

Philip Clissett worked from Bosbury making simple kitchen chairs from ash which he coppiced himself near to his workshop. Some were made with solid elm seats and some with rush, which he bottomed himself; only the latter are discussed in this article. Many readers will know that the Greenwood Trust owns a 10 acre wood, named after this splendid craftsman, near to Clissett's cottage and that it runs numerous courses teaching the techniques which he would have used.

His work appealed to the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement and, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, he made a large number of rush-seated armchairs for the Artworkers' Guild (for the princely sum of ten shillings and sixpence each!) Some one hundred years later most of these had lost their original seats and been re-seated unattractively (and uncomfortably!) with a heavy-duty cord in a Scandinavian weave. The chairs have now been restored with English rush seats and form an interesting group for study. Although Clissett is known to have marked some of his work 'P.C.', none of the chairs in Artworkers' Guild bears this stamp.

About fifty of the chairs are simple and elegant low-backed armchairs, each with three identical ladders; originally there were about thirty high-back armchairs, each with five graduated ladders. Clissett was obviously well aware that shaped and steam bent ladders are not particularly robust and his straight, cut-off design has stood the test of time – no ladder in the collection of about 80 chairs has broken! Sadly, about ten of the high back versions have been cut down, presumably because they obstructed the view of those unfortunate enough to be seated behind them and now only twenty remain. The stretchers are turned as simple round dowels and mortised into the uprights. The back uprights are plain, save for nipple finials and the front uprights are discreetly decorative.

Clissett worked with the simplest implements – pole lathe, draw knife, drill, rasp and other basic woodworking tools – yet the quality and consistency of his work is impressive. The chair dimensions are almost micrometrically identical, his turning and finishing is excellent and the tight fitting of the green wood dowel mortises and tenons quite superb – as the timber came from his own coppice and was unseasoned, he used neither glue nor screws and the 'ovalling' effect associated with the drying out of a circular green wood mortise has ensured sound, tight joints, although joint tightening has been necessary on many of the chairs as a result of their long stay in a centrally-heated building. They can usually be taken apart for gluing quite easily with the aid of a dead blow hammer, but reassembly once there is the slightest touch of adhesive on the tenons is amazingly difficult.

The arms are mortised into the back uprights of the chair and then pegged for security. The fronts of the arms are likewise mortised to the front legs and identically pegged, as is the top ladder into the back uprights. The seat rails have been gently rasped to allow close, tight coils and to reduce play in the completed rush chair. The chairs have then been polished, stain being used only on the-

high-back variants, and with age and wear the furniture has acquired a deep sheen and very attractive patina. This is most marked on the ladders.

Apparently he made and seated one chair a day – presumably he worked quite long hours!

Clissett did not use edging strips on any of his rush chairs, a different practice to that used in the North West tradition, where it was the norm to add them to all rush-seated chairs. A finished example of a high-backed chair is shown in Figure 8.

In conclusion, Clissett's work exemplifies the very best to come from the dedicated craftsmen of the nineteenth century. It is a privilege to have had the opportunity of restoring this magnificent collection of late nineteenth century West Midland chairs and to have seen at first hand the splendid work which a skilled artisan can produce with the simplest facilities.

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Fig. 8 One of the Philip Clissett Ladder-back Chairs