

"Ormskirk" Ladderbacks

Members may be interested in some chairs which have recently come into my possession.

They were purchased indirectly from Churchtown Village on the Ribble Estuary to the East of Southport where they were said by the owner to have been handed down in the family for many generations. I have been unable to find any evidence of chair manufacture in Churchtown, an old village with a history of professional "shrimping" in the Ribble estuary; however, the village of Mawdesley some eight miles to the East has been a rush growing centre since time immemorial and seat rushing was a significant local trade well into this century.

There is a reliable local report of Ormskirk chairs being collected from Mawdesley by a local farmer and his bride in about 1920 for a price of 2 shillings and 3 pence each, but whether this refers to the rush seating or the chairs I have been unable to ascertain.

"Ormskirk" chairs which were widely distributed in the South West Lancashire area, were made in other counties. Dr. Bill Cotton, in his catalogue "The Chair in the North West", 1986, instances R.H. & J. Simpson in Lancaster and J. Sharpes of Blackburn as makers. It is interesting to note the strong similarity of the turnings on the front legs and stretcher of chairs by these makers to the ladderback version illustrated here.

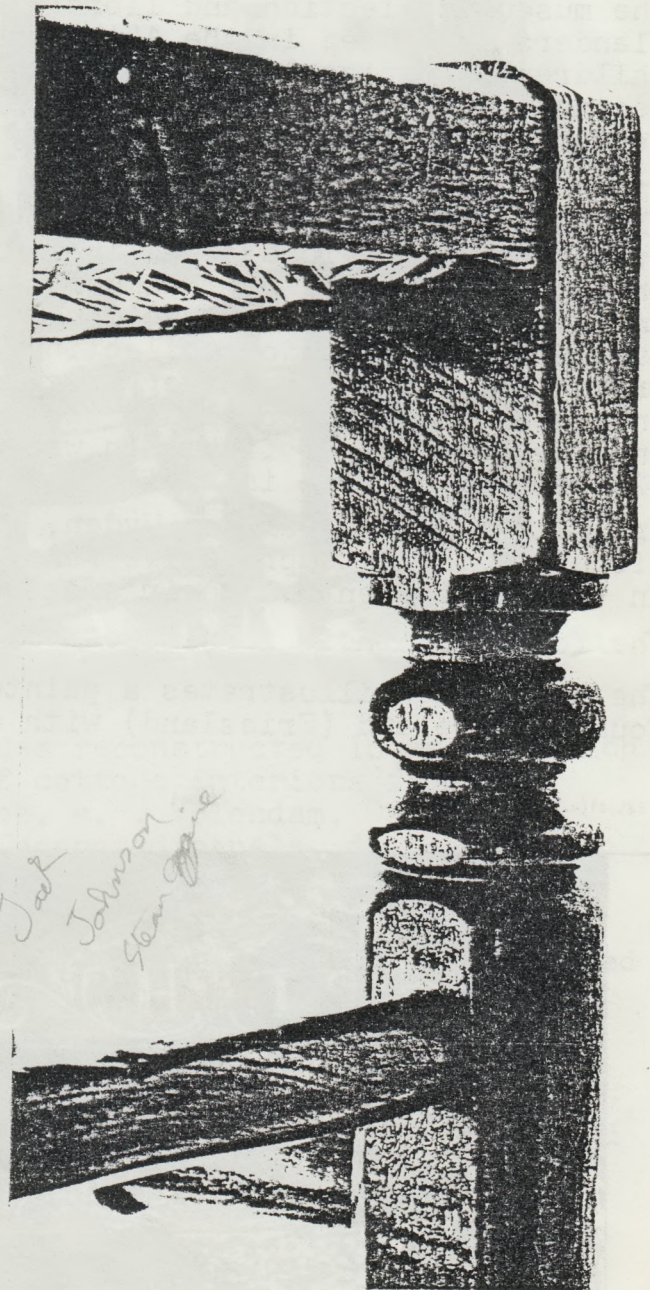
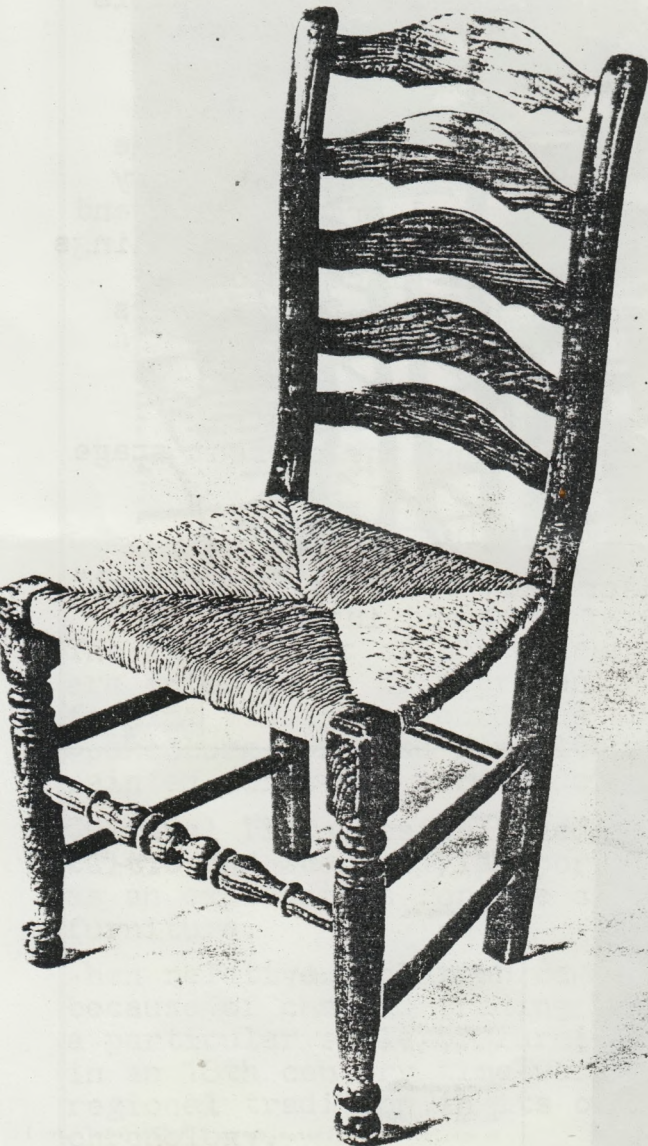
These chairs, however, are of a very rare pattern and are transitional between the well known North Lancashire ladder-back made usually with the ladder splats riven from ash and the staves and front legs turned in ash or alder and the usual Ormskirk types typical in that the front legs are "quartered" by sawing with only the surfaces normally visible in use, turned and polished.

These particular chairs embody the typical riven horizontal ladder splats with signs of simple machining on the front legs and in the shaping of the staves. The saw cuts inside the front legs are virtually parallel but angled. On close examination these do not appear to have been made by a circular saw because there is no regularity in the cuts, but neither are they as random nor at right angles to the grain as would be expected if cut by a pit saw. It appears they were made by a quite primitive powered saw, possibly with an oscillating motion. Just how such a saw was powered is a matter for speculation. An early steam engine is a faint possibility but so is a flat belt transmission system powered by a pair or horses driven round in a circle some thirty feet in circumference as often used for "Chop-cutting" on local farms until the 1930s.

No doubt some members can make further suggestions!

I am much indebted to Dr. Bill Cotton for his assistance on this subject.

Edward Webster



*Just Johnson
Year 1910*

"Ormskirk" Ladderback