

A Chair used by Robert Burns

At the Regional Furniture Society 2008 Conference there was a visit to the Williamson Museum, Birkenhead where members were shown the chair illustrated below and a discussion ensued about its regional origins that involved, among others, one of the Society's founder members, Michael Legg.

The country-made armchair bore a brass plate at the back with the following inscription:

THE CHAIR OF
ROBERT BURNS
SITTING AT WHICH HE WROTE
THE POEM
TO MARY IN HEAVEN
THE COTTARS SATURDAY NIGHT
AND MANY OTHER POEMS

The armchair has a decorative Chippendale inspired back splat with no relief carving, although it aims to be more sophisticated with an exuberant sweep of the arms and 'paper scroll' terminals, and a leather-covered set in seat. Identifying the chair as late 18th century and of Scottish origin requires the presence of a number of constructional features common in Scotland, though individually these features may be found in the north of England or in Wales.

Notes were made of a conversation with Michael Legg about the chair's style and construction relating to the date at which Robert Burns may have owned it. The features discussed were the angle of the back legs, the side member, the style of the arm, the arm fixing at an angle and potential for forged screws.

In this chair the back legs form a shallow slope straight back from the seat. Back legs of 18th-century English chairs



Fig. 1 The Williamson Museum chair used by Robert Burns (Photograph Courtesy of Williamson Museum, Birkenhead)

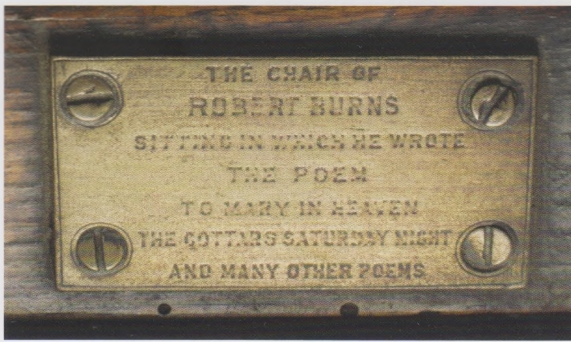


Fig. 2 The brass plate at the back of the Robert Burns chair

take a different form and are usually swept back with the inner edge faceted in two stages from vertical at the seat. After 1790 these facets disappear on rear legs giving a smooth finish and a backward curve.

The side member is trimmed like a propeller, the 'wind' into the top of the sloping leg at the right place. The scrolled arms are cut from a flat piece of timber and carved. In a late 18th-century Scottish chair, a forged screw with a non-tapering core, entering the upright at an angle to the back, fixed the arm in place. In English chairs the arm fixing is at a different point. Michael described the experience of checking the arm joint of a broken chair of similar type to examine the design of the hand made fixing screw. Hand-forged screws can be identified by a slightly off-centre notch in the screw-head. The notch was hand filed, usually by women. The screw-fixing hole is filled so cannot be examined; however, the screws on the brass plate could fit this description.

The practice of making a back and front frame for the chair and then joining them, as in this chair, suggests a late-18th-century date. After 1800 making two side frames and joining became normal practice. Michael was confident that the presence of all these features indicated the chair was made in Scotland, perhaps by a country joiner in Ayrshire or Dumfries and could well have belonged to Robert Burns.

Confirmation of the attributed ownership to Robert Burns came from Laurance Black RFS who mentioned a chair of the same design in Burn's House Museum, Dumfries, with a confirmed attribution.

Burns owned that chair, while at Ellisand Farm, Dumfries, and an ivory plaque on the front of the chair reads:

BURNS CHAIR
FROM ELLISAND PRESENTED BY
MRS BURNS TO Mary McLachlan HER SERVANT
ON THE OCCASION OF HER
MARRIAGE TO ANDREW NICHOLSON SHOEMAKER
DUMFRIES

Burns, aged 29 in 1788 left Mauchline in Ayrshire to farm at Ellisand, Dumfries; his task to 'improve' a run-rig farm (a strip-farming system similar to ridge-&-furrow in England), to drain and hedge it. There he wrote many of his finest works including those mentioned on the armchair in the Williamson Museum. As Burns' employment with the Revenue service grew to provide a sufficient income he gave up the farm and settled in Dumfries. He died on 21st July 1796. A public subscription was raised to support his wife and family.

Jean Armour Burns, his wife, may have parted by gift with what could be two of a larger set of chairs. In later years, her circumstances improved and she purchased fashionable mahogany chairs one of which was purchased at her death in 1834 for the Burns House Museum, Dumfries.

With especial thanks to Michael Legg, Colin Simpson, Curator of the Williamson Museum, Elly MacBeath, Laurance Black, David Jones, Siobhan Ratchford of Dumfries and Galloway Museums and other RFS members for their contributions.

*Crissie White
In appreciation of Michael Legg*