

William Henry Drinkwater, Windsor and Cane Chair Maker, Gloucester

A chance encounter in Cambridge University Library has revealed a collection of chairs and associated artefacts in the possession of the descendants of William Henry Drinkwater, a Gloucestershire chair maker. This is of interest because this county does not feature in the standard work on the 19th century vernacular chair and, in consequence, little is known about regional characteristics of Gloucestershire chairs.¹ The details of the Drinkwater family history described below, together with the dimensions of the chairs and the illustrations, have been kindly supplied by Alison Johnson, Jean Leader and George Drinkwater, the grandchildren of William Drinkwater.

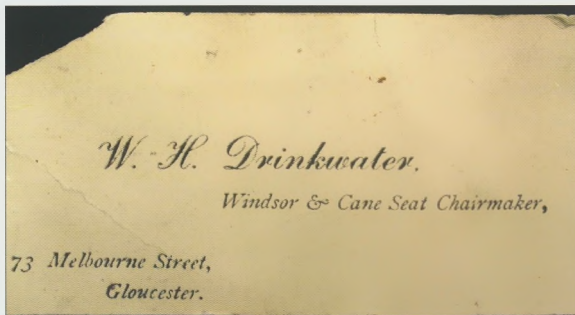


Fig 1. The business card of William Henry Drinkwater (1875 - 1958).



Fig 2. Drinkwater's rubber stamp.



Fig 3. A copper printing plate for advertising chair designs.

William Henry Drinkwater (1875-1958) was the son of Henry Albert Drinkwater (1850-1944), one of twin brothers. Henry Albert worked in Gloucester docks as a journeyman ship's carpenter (1871) and later as a shipwright (1891). The fact that the twins' father, William (1806-1868), was a journeyman carpenter in Gloucester in the 1820s and William Henry's son also worked as a carpenter in the 1930s illustrates that there was a strong woodworking tradition in the family, lasting for at least four generations. William Henry, aged 26, is listed in the 1901 census as a chair maker and was then living with his parents at Wellesley Street, Gloucester. Sometime later, possibly after his marriage in 1907, he moved to Melbourne Street, the address shown on his business card (Fig1). However, by the 1920s he was resident in the village of Upton St Leonards.

Among the objects that have passed down in the family are a rubber trade address stamp (Fig 2), two copper printing plates for advertising chair designs, two chairs and a table. The printing plate (Fig 3) clearly shows a smoker's bow and a lath-back side and armchair, the designs of which closely resemble the types of Windsor produced in the 19th century by the High Wycombe manufacturers. The smoker's bow is similar to a type produced by Glenister & Gibbon in the 1870s, even to the extent that it has the characteristic Buckinghamshire double cross stretchers with a central turned ball.² The lath-back side chair also resembles the type being made in High Wycombe in the second half of the 19th century.³ The design of the armchair, however, is better illustrated by the two surviving examples.

The lath back armchair (Fig4) is 40½ in high and 19½ in wide with a seat height of about 15 in. It has the Thames Valley features of inverted cup turning on the legs and central ball turning on the cross stretchers. It is also very similar to a beech chair (c.1840-1860) attributed to High Wycombe.⁴ It has a good elm seat and also appears to be in beech, but differs from the Thames Valley example in having five instead of six laths in the back. Moreover, the arms of the Thames Valley chair taper upwards to form an

angled joint with the back uprights but those of the Drinkwater chair are of uniform width and horizontally attached with a turned ball adjacent to the arm joint. The second chair (Fig 5) is similar except that the arms are mortised off-centre to the uprights and the rear cross stretcher differs from the front one. Neither chair has the groove around the top of the seat that is often seen on Thames Valley chairs, and both are name-stamped on the back edge of the seat (Fig 6).

Given the family history and census information, it is reasonable to conclude that William Henry Drinkwater actually made these Windsor chairs; this contrasts with the 19th century horological trade where many so-called 'makers' were merely suppliers. However, the surviving examples provide little evidence of regional characteristics. This could be because by the time William was working (early 20th century) local traditions may have been declining due to easier road and rail transport and the

increased availability of printed design sources. For example, Edwin Skull produced his catalogue of Windsor chairs in 1849 and other High Wycombe manufacturers followed suit later in the century. Nevertheless, it is possible that a study of chair making in Gloucestershire at an earlier period may provide evidence of distinct regional traditions in this little-studied county.

Bob Parrott

¹ B.D.Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, Antique Collectors Club, 1990.

² Cotton, op cit, TV224/5.

³ Cotton, op cit, TV188.

⁴ Cotton, op cit, TV193.



Fig 4. Lath back armchair by William Henry Drinkwater.

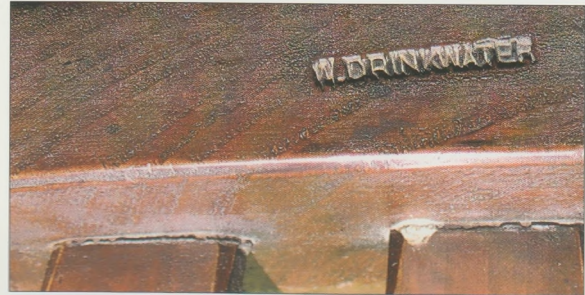


Fig 6. The name stamp which appears on the back edge of both chairs.



Fig 5. Another Drinkwater chair, with slight differences.