

Furniture Surgery

RFS Conference Edinburgh July 2013

After the AGM delegates assembled for an interesting discussion on items brought to the conference by about a dozen members under the able chairmanship of John Boram. The first example was one of a set of six superb green-painted comb back Windsor, forest chairs, purchased by George Ross (d. 1776) the Laird of Cromarty for his families use in the Kirk. They had remained in the loft there as long as people could remember. George Ross (who also had a house at Kew) purchased Cromarty Castle in the eighteenth century which he demolished and built a manor house in its place, it was completed in 1774 two years before his death. The comb back chairs were clearly in the Thames Valley tradition, and were probably purchased in London by Ross and sent to his Scottish home by sea. These very fine chairs in excellent condition are to be the subject of an article in *Regional Furniture* by Bob Parrott who led the discussion together with Lady Wemyss. We are also grateful to Christopher Hartley for making the two-day journey to Cromarty to collect the chair for us all to see.

Another chair from Cromarty, by contrast was made not by a chair maker but by a shepherd, the great grandfather of the member who brought the chair to the RFS surgery. It was made in 1893 as a nursing chair for his daughter. The seat was very deep from back to front, and the spindles in the back of the chair were hammered through the depth of the seat.

A new member from Moffat, Dumfriesshire, brought three chairs that she had purchased when they bought their house. One of these chairs described as a Kirk elder's chair probably made about 1790, in walnut had interesting arms ending in scrolls which Adam Bowett thought may have been a diagnostic characteristic of that particular cabinet maker. A discussion took place regarding the mitre dovetail tenon or concealed dovetail on the stretcher, a feature which appears on some Scottish chairs which we had observed during the Edinburgh weekend, and was a construction detail used by Gillows of Lancaster from about 1760, and probably by other cabinet makers.

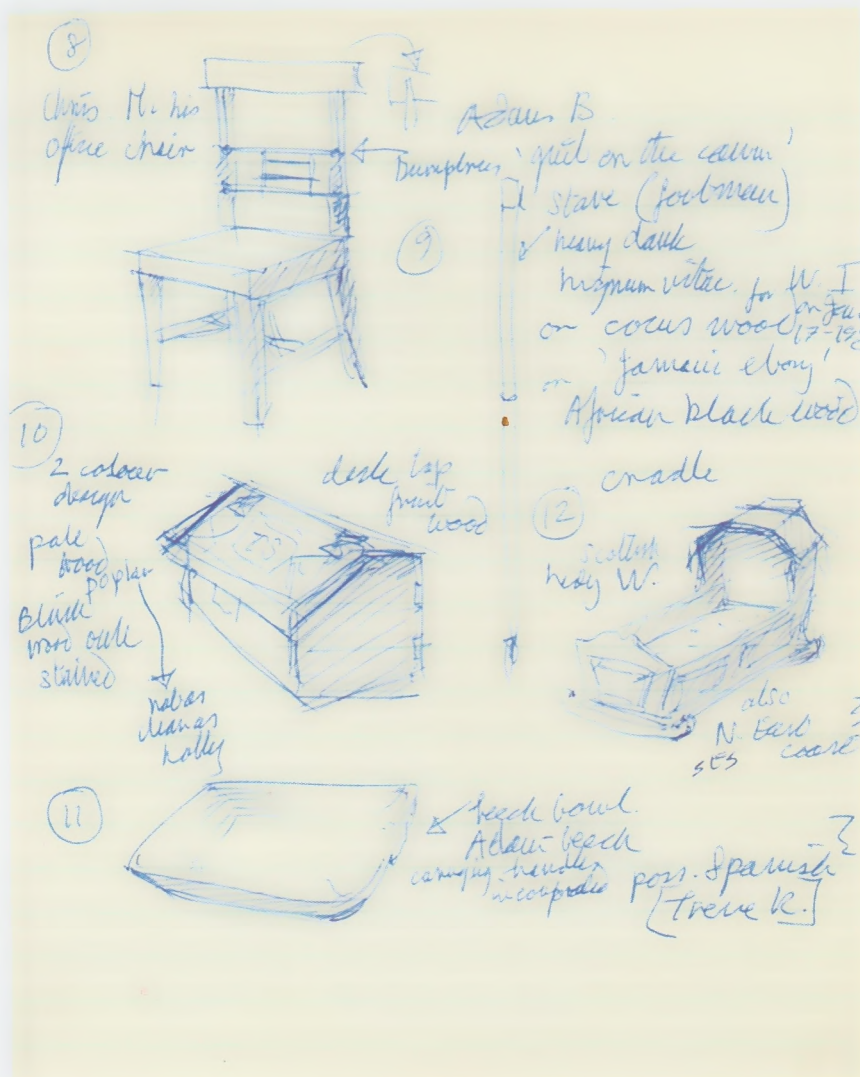
An ebonised folding table made about 1890–1910, sometimes called a 'coaching table' but used for many purposes, with a label 'J & J Smith, High Street, Peebles' was discussed. An inlaid candle box with inlay in rosewood and bird's eye maple, incorporating heart shaped motifs was examined which some members thought might have been made in Wales. A small stool known in Scotland as a 'creepy' was discussed and a northeast origin suggested. A collection of cotton bobbins, and a rectangular bowl made

of beech with incorporated carrying handles and it was suggested that they might have been made in Spain. Christopher Hartley's office chair from Dumfries of nineteenth century date, had a diagonal turned stiles of a design similar to one known in Scotland as 'quilled on the cann'. A footman's stave made of heavy dark wood led to a discussion of the wood type. Adam Bowett suggested several including *lignum vitae*, crocus wood or Jamaican ebony, and African black wood. A member brought an interesting writing/reading-slope of fruitwood inlaid with a two colour design, in a pale wood perhaps poplar and oak stained black? The early butterfly style blacksmith made hinges suggested an early date of manufacture. Lady Wemyss showed us a small cradle complete with a homemade mattress, made for a doll, which she told us, was sometimes given to a little girl when she had a baby sister or brother. The cradle's hood was made of five pieces

of wood, (when viewed from the front) a style thought to be Scottish, but the writer knows of examples made in the Whitby area of Yorkshire with the same shaped hoods. Could this be an example of design transmission via trading links along the coast of England and Scotland?

The furniture surgery is always a stimulating part of the RFS AGM weekend, and we are very grateful to John Boram for organising it, and to all who shared their knowledge with us.

Susan Stuart



Sketches by Susan Stuart of some of the items discussed during the surgery