

# Emily Gimson's Rocking Chair – Sapperton or Preston?

RFS members will recognise the chair in Fig. 1 as a type commonly found in Lancashire and the Lake District, probably made by a number of different workshops, of which two have so far been identified.<sup>1</sup> As Dr Cotton observed in an earlier edition of this Newsletter, it is probable that chairs like this formed the model for the many ball-turned chairs produced by the furniture makers of the Cotswold Arts and Crafts movement, most notably Ernest Gimson (1864–1919). In that context this particular chair is highly significant, because it belonged to Gimson's wife, Emily (1867–1941) and was sold out of her estate in 1941.<sup>2</sup> This raises an interesting question: is this chair a Lancashire original or a Gimson copy?

The photograph in Fig. 2 shows the chair, or one identical to it, in the Sapperton workshop about 1900. Alongside is a Gimson design that clearly derives some of its elements from the Lancashire model. The photo can be read in two ways; either it demonstrates that the Sapperton workshop reproduced exact copies of the Lancashire



Fig. 1

1 Susan Stuart & David Jones, 'Eskdale Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, ix (1995), pp. 14–33; Susan Stuart, 'Wonderful Walker': Portrait of an Eighteenth Century Cumbrian Furniture Maker', *Regional Furniture*, x (1996), pp. 52–65; B. D. Cotton, 'Another piece in the jigsaw – John Robinson, Preston', *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter*, No. 34 (Spring 2001), p. 18; John Boram, 'A Regional Perspective on the Innovative Development of Light Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, xxvi (2012), pp. 149–76.

2 Hobbs & Chambers, Sale of the estate of Mrs Ernest Gimson, 20 March 1941, lot 154.

Fig. 2





Fig. 3

chairs, or it shows how Gimson adapted his design on the left from the Lancashire original on the right. In a letter written in 1907, Gimson told Philip Webb that '... we are often content to be simple copyists. Some of the old patterns are so admirable – good country work with no thought of style – that the making of them is pleasure enough'.<sup>3</sup>

Gimson designed many variations on the ball-turned theme (two examples are shown in Figs 3 and 4) all of which are clearly different from Lancashire originals. There are also aspects of design which seem fairly consistent among the different models produced at Sapperton, such as the altered proportions, the treatment of the arm terminals, different grouping and cadence of the turned elements, non-tapered stretchers, and the adoption of turned rather than square back legs. Emily's chair, by contrast,



Fig. 4

corresponds exactly to the Lancashire model, with square-cut arms and square back legs below the seat. So is it a Lancashire original or a Gimson copy? The question is of more than academic significance, because in the commercial world a Gimson chair commands a much higher price than a Lancashire one.<sup>4</sup> If any RFS members can shed light on the matter I am keen to hear from them.

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<sup>3</sup> [Gimson.leicester.gov.uk/gimsonpage/gimosn-as-a-maker/the-chairmaking-workshop/](http://Gimson.leicester.gov.uk/gimsonpage/gimosn-as-a-maker/the-chairmaking-workshop/)

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Lyon & Turnbull, sale of 22 April 2009, lot 269.