

## **The Leicester Family of Chairmakers by John Boram - Saturday evening**

As a follow up to our afternoon's visit to the still active chair and furniture manufacturing works of the

Berry family at Kirk Mill, Chipping in Lancashire (founded in the 1840s) our Saturday night lecture focused on the Leicester family of chairmakers and their alternative but more traditional style of management involving various workshops in Hyde, Macclesfield and Plumley on the south side of Manchester run by one or more members of the family until the total cessation of their activities by the 1890s.

Six members of the Leicester family have been identified as chairmakers producing a range of rush-seated spindle back and ladderback chairs some of which were illustrated using slides, the most recent



Fig 5. P. LEICESTER stamped chair, c.1840

discovery being a Peter Leicester stamped spindleback armchair (Fig. 5) c1840s. Although makers' stamp marks are very rarely found on any rush-seated chairs, the marks applied in the family workshops were LEICESTER, C. LEICESTER and P. LEICESTER.

Reference was made to *'The English Regional Chair'* (ERC) by B. D. Cotton (1990) which provides a wider perception of the regional traditions of vernacular chairmaking in which the Leicester family operated during the 19th century.

Starting with the first known chairmaker within this family, we have Charles Leicester senior (born 1784), William Leicester (b 1816), Charles Leicester junior (b 1818), Thomas (b 1830), Peter (b 1808) and Samuel (b 1820).

In his talk, John emphasised the initial advantages of the Macclesfield and Hyde chairmaker's workshops in terms of their proximity to the rapidly expanding industrial population in this part of N. E. Cheshire during the 19th century and the availability of indigenous materials such as hedgerow timbers and chair platt rush to facilitate their early production. *'A General View of the Agriculture of Cheshire'* by Henry Holland, 1808 states that there are few woods or plantations of any large extent in Cheshire but *'In the northern and middle parts, particularly, the number of trees in hedge rows and coppices is so considerable, that from some points of view, the whole country has the appearance of an extensive forest'*.

R. Buxton in his botanical guide to the flowering plants growing within 16 miles of Manchester (published in 1849) states that *scirpus lacustris*, lake club rush, bulrush was to be found along the N.W. border of Rostherne Mere (between Altrincham and Knutsford) and then refers to its usefulness in more detail. *'When fodder is exhausted, cattle will live on it. Cottages are sometimes thatched, and pack-saddles stuffed with it. Bottoms of chairs are very commonly made of this rush. Goat and swine eat it'*.

A summary of the involvement of the various members of the family in chairmaking was based upon trade directory, census returns and church registers which was illustrated using bar charts etc. Charles Leicester (senior) was recorded in the register of the Allostock Presbyterian Chapel as being born in the village of Plumley, Cheshire in 1784. He was first recorded as a chairmaker working in Macclesfield in 1816. Pigot's Directory of 1820 records his workshop address as 120 Chestergate.

From 1848, trade directories and census returns indicate a new workshop address in Derby Street, where his son Charles was working as a cabinetmaker in the 1860s following the death of his father in 1858. However from 1869 to 1892 only the eldest son William is recorded in trade directories for Macclesfield.

Peter Leicester (b 1808), nephew of Charles Leicester senior, is first recorded as a chairmaker in the census of 1841 working in Hyde, Cheshire. By the time of the next census he had returned to work in his place of birth in the village of Plumley near Knutsford, where he worked as a journeyman cabinetmaker and chairmaker until 1874.

Comparisons were made between the spindle-back armchair made by J & D Bancroft in Salford between 1804 and 1815 and those made by Peter Leicester in the 1840s, which provide a useful guide to the longevity of this particular vernacular tradition in the first half of the 19th century.

Thanks are due to Phil Holland for his useful contribution to this talk by his research and slides illustrating the location of the early Chestergate workshop of Charles Leicester and other makers such as James Riding. Phil also assisted at the end of the talk by discussing aspects of the various Leicester-type chairs which had been brought along to the evening lecture.



## Furniture Surgery AM 11th July 2004

The furniture surgery on the Sunday attracted a diversity of vernacular furniture which added to our knowledge of regional furniture making. A few examples are described below.

A name-stamped Empire-style chair, recently discovered by Simon Feingold, Figs 6 and 7 made out of birch, brought a new level of provenance to the range of vernacular rush seated kitchen chairs, broadly attributable to the North West of England but never keyed into any specific workshop (*ERC NW 371-381*). This chair had been stamped marked in four places 'R. SIMPSON MAKER'.



Fig. 6 Stamp mark of R. Simpson Maker

The Simpsons of Lancaster have been recorded as chairmakers in St. Nicholas Street in the period 1848 to 1887. The Simpson family are particularly important for



Fig 7. Empire-style chair



Fig 8. Crested spindle-back hybrid

the diversity of vernacular furniture they made during the 19th century, including chest of drawers and tables.

Another chair (fig. 8) also made out of birch, appears to link the tradition of the 'Crested Spindle Back' chairmakers ('ERC NW 152-159'), made in the period 1780 to 1840, to the 'Rush-seated Kitchen Chairs' made by R. Simpson of Lancaster and J. Sharples of Blackburn (ERC NW 382 and 383) and suggests not only the transitional timescale in which this tradition emerged but a north Lancashire origin for the 'Crested Spindle Back'.