

A Child's Caned Chair used by John Ruskin

During a visit in late summer 2010 to Brantwood, Coniston, home of John Ruskin (1819 -1900) and now a museum, a child's caned chair caught my attention. The chair has a caned seat and back, but the seat had been re-caned in the recent past, unfortunately with inadequate expertise. Before leaving the museum I left a note explaining the poor condition of the caning, recommending that the cane to the seat be renewed, because it was not a good example of the craft of chair caning.

This resulted in discussion with the collection manager, Sheila Clark, and then a meeting at the museum with Howard Hull, director of the Brantwood Trust. Closer examination of the chair revealed that not only had the incorrect width of cane (2.5 mm instead of 1.7 mm) and incorrect holes been used in re-caning the seat, but the cane to the back panel was extensively damaged. With chairs of this design, the cane in the seat and the back share the same holes around the seat frame. Consequently the cane to the back had been damaged beyond repair when the seat was re-caned (Fig 1). It was mutually agreed that all the cane should be renewed, to restore the chair caning to its original form, at no cost to the Brantwood Trust.

In view of the chair's intrinsic value, it was not possible to work on the chair in my Chester workshop, so all re-caning was undertaken in the museum. The opportunity was taken to do this in full view of visitors and to discuss the activity with them.

The chair has a mahogany frame and previously unknown features were identified when the re-caning commenced. On the underside was the maker's stamp T.CRAY (Fig 1). Also a faintly inscribed 'R' on the underside of the cross rails. Reference to the Furniture History Society's *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660-1840* indicates that very little is known about this maker: 'Cray, T., address unknown, chairmaker (c. 1805). A pair of beechwood japanned chairs in the Indianapolis Museum of Art and a set of twelve mahogany dining chairs sold by Phillips on 29 March 1883, lot 64, were stamped 'T.CRAY'. I have made contact with this American museum, but so far I have received no details. Any further information from RFS members on this maker would be appreciated.

When caning a panel there are six stages, the first four establishing the square grid and the last two the diagonal grid. In a chair with a caned seat and back that share the same holes, the first four stages of the seat are worked first; then the first and third stages of the back, i.e. the vertical canes in pairs, which offer support to the second and fourth stages of the back. These are then worked in pairs commencing just above the seat (Fig 3). The fifth and sixth stages are woven on both the seat and the back, finally finished off, in this case, by beading around each panel of cane (Fig 4).

The caning process was slowed, partly because of the

fineness of the cane used, but primarily due to the very small dimensions which made access difficult. An adult chair of the same design and number of holes in the frame could have been completed in two thirds of the time taken on this chair.

During one of my visits, I showed a hole at the crossing point of the rails under the chair to Howard Hull. This would be the means of fastening the chair to a stand, so that a child could dine at the table with the family. The next day an excited email revealed that the stand had been 'discovered'. The trust had the stand but could not understand why it had a hole in the middle. Ingeniously, an upholstered panel had been made to fit the stand, using the hole for attachment and then using the stand as a stool. When the chair and stool were put together everything matched exactly, even down to the scratches from the chair legs.

The chair and stand are now re-united and Fig 5 shows them in front of a painting of Ruskin as a child.

Brian Crossley

Brian Crossley is a professional chair caner with over 50 years' experience, having been originally taught by his mother. He researches the world history of caned furniture, teaches the craft in various locations and has recently been to Turku, Finland, to introduce 10 professional upholsterers to the craft. He is a member of the Basketmakers' Association, a yeoman member of the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers, and secretary of the recently formed Heritage Crafts Association which promotes and supports traditional craft skills.

