it still has the drag wear marks on the legs.



Fig.1.



Fig.2.



Fig.3.

showing that it has been well used and that children of all areas and nationalities had the same fantasies as they still have today.

N.B. If any members of the RFS would like to inspect the miniature chairs photographed, they can be seen at Key Antiques, 11 Horse Fair, Chipping Norton, where Danny Robinson would be pleased to show them. Saturdays, or by appointment (Tel: 0608 3777).

Danny Robinson



Fig.4.