

Members may have seen reports and photographs in the press of an early 17th century carved oak and walnut armchair that was bought at the November 13th

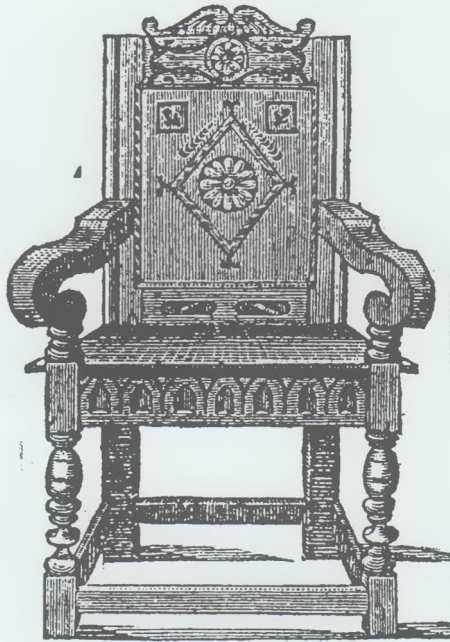


Fig. 11 Engraving of the chair published by Samuel Ireland in his book *Picturesque Views on the Upper, or Warwickshire Avon, from Its Source at Naseby to its Junction with the Severn at Tewkesbury*.

sale at Christie's South Kensington by The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Prior to the sale, I was cataloguing furniture with Simon Green at Christie's warehouse when I noticed the two small carved details on the panel of the chair, which I recognised as the Shakespeare family arms. On the left was the shield (with the spear laid diagonally across it) and on the right was the crest (a standing falcon holding a spear). Between them, in a spurious gothic script, were the initials WAS, which as every schoolboy would have known in my day, must stand for William Shakespeare and his wife Anne (née Hathaway).

As Consultant to both Christie's and The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, I naturally revealed to Simon everything that could possibly be in the public domain, including the identification of the crest and initials. As the most obvious candidate for an interest in purchasing the chair, we emailed an image to Ann Donnelly, Museums Curator to the Trust, who was quickly able to confirm to me in confidence that the chair was recorded as having an intriguing history of connections with both the Hathaway and Shakespeare families.

During his travels in the English Midlands in 1793, the author and engraver Samuel Ireland visited

Shakespeare's Birthplace in Stratford and was told by John Hart, a descendant of Joan Hart, Shakespeare's sister, of an old oak chair at Hewland's Farm (now known as Anne Hathaway's Cottage) in nearby Shotton, that had 'always in his remembrance been called Shakespeare's courting chair with a purse that had been likewise his, and handed down from him to his granddaughter Lady Barnard, and from her through the Hathaway family'. Ireland purchased the chair from the Hathaway family who still lived in the house (descendants of Anne's brother Bartholomew) and removed it to his home in London.

As a record of his visit, Ireland published the first known engraving of the house in his book *Picturesque Views on the Upper, or Warwickshire Avon, from Its Source at Naseby to its Junction with the Severn at Tewkesbury*. Fortunately, Ireland also included an engraving of the chair, fig.11, making identification with the present chair possible. The Shakespeare armorial motifs are clearly included in the image, but Ireland made no comment on them. Significantly too, Ireland's



Fig. 12 The 'Shakespeare' chair, now returned to Anne Hathaway's Cottage after 210 years.

engraving does not include the initials WAS, confirming them as a later addition. Ireland's son, William Henry Ireland, was later a notorious forger of Shakespeare relics, and it may be he that added the initials in the early 19th century.

In all respects other than the armorials, the chair itself is a rather ordinary panel-back armchair, though with a convincing skin of old patination and wear, retaining its original seat, and bearing some Victorian or 20th century patches to the original walnut arms and legs,

which had suffered from woodworm. The form of the chair is absolutely typical of the early or middle 17th century, and the original carved decoration is very simple, including a debased Flemish-style cartouche on the upper rail over a distinctive diamond-shaped lozenge in the centre of the panel.

We should give some consideration to the question whether it is possible that the chair can actually have belonged to William Shakespeare himself, who died in 1616. One has to be sceptical, and it has to be said that stylistically the chair appears most probably to have been made rather later, in the second quarter of the 17th century. However, all the elements of the design (the shaped cresting, the panelled back, the scrolled arms, the turned front legs, the carved decoration) had been established in the vocabulary of English chair design before the end of the 16th century, and it may not be impossible that the chair pre-dates Shakespeare's death.

The Shakespeare arms and crest had been granted to John Shakespeare, William's father, in 1596 and his son was entitled to use them. It is impossible to confirm on a visual basis whether the shield and crest are part of the original decoration of the chair, but scientific analysis may be able to indicate whether the patination layers over the armorial carvings are of the same composition as those on the rest of the chair.

As for its regional character, I am not aware of any recording that has been done on south Warwickshire styles, but I have certainly seen this simple lozenge in other work locally. Indeed, very similar carved lozenges also appear on the Hathaway bedstead and a panelled chest in the same room at Anne Hathaway's Cottage. As with the chair, both these pieces have a long history with the Cottage, and the similarities in the decoration (including an identical moulding-profile on chair and bedstead) and construction suggest that all three pieces may be local products, possibly made in Stratford or nearby. Future work, especially comparison with similar local dated and fixed woodwork, may enable us to date and regionalise the three pieces more accurately.

Ireland's account of the chair's early history, gleaned from John Hart, must be regarded with some scepticism, but it is an interesting possibility that the chair may conceivably have come to the Hathaways from Lady Elizabeth Barnard together with the bedstead and chest, though no myth of Shakespearean association has attached itself directly to either the bedstead or the chest. William's daughter Susannah Hall and her daughter Elizabeth Barnard had both in turn inherited and occupied Shakespeare's last house, New Place in Stratford, no doubt together with his original furnishings. Elizabeth died childless in 1670, and her will bequeathed the Birthplace to Thomas Hart and moneys to some of the Hathaway daughters, but made no direct mention of furniture or other goods. However, she clearly had contact with the Hathaways and may have gifted the chair and purse to them during her lifetime.

For the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the initial interest in the chair lay in its demonstrable ancient link with Anne Hathaway's Cottage, and it may now be seen back in its former home along with other furniture and domestic items associated with the Hathaway family. A small postscript revealing some of the history of the chair in the 20th century appeared after the chair was shown in an item in the Daily Telegraph following the Trust's purchase. Mrs Elsie Torrent of Bournemouth wrote to the Editor: '*seeing the photograph of Shakespeare's Chair... was like being suddenly confronted by an old friend.*' Her husband's maternal grandmother had bought the chair in Balham at the end of the 19th century, but, later deciding that repair to the woodwormed arm was too expensive, the family sold the chair.

I am grateful to Roger Pringle, Ann Donnelly, Aidan Graham and Bob Bearman for information supplied; illustrations are reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

We intend to pursue field research into the typology of 17th century Warwickshire and neighbouring furniture, and I would welcome hearing from any member who has already started to compile any notes and photographs in the area.

Victor Chinnery



Fig. 13 Detail of the upper back of the chair, showing the debased cartouche pattern of the top rail and the lozenge panel, flanked by the Shakespeare armorials and the initials WAS, the latter added after 1793. It is perhaps worth noting the significantly different treatment of the lozenge and its tiny pennants, compared with the Halifax lozenge and pennants discussed elsewhere in this issue.