

An Early Windsor Chair Illustration

It is highly probable that the Windsor chair was initially conceived in the Thames Valley region, for use as an outdoor seat. There are several references to the use of Windsor chairs in gardens in the first half of the 18th century and a number of later conversation pieces by Arthur Devis and Johann Zoffany depict the outdoor use of painted Windsors on country house estates.¹

However, the earliest known picture shows people being pushed around the grounds of Stowe in Buckinghamshire in wheeled Windsor chairs. This 1733 print by J. Rigaud depicting baluster-leg comb-backs mounted on steerable wheeled platforms has been illustrated before.²

Another picture showing the garden use of Windsor chairs from about the same time as the Rigaud print has recently been discovered. This was noted in an engraving entitled *Plans and views of Claremont* by John Rocque (1737), taken from *Vitruvius Britannicus* by J. Badeslade and J. Rocque.³ Claremont is in Esher, Surrey, and the print illustrates the house and garden buildings designed

by Sir John Vanburgh for the Duke of Newcastle. One view, entitled *The Nine Pin Alley*, shows a small neoclassical temple with two Windsor chairs standing in the portico on either side of a central door (Fig. 1). The chairs are of comb-back form with large saddle seats and splayed legs, without stretchers, which seem to have outward pointing feet, possibly suggesting a cabriole leg. This is of interest because no other contemporary illustrations of cabriole-leg comb-backs are presently known. However, the leg profile may be an example of artistic licence because the pictures are small, indistinct and not correct in every detail; for example, the spindles are very thick and too few in number.

As the clear area of ground in front of the building was used as a ninepin bowling alley the pair of outward-facing chairs would have been in a sheltered position for two spectators. The chair on the right is taller than the one on the left, and has six, instead of five, spindles forming the back. This might suggest that the pair of chairs was made for a man and a woman, possibly for the Duke and Duchess to observe bowling matches. Interestingly also, after Vanburgh's house at Claremont was demolished and replaced by another built in the 1770s for Clive of India, the garden was landscaped by Capability Brown and supplied with a set of six green-painted fan-back Windsor chairs.⁴

Clearly, the use of Windsor chairs as garden furniture remained fashionable at Claremont, as at other country houses, throughout the 18th century. This tradition ended with the introduction of more durable painted wrought iron seating in the Regency, a period when the indoor use of Windsor chairs was growing in popularity.

Bob Parrott

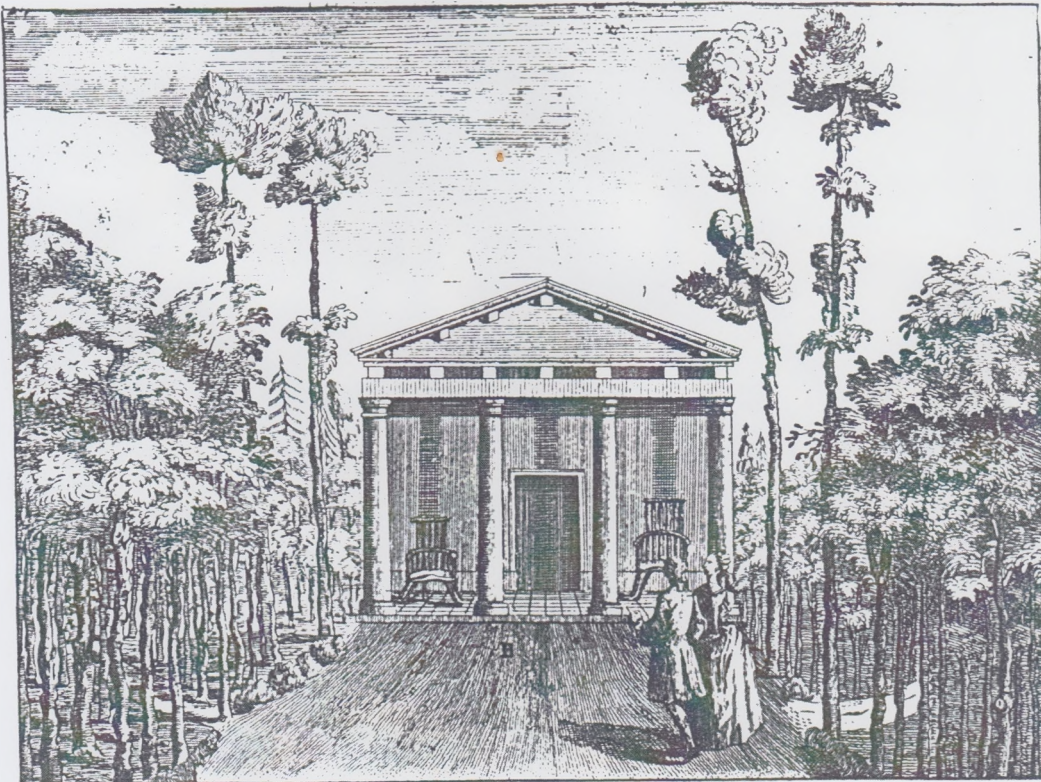


Fig. 1. *The Nine Pin Alley* from Badeslade and Rocque's *Vitruvius Britannicus*.
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1 See R.Parrott, *Regional Furniture*, 2005.

2 Thomas Crispin, *The English Windsor Chair*, Alan Sutton, 1992.

3 Facsimile edition published by Benjamin Blom, New York, 1967.

4 Crispin, *ibid*.