Chairmaking in Lincolnshire, 22 September 2014

Fig. 1 **Rob Ley demonstrating the technique of riving coppiced ash**

William Sergeant had most thoughtfully arranged this study day and he had invited several other collectors of Lincolnshire chairs (and chairs from their collections), together with Rob Ley, who describes himself as a craftsman in wood and mud, and Peter Tree, a chairmaker and restorer. Members were also encouraged to bring chairs to the event so these joined the already serried ranks of chairs, sorted into production areas and even specific named workshops – it must be one of the most extensive displays of Lincolnshire chairs to date. Being able to look closely at related examples of chairs really emphasised the importance of collections, even in this digital age. William had planned the day around the two traditions of chairmaking in Lincolnshire; a delicious lunch divided study of the Windsor tradition of the south west of the county and the rush-seated tradition of the north east.

After an initial introduction to the potential for the spread of ideas in terms of stylistic characteristics and construction methods via familiar links between Windsor chairmakers and chair turners in Lincolnshire from the 18th century onwards, William Sergeant's talk focussed on construction techniques, workshop practice, timber resources, independent component suppliers and the markets for these chairs. For example, the Shadford notebook covering the period 1843 to 1889, not only includes sketches of Caistor Windsor chairs with their distinctive spindle back configuration and comb top rail, but also highlights workshop practice during this period. It was suggested that certain turned components were probably supplied by the neighbouring Windsor chairmaking workshop run by the William Shirley, where John W. Shadford had previously served his apprenticeship and worked as a journeyman prior to opening his own workshop.

The tapered hoop joint into the arm rest and plain turned back legs as used by Marsh of Sleaford, Taylor of

Grantham and Amos of Grantham was a typical Lincolnshire Windsor chair construction detail. Peter Tree stressed the importance of using templates to make standardised hoops, and the importance of jigs in the configuration of spindles. In Lincolnshire female woodland outworkers, known locally as 'woodlings' supplied thatching spars and the components of Windsor chairs.

Evidence of wood preparation in ladders or splats for rush seated chairs, attributed to the workshops of the Ashtons, Greens and Todds in North East Lincolnshire, suggest that riven, coppiced ash was frequently used, unlike Lancashire traditions where saw marks were often in evidence. Later in the day Rob Ley demonstrated the technique of riving coppiced ash, using a brake frame (Fig. 1)

Interesting discussions included a debate about whether the ash ladder back rush seated chairs with squared front 'cab' legs generally associated with chair turners in the Spilsby, Louth and Alford areas saved production time relative to those that were made with turned feet; and the meaning of a number of advertisements in *The Stamford Mercury* from the 1780s onwards for journeymen 'pin-chair' makers and one by William Shirley on Friday 25 June 1819 for an apprentice 'Turn-pin' maker (Fig. 2).

Indigenous timber resources included ash, elm, beech and alder and these were frequently used in Windsor chairmaking, as well as American birch that was probably imported through the port of Grimsby in the latter part of the 19th century. The expanding port of Grimsby was also a potential market for all of these chairs during this period.

Our thanks are due to William Sergeant for his thoughtful organisation and enthusiastic leadership of a great day, and to Rob Ley, Peter Tree and William's other guests for sharing their chairs and knowledge, and not least to Clare Plumbley and Judy Williams for the delicious lunch and tea.

John Boram and Polly Legg

Fig. 3 Rob Ley discussing chair details with Gerry Coughlan and others, and William Sergeant in the background