

Foreword

The paper published below was written as a report for the New Orkney Antiquarian Journal, and is to be published in that Journal later this year. The paper follows a very exciting find of an important historic 17th century chair at a farm on Orkney in the summer of 1998. It is published here in full, with the physical report of the chair's condition, and suggestions for its conservation. Various local sources which were reflected in the carved iconography on the chair back are also included. The finding of the chair, in the attic of a farm, gives all of those who do field-work in furniture history, cause for great encouragement, and reminds us that new evidence can lie in the most unexpected places.

Introduction

Whilst visiting the Orkney Islands in July 1998 to record items of historic furniture made and used in homes on the islands, I was asked by Mr. Philip Astley, Assistant Archivist of the Kirkwall Library if I would appraise a chair which might have significance for the history of Orkney. The chair had been found in a dismantled condition in the attic of a farmhouse in Birsay



Fig.11. The Wallace Chair

by a farmer who took over the farmhouse from his father's occupancy. He has been unable to find information about the chair's background (apart from it having belonged to an elderly aunt who 'collected old things'). He subsequently took the chair to a local joiner who reassembled it (fig. 11). On recognising that the two prominent initials on the upper section of the chair 'I (i.e. J) W' coincided with the initials of the author of the first written history of Orkney, James Wallace (1642-1688), and that the date 1672 carved on the lower section of the back panel coincided with Wallace's investiture as the Minister at St. Magnus Cathedral, Mr. Scarth contacted the Kirkwall Library to explore the possibility that the chair may have belonged to Wallace. By coincidence, this initial contact occurred at a time when Kirkwall Library was in the process of securing, by purchase at auction, the original James Wallace hand-written history of Orkney of 1684. I duly visited the farm on two occasions, examining and recording the chair in some detail. The findings of this research follow.

General description

The chair is of jointed construction with a panelled back and (replaced) arms connecting the back uprights to heavily ring-turned front posts, in the manner found in other Scottish joined chairs (see Chinnery figs 4.110-112). The front legs are connected by two horizontal stretchers which are decorated with gouge carving. The original seat is missing, and is now replaced with a plywood seat. The back of the chair has two continuous outer uprights, carved with stylised tree-of-life motifs, above the seat. The single, central back panel is cushion moulded on its outer edges. The centre has a foliar device which is closely similar to a more extensive motif carved on a 17th century panel which now forms part the communion table front in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall (see fig 12).

At the base of this foliar decoration is the carved dated '1672'. Above the foliar motif, the initials 'EC' are prominently carved; the letters being separated by a lozenge-shaped device. The cresting rail and upper chair back are constructed from a single piece of wood. Above the central panel the prominent initials 'I (J)W' appear, with a letter 'M' of equal size centrally carved above this. On each side of the 'I (J)W' carving is a five-point star, perhaps intended as the universal symbol of celestial ascendancy, a symbol which also appears on the tombstone of Elizabeth Cuthbert, 'Spouse of James Wallace, Minister of Kirkwall', in St. Magnus Cathedral (see fig. 13).

To the right of the stars on the chair back is a vertical row of repeated semi-circles, parallels for which are included in other tombstones of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries displayed in St. Magnus Cathedral. Two small whorl carved roundels are also included to each side of the letter M, and similar devices to this are also shown in the St. Magnus tombstones. The integral cresting rail of the chair has a curvilinear silhouette, and includes two large outer volutes, with two smaller ones in the centre. Devices of this pattern are found in examples of Scottish joined chairs from the seventeenth century. Four stylised foliar motifs face downwards between the volutes. The style of the lettering closely parallels letters on many of the tombstones in St. Magnus' Cathedral.

Condition Report

The chair is in a stable condition, having been reassembled by a local joiner. However, in so doing, inappropriate measures were taken, and any route to restore its integrity as an historic subject will almost certainly require it to be dismantled and the non-reversible glues, wood filler, inappropriate repairs and the linseed oil on its surface will probably need to be removed prior to its re-assembly. The provision of a more cosmetically acceptable (removable) seat and repairs to the lower back legs and upper back will also need to be considered. Although the arms are replacements, they should probably remain as a valid part of the biography of the chair, since any other replacement would be conjectural. The chair is made of oak which shows the dark

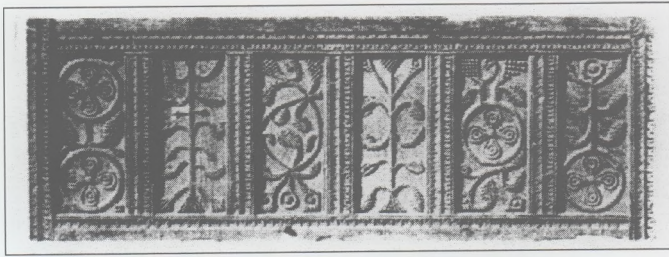


Fig. 12 Wooden panel now incorporated in a communion table

heartwood typical of *Quercus Pedunculata*, a species which prefers acidic soils, and often grows on hill slopes, where it produces a distinctive dark heartwood and narrow, light coloured sapwood. The origin of the wood is intriguing, since many unexplained round mortise holes are present in the seat stretchers and the front leg stretchers, as well as in the right back upright. The large size of these mortises suggests that the timber was reclaimed from either ship or house timbers. My initial examination has identified the following areas of the chair which require special consideration in conservation terms, due to the loss of some parts over time, and more recently from the inappropriate measures taken to re-assemble and repair the chair. These include:

1. Missing parts, including a rear leg stretcher and side stretchers, as well as lower ring leg turnings below the existing stretcher, which would have raised the chair in height.
2. The arms have been replaced. Originally the arms may well have been of this general type, but would probably have terminated in volute carvings similar to those on the top rail.
3. The original board seat is missing and a sheet of plywood has been glued over the frame with non reversible white adhesive.
4. The lower back legs have had pieces of wood added and then secured with metal bolts to hold them in place.
5. The cresting rail and continuous lower section has a split across it. This has been reinforced at the rear with a plywood panel.
6. Various crevices on the chair's surface have been filled with brown wood filler.
7. The naturally oxidised dark surface of the chair has been further darkened by the recent application of linseed oil.

Further Possible Examination Procedures

1. X-ray of the whole chair might reveal more detail of the wood, as well as the constructional techniques used.
2. Dendrochronology testing against both Scottish and Scandinavian maps might reveal the geographic origins and the date of the wood when used originally.

Conclusion

Having examined this chair, I am of the view that it is a joined chair made in the seventeenth century from

reclaimed timbers of *Quercus Pedunculata*, which were acquired from either ship or house joinery. The overall design is congruent with chairs made at this time on the Scottish mainland; particular references being the heavily turned front legs and the volute carving on the top rail. The probable local origin of the chair is supported by the use of symbolic and decorative carving motifs which have both local and more general references associated with Scottish furniture design during the seventeenth century. The tree-of-life carving on the outer back uprights, the gouge carving along the bottom horizontal back stile, the front under-seat stretcher and the front leg stretcher are all common devices to both Scottish and English seventeenth-century carving. However, the foliate carving on the central back panel is not a common motif, but is closely similar to an example found on a seventeenth century panel now included on the communion table front in St. Magnus' Cathedral. This panel, with others re-used in the communion table, and elsewhere in the Cathedral, are believed to have come from the early seventeenth century Bishop's Loft dismantled in the late nineteenth century. The decorative devices included in the chair, also found variously on tombstones now in St. Magnus Cathedral, include the stars, half-roundels and whorls. It seems highly probable, therefore, that the carver of the devices on the chair was familiar with the panels in the Bishop's Loft in the Cathedral, perhaps having carved both, and that he was influenced by the devices that stone masons had included in the tombstone decoration.

The chair is clearly intended as a commemorative item, and given the two sets initials, 'JW' and 'EC' surmounted by the letter 'M', it seems likely that this refers to the marriage between James Wallace and Elizabeth Cuthbert in 1672. This event is evidently not confirmed by entries in either the Kirkwall old parish registers or the International Genealogical Index. However, the first child born to them is recorded in 1673. Given that James Wallace was ordained as Minister of St. Magnus Cathedral in 1672 it may be that the two occasions of his marriage and his investiture were commemorated by this one chair.



Fig. 13 Tombstone of Elizabeth Cuthbert