

A Regional Furniture Study Day in Cirencester



Fig. 1 Bill Cotton discussing a collection of Mendlesham chairs brought by Tony Howe, surrounded by various RFS members

On 1st June thirty regional furniture enthusiasts met at Moore, Allen and Innocent just outside Cirencester eagerly awaiting the day ahead. Bill Cotton had carefully designed a day in which collectors brought items from their own collection to an informal forum where they were encouraged to share the research they had done with the group and have Bill Cotton cast a discerning look over their pieces. This allowed a great amount of information to be shared and for some lively discussion; photographs sent prior to the event allowed Bill and Gerry to select material from their archive and to add new information to each item.

We began with Simon Clarke who brought an applewood chair from the first half of the 19th century. Bill discussed two strong indicators of it being Welsh; firstly the stretcher running centrally from front to back on the bottom of the seat and, secondly the distinct taper of the front leg below the front stretcher. He commented that it was unusual to see such a chair in applewood, more commonly oak was used and attention was also drawn to the fan decoration that is also seen in Welsh lowboys and dressers. Discussion led to the 'buttons' in the back seen in Cheshire joined chairs, but are perhaps more well known in East Anglian designs. This highlighted how regional groups influenced each other and it was important to look at the bigger picture.

Next was David Dewing with two turned chairs from his collection. Bill immediately produced an array of reference books and comparative examples from his extensive library, including Wolsey and Luff, David Knell, John Gloag, and Wallace Nutting. Bill commented on the knops being of Dutch influence and knew of a similar example to one of the chairs in Germany, which also had spindles below the front rail. The discussion here mainly focused on American influences, however, it was determined that they were more likely to be English. The legs indicated that they were probably 17th/18th century rather than any earlier but they took a definite influence from the earlier triangular turned chair construction.

We also looked at an example of a West Midlands chair with a spindle back and solid seat, but significantly it had a round piece to both sides and back of the seat framing it, but not across the front. If it had had a front round piece to the seat this would have been indicative of a West Country origin. The chair was also stamped to the top of both uprights WW. The mark enabled Bill to discover that William Winnet of Woolhope, Herefordshire, made it, *circa* 1859. A connection was also made with Philip Clisset, who worked quite close by, and how he could have influenced Winnet. We were once again encouraged to look for unrecorded chairs and furniture.

Next up was Bob Gowland with a Queen Anne vase-splat laburnum chair from Scotland and discussion centred on the wood used. *Laburnum alpinum* is typically found in Scotland and is often much darker than the more commonly found whereas *Laburnum Anagarioides* which grows in England. However Bill commented that the Scottish wood might have been fumed to deliberately darken it.

Tony Howe brought a collection of five Mendlesham chairs. Bill has done extensive research on this area with meticulous details and measurements analysed. The results have shown that there were five groups and four known makers, one of who was Richard Day. He appears to have been trained in the Thames Valley tradition. Focus turned to a high back example, identified as made of plum, this timber having the darkest heartwood of the fruitwoods. It was admired for its refinement, and showed the influence of Thomas Sheraton. An example of a high-back was mentioned that has been recently acquired by the Geffyre Museum and there are two side chairs in the Christchurch Museum.

David Hannah had bought several fine Windsor chairs each one stamped by its maker. One chair was made by John Gabbitass, the earliest maker in Worksop, Nottinghamshire, and branded with his name, 'I GABBITASS' under the seat. Attention then centred on the other two Gabbitass chairs that were stamped by his wife Elizabeth. She had inherited the workshop after his death and it became a thriving concern over a period of fifty years. David read out a revealing article from a newspaper article dated 1885 outlining how her workshop was the foundation of this trade in Worksop. She travelled far and wide to sell her chairs and encouraged a number of young apprentices. However her trade ultimately declined because of the industrialisation of chair making in South Yorkshire with which they could not compete.

Tom Wells, who brought some fine West Country examples, provided the last group of the morning. First was a Cornish spindle-back armchair with turned arm supports. It would have been originally covered with blue/green paint made from white lead mixed with copper sulphate, then a coat of plaster of Paris was used to seal the grain before painting it red to simulate mahogany. Finally, at a later date it was covered with black varnish, as was the fashion. Timbers were not significant in this type of chair as they were to be painted; sycamore and beech were popularly used. A cooper had possibly made this chair in Penzance, west Cornwall, as this was a common trade in the area to pack fish for export. Coopers were used to making dry barrels, which meant that the hoop was normally fairly flat as they were used in constructing

barrels. Bill also highlighted the Cornish chair depicted in a scene by the Newlyn School artist Ralph Todd, and the importance of looking at pictures of regional interiors to glean information about the furnishings.

A 19th-century windsor chair from Yealmpton, Devon, with distinctive flowing, continuous arms was then examined; it is believed that the town had the only known workshop in the United Kingdom to use yellow ochre to simulate bamboo. Discussion centred on the difference between examples seen in America and those of Yealmpton. Bill also talked of the significance of the Snawden family who came to Yealmpton and diverted the River Yealm, starting what became the biggest chair factory in the West later in the 19th century.

The afternoon began with William Sergeant sharing with us his extensive research on the Lincolnshire Windsor and rush-seated chairs. He noted that rush seated chairs were not marked whereas Windsors could be. We looked at a Lincolnshire spindle-back armchair, a well made piece, with a very distinctive shaped top-rail possibly made by J. Shadford of Caistor, and illustrated by him in his drawing book. William then suggested that there was a working liaison between Shadford and Shirley as he lived only 100 yards down the road, and had a large chair-making workshop. William Sergeant continued by showing two ladderback chairs, one of which had square cabriole legs and pointed feet and the other with rounded legs and pad feet. The Ashton's and the Green's of Spilsby Louth and Boston made ladderbacks of this type, and John Todd of Caistor's wife, Martha, was a Green. He also commented that Todd might have made ladderback chairs as well. He finished by showing a Windsor chair by Hubbard of Grantham and he thought that this was what was locally known as a 'turned pin chair'. He also pointed out that there was a link between another chairmaker Thomas Marsh and Hubbard, Marsh was a witness at Hubbard's marriage.

David Viner had come a short distance with the fascinating Weaver's Chest from the 15th century Weavers Hall in Cirencester. This was a banded oak chest with three locks. He talked us through the extensive records dating from 1 September 1483 and the original cost of the individual components of the chest.

Simon Baldwick brought an intricately carved pine chest from Orkney along. It had been found in a croft on Stronsay in the 1970s. The decoration showed influence of Scandinavia and talk led to the Vikings who had their own designs that appear not only in Northern England but also across Europe. Chris Pickvance noted the clamp construction and applied grids on the sides (often found pre-1500) but suggested the false panels on the front implied a post-1500 date.

Ann Carter bought along her 17th century six-plank chest. We all admired the simple construction while Bill thought it could have been Welsh or from the Lake District. He talked about the sessile oak grown in acidic conditions where the dark heartwood is very distinct from the lighter sapwood, which is typical of these regions. He went on to say that pedunculate oak is lighter in colour and grows on less acidic soils at lower levels.

Louise Forster bought a substantial and imposing carved oak armchair that had a distinctive top rail and an elongated lozenge to the lower back with a branding mark RC. It was believed to be Scottish. Made of oak, it had a low seat, heavy in construction, massive front legs and extensive use of nulling/arcading; all indicators of possible Scottish origins.

This led us to the collection of East Anglian banister back chairs owned by Robert Williams. He took us through the research he had carried out of the region. The dished or hollow seat that he believed was first noted in the Norwich Book of Prices in 1801. He talked of the lack of walnut in the 19th-century furniture as the last advert he had found for its use was in 1805. The reason for this appeared to be due to disease and bad weather and also during the Napoleonic War walnut was needed to make thousands of gunstocks. Bill then discussed the use of vase splats in other regions. He talked of a chair he had discovered that was depicted in Beatrix Potter's *Tailor of Gloucester* and is distinctive to the Lake District because of its high pedestal at the base of the splat. We then discussed a further vase

splat back chair with Chinese influence. This was thought to be early 18th century and in the Dutch form due to trading by the East India Company in the Far East. The Chinese type splat developed into the India back chairs.

John and Sue Parry brought along the final pieces of the day and John took us through some of his recent acquisitions. First was a pair of yew-wood cats or plate-warmers, c. 1770–80. Next was an oak cupboard with arched door and drawer below, interestingly the top was also polished, it had a lovely overall colour and with a depth of patina. We saw a Lazy Susan on rollers in burr yew with an ebony inlay and a yew-wood quartered tray with laminated elm to the back. The two chairs he had selected were a 'Manchester' chair with the distinct North West pyramid finials and what was thought to be a Scottish 17th-century backstool with Renaissance decoration. Finally the table I think we all would have liked to take home! This was a cricket table, which by common assent, was probably of burr poplar. It had chamfered shaped legs and there was also residue of blue paint to the underneath of the top an indicator, perhaps that it came from the West Country.

I would like to thank Bill and Gerry for a memorable day and everybody else who was involved in making it such a success. Also to Philip Allwood who allowed us the use of his saleroom, a preview of his upcoming auction and also a look at some interesting pieces from his own collection which included a Civil War wooden cannon ball!

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