

ANOTHER PIECE IN THE JIGSAW JOHN ROBINSON, PRESTON

One of the exciting things about regional furniture is the real possibility of finding new and important pieces of provenanced furniture which will substantially add to the over-all picture. Such is the case of a chair acquired by our member, Dr. Guy Poulter, who, when looking at it with his mother, Betty, noticed that there was both a maker's name and place underneath a thick layer of black paint and varnish on the right rear leg at seat level. Dr. Poulter wrote to me about it, and I identified the chair as a North West style of rocking chair (fig. 1) which has ball turnings in the legs, stretchers and back spindles. This chair design is attributed to Lancashire by various stylistic features, and David Jones and Susan Stuart published examples in their article, 'Eskdale Chairs' (Regional Furniture Vol. IX 1995) which they attributed to the Brocklebank family of chairmakers of Eskdale in the second half of the 19th century. Other chairs of this essential design, but interpreted in different ways, were made by members of the Arts & Crafts movement, and an example is illustrated in 'Good Citizens' Furniture' p 88. (Annette Carruthers and Mary Greensted. Cheltenham Arts Gallery & Museums. 1994)

Dr. Poulter brought the chair to Trouthouse to be recorded, and closer examination indicated that it was indeed made in the first half of the 19th century. But what of the important stamps on the leg? By revolving the chair under photographic lights, and using a magnifying lens on a medium format camera, (Bronica SQA) I hoped that the reflected light would pick out the stamps more clearly, and they were photographed in this way. However, it was decided that ultimately, this probably wasn't going to yield the chair's secret; and cleaning the stamp was undertaken by Gerry Cotton, using cotton-wool buds and absolute alcohol. As the paint and varnish dissolved, the eureka moment arrived, with the name I (J) ROBINSON PRESTON appearing (fig. 2).

We knew that this was an exciting new discovery, with the absolute identification of a known chair design to its maker and place of origin; important new evidence too, since although chair makers are known to have worked in Preston, this is the first provenanced style to emerge for this town. But what of the maker? Was more known about him? Gerry was able to refer to our master card index, (which is now gradually being turned into a computer database), and to our delight, a sustained record was available of the maker, John Robinson, working in Friargate and Lord Street, Preston between 1816 and 1848. The chair is now duly recorded; photographed, measured, and its wood identified as ash; and it has taken its place in the history of regional furniture.

This kind of team effort really reinforces one of the most encouraging aspects of our Society: that every member can make significant discoveries and add to the field, and that the Society can help to bring this history into closer focus through its records and other expertise.

Dr. B.D.Cotton

Cover illustration: Team work – examining the chair



Fig. 1 Rocking chair made by John Robinson



Fig. 2 Name stamp