

AN EARLY REFERENCE TO INITIAL-STAMPING

William Sharpe was a Norwich chair-maker and cabinet-maker who worked as a journeyman for the partnership of Thorn and Leverington in St. Stephen's parish (Thorn was later to supply Parson Woodforde with much of his furniture). Sharpe left and set up on his own in the same parish in 1774. Thorn and Leverington placed a discursive advertisement in the Norwich Mercury of 8th October 1774, too long to quote here in full, but including a complaint that Sharpe had "made personal Application to some Persons (whom he knew were Customers of ours) in his own behalf". The advertisement concludes with a "caution" that another journeyman had absconded, leaving six walnut-tree chairs unfinished, last seen wearing "a round skuttle Hat, a short red Jacket and Waistcoat of the same Colour".

The following week Sharpe responded to the allegations:

WILLIAM SHARPE CHAIR AND CABINET-MAKER

Begs leave to return his sincere Thanks to all his Friends and Customers for their Favours during the short Time he has been in Business, and hopes for a Continuance of the same, although Messrs. Thorn and Leverington have taken great Pains in last Week's Paper to injure me, by saying I personally applied to their Friends to solicit thier Favours, which I declare to be false and groundless, as I took no other Method than what is generally made Use of by young Tradesmen, in distributing Hand Bills, to solicit Public Favour; as such I doubt not but it will be look'd upon as Envy, and their malicious Intentions will thereby be frustrated: And at the same Time they published, they forgot to mention that I and my Brother made the best of their Chairs ever since they have been in Business, which have gained them so much Credit, and which may be known by all those who have bought of them, by looking at the lower Edge of the upper back Rail for the initial Letters W.S. or E.S. as we always stamped all we made, not being asham'd of our Work; likewise of my staying to carve twelve Cabroul* Chairs, which they begg'd as a Favor, and which I very readily complied, to oblige them, as they said they should lose the Sale of them, at the same Time I do solemnly declare I hindered myself very much by the Means, as it prevented my entering into Business three Weeks longer than I intended, for which they have made this Return.

WILLIAM SHARPE

N.B. As I don't mean to enter into a Controversy with the above Gentlemen, whatever shall be said by them in future, will be treated with silent Contempt.

This is a rare example of contemporary documentation of the practice of journeymen stamping furniture with their initials. The

implication of the statement is that the practice was carried out on the initiative of the journeymen themselves as a matter of pride rather than at the instigation of the master as a check on who had done the work.

Although WS and ES are common initials the stamping of chairs under the top rail is unusual, so any surviving chairs by Edward or William Sharpe should be easily identifiable. If any members come across such chairs (or indeed a man in a round scuttle hat and a short red jacket and waistcoat) I would, needless to say be interested to hear from them. I would like to thank Mr. David Cubitt for drawing my attention to the two quoted newspaper advertisements.

FOOTNOTE * **Cabroul** This is probably a corruption of 'cabriole'. If so, it is of interest as being a very early use of the term. The **Oxford English Dictionary's** earliest reference is 1785, though the Appuldurcombe Park inventories mention cabriole chairs in 1780 (Boynton, **Furniture History** (1965), 1, 44). The term is rather obscure. Hepplewhite (1788) defined it as a chair with a stuffed back, but his Plate 11 includes an example with a wooden back. In the **Cabinet Dictionary** (1803) Sheraton defined it as a chair 'stuffed over with mahogany legs'. It is likely that the term came originally from the French *siège en cabriolet* which was a chair with a concave back. How many of these applications relate to the original meaning of the French word (goat's leap or caper) is enigmatic. The term 'cabriole leg' is unrelated, being a late 19th century adoption.