

Fig. 5 Ian King, Uxbridge Library

I have recently repaired a set of yew wood chairs which I believe merit a mention to the Regional Furniture Society. These comprise a set of "draught" back windsor chairs with crinoline stretchers i.e. 4 single chairs in yew, 2 elbow chairs in yew, 2 childrens chairs in yew and 2 single chairs in ash/fruitwood, making 10 chairs in all. The yew wood chairs only have three splats to the back, whilst the ash/fruitwood chairs have three splats and two sticks. The oral tradition in the owners family is that all these chairs have been together since new.

One of the children's chairs is a high chair with H stretchers and holes in the front legs to accomodate a loose foot rest at a choice of heights. This foot rest is now missing. The other chair is a perfectly scaled down adult single chair (without arms).

There is an interesting detail on one of the single yew chair seats. There can clearly be seen the stumps of two yew sticks between the splats, cut flush with the surface of the seat. There are no corresponding holes in the back bow! As this is obviously the original bow, this alteration must have been made before the chair was finished, a mistake perhaps or maybe an indication of a mix and match using existing stock parts.

These chairs have been in the continous ownership of a family called Trumper who left Wales in the late 18th century. One half of the family took the

farm known as Warren Farm on the Osterley Park Estate at Osterley, Middlesex. This is where the chairs have been until the site of the farm was converted to sports fields in the late 1950's. The road leading to this farm is called Trumpers Way. On older maps, it is referred to as Trumpers Lane.

The other half of the family settled on a farm in Uxbridge, Middlesex approximately 8 miles from Osterley. The farm no longer exists, but another Trumpers Way survives a few hundred yards to the south of the east end of Uxbridge High Street. This puts the likely site of the farm behind the Prior chair workshop. This fact together with the obvious similarity of style to the draught back chairs, made by the Priors, led me to believe that, although unstamped, these chairs may well be made by them. The Osterley Trumpers must certainly have been aware of the workshop since it was adjacent to their brother's farm. The "draught" in the splats of such chairs is turned on a treadle lathe using a form tool specifically made to cut the profile as seen in cross section Figure 6 illustration.

This tool would invariably be made by the chair maker for his own use. An old file was the usual basis. The form tool cut the required design on to the splat

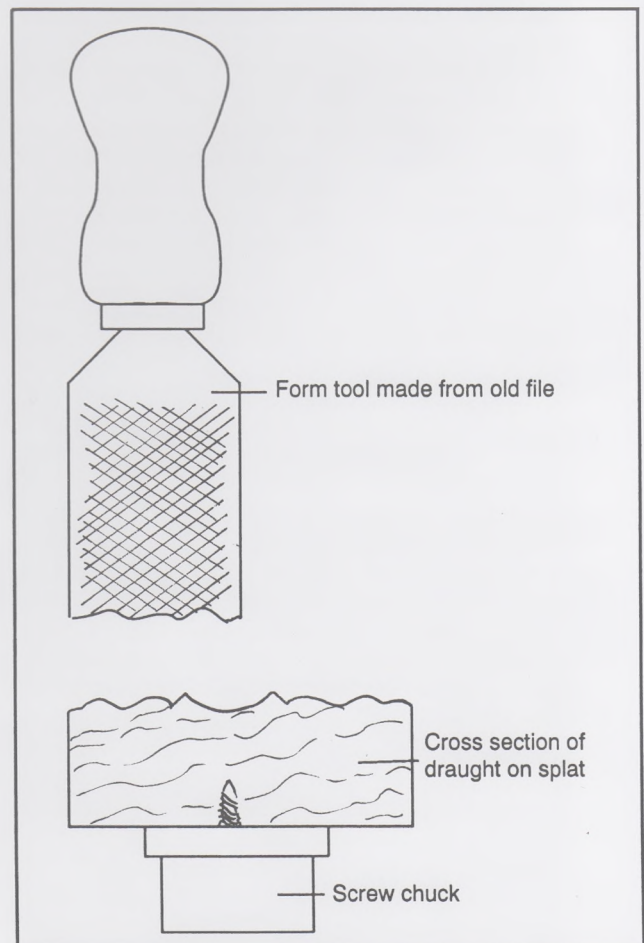


Fig. 6 Form Tool

blank which was held by means of a screw chuck on the head stock of the lathe. The small hole in the back centre of the draught provides evidence of the use of a screw chuck. This chuck would be at the rear of the headstock, allowing the length of the splat blank to swing free of the lathe bed. A tool rest would be free standing parallel with the mounted splat.

This method of producing any turned roundels creates identical contours on all pieces turned with the same form tool. Therefore, if it can be shown that the draught pieces or roundels in one chair are identical to those of another, then those splats were made in the same workshop and in all probability by the same turner.

I set out to compare the draughts in the yew chairs with these in the ash/fruitwood ones. At first I attempted to make a plaster cast of them but found some difficulty in extracting a clean cast from the splats. The plaster casts were also too fragile for further study. The material I eventually found very satisfactory for the purpose was a two part epoxy filler used in the cabinet trade. This filler is exactly the same as car body repair filler but has colour added to match various woods.

The chair with the splat, from which the cast is to be taken, is laid on its back and the draught to be cast from is cleaned of dust. I chose the sharpest and least damaged or worn draught in both cases. A releasing agent (silicone grease spray) was then lightly applied to the draught, to ensure easy removal of the cast.

The epoxy paste is then mixed as per manufacturer's instructions and applied to the draught with a small filler knife, pressing the filler into all recesses. This



Fig 7.

paste hardens in about 5 minutes, but the hardness should be checked after about three minutes since it is easier to remove the cast whilst still slightly soft. The cast can be prised off gently with the filler knife applied to the edge. The casting is then cut into quarters across the centre (see figure 7) One quarter, when viewed edge on, presents the exact profile of the form tool.

The process was repeated on both the yew and the ash /fruitwood chairs. Armed with a quarter cast of each, I then transposed them onto their opposite splats and found that they fitted perfectly. This proved that the odd two ash/fruitwood chairs in the set were made in the same workshop.

The next step in identifying whether these chairs were Prior chairs was to repeat the draught comparison with a name stamped Prior chair.

It was arranged through the kind co-operation of Mrs Newbury, the museum officer for Uxbridge, to visit Uxbridge library and carry out the casting technique on the stamped Prior chair on display there. This chair is an elbow draught back chair made in ash and fruit wood, (Figure 5). The cast from this provenanced Prior chair fitted perfectly the draughts on the Trumper set, thus proving that the "Osterley Chairs" were indeed made by Prior as the circumstantial evidence suggested.

As a further method of identification I took templates of the whole splats and as the normal practice of any chair maker was to make permanent wooden patterns of the flat parts of the chairs, the templates would be expected to fit from chair to chair. Within the inaccuracies or tolerances to be expected in following a drawn line with a bow saw, this was found to be the case.

The only remaining question is why were these chairs not stamped by Prior? The quality of these chairs is superb so they were certainly not seconds.

*Ian King*