

Robert Prior Sold Shoes as well as Making Chairs

The Prior family of chair makers is well known; when John Prior died in 1816 his chair-making business was taken over by his sons John and Robert.¹ The quality of these chairs was high and, in consequence, low-back Windsors stamped 'ROBERT. PRIOR. MAKER. UXBRIDGE' are keenly sought by collectors. Recently however, some new information about Robert Prior has come to light in the Proceedings of The Old Bailey.² This concerns the trial of Thomas Rawbone and Joseph Grainge for theft (shoplifting) on 30 October 1811. The statements made by Robert Prior and constable Edward Brown, as reported, are as follows.

ROBERT PRIOR: 'I live in Hillingdon-lane, I am a Windsor chair maker, and shopkeeper. On Tuesday, October the 8th, about half past seven in the evening, the two prisoners came into the shop, Rawbone said he wanted a pair of light shoes to ran a race that evening for a guinea by moonlight; he tried three or four pair on; Grainge sat on the counter, and directly they went out I suspected them. In about half an hour after Edward Brown produced to me a pair of high shoes, I believe they are mine. I missed a pair of high shoes off a shelf by the door. Mrs Prior was in the shop, she is not here.'

EDWARD BROWN: 'I am a constable in Uxbridge. I took the prisoners about three hundred yards from Mr Prior's shop. I met Mr Prior in the street, he told me that he had been robbed of a pair of high shoes; he described the men, I took them by that description. I searched them, I found a pair of high shoes, in Rawbone's pocket; Rawbone said he bought them; Mr Prior claimed them in the prisoner's presence.'

Rawbone was found guilty and, by the harsh standards of the time, was sentenced to six months' confinement in the house of correction, and a whipping. The interesting feature of this report is that we now know that Robert Prior was making Windsor chairs as early as 1811 and that before taking over his father's business he also had a shop selling shoes. Likewise, several other 18th century Thames Valley chair makers are recorded as having additional occupations. For example, John Pitt and Richard Hewett also both worked as wheelwrights, and a 1768 invoice from John Prior stated that he was a 'Windsor chair maker and turner'. The recorded activities of five other Buckinghamshire chair makers included tallow chandler, wheelwright, brush-block-maker, seedsman, and shopkeeper,³ and an 1823 directory described Robert and John Prior as both chair and hurdle makers.⁴ It would

seem, therefore, that Windsor chair making may not have been a particularly profitable business before the adoption of mass-production techniques and that even the best makers had to supplement their income with other forms of employment.

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- 1 B.D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1990.
- 2 www.oldbaileyonline.org
- 3 *Universal British Directory of Trade, Manufacture and Commerce*, 1793-1798.
- 4 *Pigot's Directory*, Middlesex, 1823.