

A 1753 garden print showing a cabriole leg Thames Valley

Windsor Chair

Contemporary paintings and engravings can provide useful clues to the social context in which furniture was used, even though the representation of individual items was, as far as can be judged from surviving pieces, often not entirely accurate.

With respect to the Windsor chair, there is both pictorial and documentary evidence indicating that painted examples were frequently used in the gardens of country house estates in the 18th century. Also, the fact that they were sometimes formally arranged outdoors, and often feature in conversation piece paintings, suggests that the Windsor design provided a type of garden seat that was both practical and highly fashionable. However, most of the known illustrations show painted side chairs or simple stick-backs rather than the characteristic Thames Valley type of armchair. This may be because these high quality chairs, often made of choice woods, were mainly supplied stained and polished for indoor use.

The mid-18th century Thames Valley Windsor armchair was usually of comb-back design, with a vasiform splat and two or four cabriole legs, as exemplified by the type made by John Pitt (1714-1759) or Richard Hewett (?-1777) of Upton-cum-Chalvey (Slough) near Windsor.¹ Until now though, no contemporary illustrations depicting this type of chair have been found and only recently has a print been discovered showing what appear to be two cabriole-leg comb backs on the portico of a neoclassical garden temple.² In fact, the various paintings and prints illustrating Windsor chairs in use outdoors invariably depict examples with baluster or simple turned legs.

Chiswick House, the Palladian villa designed in 1725 by Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington, was completed in 1729. The planning of the ground was the result of collaboration between Lord Burlington, William Kent and Charles Bridgeman. The 1753 engraving of the now demolished Cassina, or Bagnio (Fig 1), the first building to be erected on the Chiswick estate, was based on a drawing by the architect John Donowell.³ Its significance lies in the chair shown undercover beneath the arch of the Cassina. While not correct in every aspect of the design, this is clearly a Thames Valley type of armchair with a shaped

Fig 1. A View of the Back Part of the Cassina, & part of the Serpentine River, terminated by the Cascade in the Garden of the Earl of Burlington, at Chiswick, a print of 1753 based on a drawing by the architect John Donowell. Courtesy of the British Library.



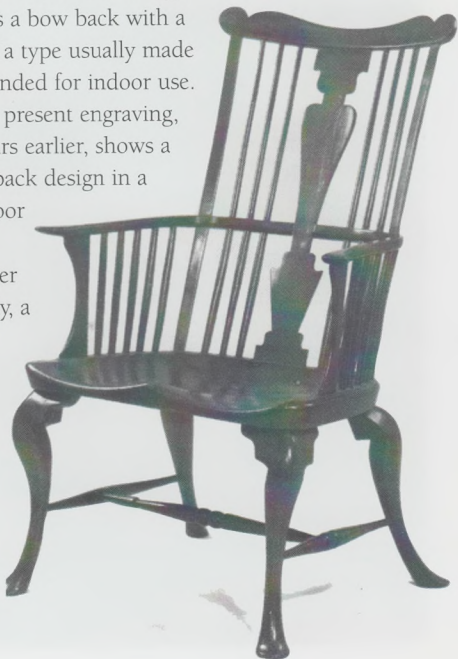


Fig 2. A detail showing the chair in the print.

comb rail, vasiform splat and two, or possibly four, cabriole legs. Moreover, given the detail and precision of the drawing, it is reasonable to assume that this represents an actual rather than an imagined chair. Note, however, that in a similar view by John Rocque in 1739, no chair is apparent at this location.⁴

The enlarged view of the chair can be compared with a photograph of a Thames Valley comb back attributed to John Pitt (Fig 3), where it can be seen that there is a fairly good resemblance.⁵ Richard Hewett's sole surviving chair is of similar design but it cannot be assumed that either Pitt or Hewett supplied this chair to the Earl, although as Slough is only about 15 miles by road or river from Chiswick this is a possibility.⁶ Also, although the comb back in the engraving appears to be pale coloured or white, this may not actually have been the case. The chair may have been illustrated in this way to make it more obvious in the shadowy recess of the Cassina. However, a black-painted comb back with a gilded armorial on the splat has recently been attributed to John Pitt, so Thames Valley armchairs could be supplied with a bespoke paint finish.⁷

Several 18th century trade cards are known depicting Windsor chairs for outdoor use, but none shows a cabriole-leg chair. With the possible exception of the 1730s print referred to above, the earliest illustration of a cabriole-leg Windsor is on a 1768 invoice raised by the Thames Valley chairmaker, John Prior of Uxbridge.⁸ However, this is a bow back with a pierced splat of a type usually made of yew and intended for indoor use. In contrast, the present engraving, which is 15 years earlier, shows a chair of comb-back design in a protected outdoor situation like that in the earlier print.⁹ Similarly, a rare group of



painted 18th-century cabriole-leg Windsor chairs is still to be seen on the colonnade at West Wycombe Park although, arguably, these chairs are of a slightly later date. A tentative conclusion might be that the more expensive cabriole-leg painted Windsor was placed on show outside, but under cover, rather like the American rocking chair, whereas the turned or baluster-leg painted chair was used on the grass as an outdoor seat for social occasions such as taking tea.

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- ¹ John Stabler, 'Two Labelled Comb-Back Windsor Chairs', *Antique Collecting*, Vol 11, 1972.
- ² R. Parrott, *RFS Newsletter*, No 44, 2006.
- ³ M. Symes, *Journal of Garden History*, Vol 7, 1987.
- ⁴ *Vitruvius Britannicus* (Facsimile edition), Benjamin Blom, New York, 1967.
- ⁵ R. Parrott, *Regional Furniture*, 2005.
- ⁶ Stabler, *op. cit.*
- ⁷ Parrott, *op.cit.*
- ⁸ B.D.Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, Antique Collectors Club, 1990.
- ⁹ Parrott, *op. cit.*

**Fig 3. Comb-back armchair attributed to John Pitt.
Courtesy of Michael Harding-Hill.**