

THE ENGLISH REGIONAL CHAIR

Study day at the Geffrye Museum, Kingsland Road,
London E2 8EA 9th April 2005



Fig. 7 Detail of an elm East Anglian reclining chair

We were warmly welcomed by David Dewing, Director of the Geffrye Museum, who introduced the study day by giving a brief history of the Cotton collection and the proposals for its integration into the museum.

He also outlined the scope and purpose of the English Regional Chair exhibition.

David acted as chairman and provided a useful context in which it was possible to appreciate the current state of regional furniture studies and the scope for future research. This he did in his usual clear and succinct manner.

Dr. B.D. Cotton's paper focussed on a number of his current research activities including the Egton/Whitby chair group (William Frankland); the Kendal chair group (William Robinson's Steam Works); a chair from Burley Dam Cheshire, (George Hamnet); chairs from Rich's chair and trug factory in East Hoathly, Sussex; East Anglian reclining chairs (fig 7); a Banbury Windsor chair and the imminent project to hunt for the elusive products of the recorded chair maker's workshops in Rutland and Leicestershire.

John Boram's paper concerned the possible design origins of the Sussex rush-seated chairs, sold by Morris & Co., and the likely influences from French 18th and 19th century vernacular traditions. He argued that although the feature of a setback under-arm support spindle (keyed into a stretcher below the seat rail) is

rare in English chairs, examples can nevertheless be found in several regions dating back to the 18th century. Vernacular examples with the setback arm device from Lincolnshire, N.E. Cheshire, the Westmorland Dales (fig 8), Worcestershire, and Herefordshire were illustrated.

John compared details of setback arms on English chairs with examples from Flanders, Picardy, Normandy, Loire Valley, Basque Country, Provence and even New England.

His work not only on nomenclature but on many related structural devices and detailed features (such as the 'picking stick' arm rest one associates with chairs from Macclesfield in N.E. Cheshire) helped to reinforce our understanding of the evolution of structurally sound hybrids by the second half of the 19th century. He made the point that attributing chairs to a specific region based on only one design feature was likely to be misleading.

Dr. Adam Bowett explained his analysis of a group of Yorkshire primitive comb back Windsor chairs.

The majority of these chairs had several of the following features; a comb-back; the use of ash as primary timber; a split-lath brace to support the arm rests; a distinctive seat profile; single ring turning to the legs; three or more under arm bow spindle supports, often retaining some of the original blue-green undercoat; a lap joint to some arm bows; legs which are fitted through the seat and wedged; spindles piercing the seat and bow; mostly eight to ten back spindles; occasional use of compass timber for the bows and arms (i.e. cut from a naturally curved piece of wood); usually no stretchers; back spindles often set vertically or near upright; spindles drawn but not turned as on most chairs in a red-brown or green paint. A number of related West Country chairs were shown. Adam then suggested that it was axiomatic that the greatest frequency of examples of a vernacular tradition will tend to be found near the point of production (usually manufacturers' goods tended to travel further from the centre of production than locally made items). A local group, it was argued, would show a certain degree of homogeneity in their use of materials, construction design, finish etc. He stressed the dangers of too readily connecting or regionalising groups of furniture which have similar features (e.g. the jointed arm bows of West Country Windsors). These connections may only be coincidental, but with large sample sizes and a very broad examination of evidence tentative conclusions may be possible.

This rigorous initial study did support the existence of a Yorkshire based provenance for this group of comb back Windsor chairs.

A lively and informative question session followed. The subtleties of the Celtic traditions of Windsor chair making were discussed and the potential impact of the migration of mine workers to the Yorkshire coalfields from both Wales and the West Country was mentioned as a possible design influence on the suggested Yorkshire chair group.

After lunch Dr Bill Cotton delivered a masterclass on the identification of regional features in vernacular

chairs drawn from the Cotton Collection.

Topics included West Country Windsor chairs; the similarity between Egton and Billinge chairs with their unusual concave profile to the seat rails; the roundel splat decoration used in the Thames Valley chairs; cleft ash timbers used on ladder backs chairs from Worcestershire and Herefordshire; oxidation properties of woods and their potential decorative qualities; the Norwich Book of Prices; the difference between elm and wych elm (as used in Scottish furniture making); Lincolnshire Windsors with typical North East bow tapers, shaped on all sides at the joint end; West Country Windsors with top bow joints tapers to the rear; Thames Valley Windsors with stepped joints; and so much more.

All in all an excellent day, and warm thanks are due to the speakers, the organisers and the Geffrye Museum staff.

Simon Feingold



Fig. 8 Early 19th century Westmoreland Dales chair