

# New information about the 18th century Thames Windsor chair maker Richard Hewett

Richard Hewett's comb-back (Fig1) is one of only four 18th century Windsors surviving with an original maker's label. It was discovered by the dealer and furniture historian, the late Thomas Crispin, who donated it to the Victoria & Albert Museum.<sup>1</sup> However, when examined on a recent RFS visit it was found to have had numerous repairs, including replacement of all four pad feet. Also, a large metal strap beneath the seat obscures part of the all-important trade label (Fig.2), the decipherable parts of which read as follows: 'RICHARD HEWET(T) CHAIRMAKER At Slough in the .... (ne)ar Windsor MAKES and s(ells)...Forest Chairs and all s(orts)...'

The chair was described in a landmark article, together with another labelled example made by John Pitt (1714-1759).<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, both makers, who were also wheelwrights, worked in Upton-cum-Chalvey near Slough. Pitt's apprenticeship is not recorded so he presumably learned wheelwrighting from his father, William, who was in the trade, but it is unclear how he became a chair maker.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to Pitt, very little is known about Hewett.<sup>4</sup> The Upton parish register records the burial of Richard Hewett, 'wheeler', on 7 September 1772 but his marriage cannot be traced. However, the *International Genealogical Index* (IGI) records that Richard and Sarah Hewett had five children baptised at Upton : Ann, 15 June 1754; John, 5 Aug 1756; William, 20 Feb, 1759; Mary, 29 April, 1761; Richard, 31 Oct, 1763.<sup>5</sup>

Hewett's will of 29 August 1777, proved 12 September, is mainly concerned with family matters.<sup>6</sup> Bequests of £40 were made to his daughters Ann (nee Simms) and Mary, while his son Richard was given £50 and 'all the rest residue and remainder of my worldly goods and efforts wheresoever and whatsoever not already disposed of by me'. His wife Sarah and son John were to 'share and share alike they paying my just debts, legacies and funeral expenses and maintain provide for and bring up my said son Richard (then aged 14) until he is capable to provide for himself'. Sarah and John, the executors, were '...to manage the Trade and Business which I now follow jointly to the best benefit and advantage...'. The use of the words 'now follow' is interesting, bearing in mind that Hewett made and sold Windsor chairs but was described as a wheelwright when he died. Richard signed with his mark (+) and one of the witnesses was a Thomas Hewett, probably his brother. A notable omission is his son William who, it is assumed, was already deceased.

Two other Hewett families had children born at Upton: James and Mary (6 children in the 1760s) and Thomas and Martha (1 child in 1769) : this Thomas might be Richard's brother. However, Richard's christening is not recorded anywhere in Buckinghamshire or Oxfordshire

between 1720 and 1760, although two Richards were baptised in Berkshire in 1722 and 1735. Both were children of John and Mary Hewett of Buckland who also had a son, Thomas. Possibly, therefore, Richard Hewett may have come from Buckland, Berkshire, (mid-way between Swindon and Oxford) now in Oxfordshire. Interestingly, the following apprenticeship record has been discovered: '1736 Richard Jn Hewett of East Iseley Berks yeo to Simon Bartlett of do wheeler £8'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Richard Hewett, son of John, smallholder, resident of East Iseley, was apprenticed to a wheelwright in 1736. Moreover, because apprentices were usually 14 when taken on, Richard could have been born in 1722.

There were two problems, the first being the non-existence of East Iseley. This was easily resolved as East Iseley is a mis-spelling of East Ilsley, a town on the main road between Oxford and Newbury and much nearer to Slough than Buckland. The second problem was that the IGI lists a Thomas Hewett baptised in 1731, but no Richard, although the parents (John and Elizabeth) had other children as early as 1719. Fortunately, the East Ilsley local history society was able to confirm that Richard Hewett was christened there on 29 April 1722; in this instance, therefore, the IGI records are incomplete.<sup>7</sup> Thus, although it cannot be proved, it seems probable that of the three Richard Hewetts born in Berkshire in the 18th century, the one baptised at East Ilsley in 1722 could be he who later made Windsor chairs. If so, he would have been 32 when his first child, Ann, was born at Upton in 1754 and 55 when he died in 1777.

It is perhaps more than coincidence that Pitt and Hewett were both wheelwrights and Windsor chair makers working in Upton. However, whereas Pitt's label described him as wheelwright and chair maker, Hewett's does not mention that he was a wheelwright, suggesting that he was no longer involved in the trade. Pitt died in 1759 and was 40 years old when Hewett's first child was baptised in 1754. In a village like Upton (population 1018 in 1801, presumably less in 1750) it seems inconceivable that Pitt and Hewett did not know each other and it is possible that Hewett moved there to work with Pitt as a wheelwright. Speculating further, he probably learnt chair making from



Fig 1. Richard Hewett's chair

Pitt and carried on the trade after Pitt died.

East Ilsley is about 35 miles from Upton and it may be that Hewett, the uneducated country wheelwright, journeyed there in search of better employment. Slough was rapidly developing as a staging post en route to fashionable Bath and Pitt, like his father before him, was already in business there as a wheelwright, with a perhaps profitable sideline in Windsor chair making. Possibly, somewhere along the way Hewett met his wife Sarah before settling in Upton as a wheelwright, only later specialising in Windsor chair making.

As nothing has been published on Hewett in the last 30 years, this study used on-line databases to reinvestigate his background. This is far less time-consuming, but not a substitute for the examination of original source material. Clearly, some of the above information

may be conjectural, but it is worth noting that an internet-based approach provides a powerful additional tool for regional furniture research.

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- <sup>1</sup> T.Crispin, *The English Windsor Chair*, Alan Sutton, 1992
- <sup>2</sup> J.Stabler, *Antique Collecting* Vol.11, pp 12-14, 1977
- <sup>3</sup> [www.originsnetwork.com](http://www.originsnetwork.com)
- <sup>4</sup> R.F. Parrott and M.Harding-Hill, *Regional Furniture* XIX, pp 20-32, 2005
- <sup>5</sup> [FamilySearch.org-Search](http://FamilySearch.org-Search)
- <sup>6</sup> [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline)
- <sup>7</sup> Thanks to N.Wardell, [east.ilsley@btinternet.com](mailto:east.ilsley@btinternet.com)

Fig 2. Hewett's trade label

