



Fig. 17 Mitch Mitchell stressing the finer points of a Mendlesham chair

## Furniture Surgery

In the capable hands of John Boram the Surgery began with a line of Mendlesham chairs set up to compare and contrast. Described as a 'right mess' by the owner Mitch Mitchell, the first chair appeared to have been in a fire and had lost most of its surface colour, yet it was the only standard Mendlesham chair in the surgery. Mitch stressed that the maker would try to get everything as perfect as possible; the beautiful clean joints being typical. To 'undercut the joint' the tenon is round (?) cut for a rectangular trench to give a perfect joint. Kept in a centrally heated home the chair had relaxed enough for Mitch to lift the back to reveal this joint.

After stating that a Mendlesham is a sophisticated version of a Windsor, Keith Pinn introduced a single Windsor chair with horizontal top rail, zigzag-placed uprights springing out of the seat, the side supports inlaid with dots. Originally from a set of at least six, including an armchair, the owner would only sell this single chair. Evidence of labels and tacks left us to speculate on potential makers. Keith queried whether 'Is it all just Daniel Day?' Next came an armchair with burr elm seat, more typically from the Mendlesham tradition.

William Sergeant, from Lincolnshire, wanted to share research into his local chair-making tradition and revealed a major comb back Windsor, like a magician from under a cloth, that appears in Bill Cotton's *The English Regional Chair* (p. 151). Stamped with the name I Todd 1844 (of Caistor) this would appear to give it an exemplary regional kudos. Yet William stated that in fifteen years involvement in collecting Lincolnshire chairs he had never seen a chair remotely like it. Managing to contact the owner (now living in Hong Kong) the chair was released from storage and brought here for the benefit of the conference.

To William, there was nothing about the chair that suggested a Lincolnshire maker. The back bow was poorly made and although the underarm supports were beautifully turned, the legs were clumsy. William suggested that John Todd had never made a chair in his life. Born in 1772 to a father who was a chair turner, he died a wealthy man leaving nine houses, but research into Todd's wife, Martha Green, turned up links with makers of rush seated ladderback chairs. He noted that the stamp beneath the seat was made up of individual letters. From the floor Treve Rosoman wondered if the chair could have been made as a presentation piece for Todd.



Fig. 18 William Sergeant pointing out the finer details of the chair stamped 'I Todd, Caistor, 1844'

William then produced two typical rush seated Lincolnshire chairs currently of such low value they are being destroyed. 'Surely the quintessential local vernacular chair – buy it before they all disappear' he declared with passion.

Robert Williams then introduced two dough chests. The first had appeared in Bill Cotton's 1987 *Catalogue of East Anglian Furniture*, bought from a house sale at Shipdham, Norfolk, probably made in the village. Of simple panel construction, with evidence of graining, and no lock, Robert suggested it could date from 1800–40. His second example, entirely made of elm, had a lift off top and was of nailed construction with socketed legs. We were encouraged to suggest origins – perhaps West Country? Robert revealed it to have belonged to a member of his own family – an agricultural labourer from Saffron Walden who moved to the Isle of Dogs, East London to drive a horse and cart.

Christopher Claxton Stevens briskly introduced a mulberry wood box with a label of interest to the audience. It stated this was made from a tree that grew in the garden at Weston near Bath, 1877 during the incumbency of the Reverend Islin Bond.

We continued with four variously owned hollow-seated chairs of East Anglian design made from a selection of timbers. John Stabler pointed out the typical hessian strips fixed to the underside of the seats. Katie Abbot revealed her chair as being unusually of birch with a mahogany seat.



Fig. 19 Members of the Society doing what they do best

Several members thought it originated from central Essex, c. 1840–50. Nick Abbott confirmed this attribution by declaring the chair came from his father's old office in Chelmsford founded in the 1870's.

Next came a folding mahogany chair with scrolled legs c. 1720, presented by Roderick Butler. In original condition except for the hinged seat, we were invited to speculate for what purpose the chair was made. Too heavy to travel in a coach, Treve Rosoman wondered if it was a rout chair.

Into the realms of treen with a Cat, or bowl stand, marked with the name J. Barritt 1823, listed as a wood turner in Colchester. This led to a discussion as to how they were used and Peter Brears proposed the idea that they could be used to prop a plate at an angle.

Finally, William Sergeant revealed a Grantham chair, signed Hubbard of Grantham, with a distinctive decorated junction to the cross bar. He then produced a group of similar chairs with differing detail, loaned from Lincolnshire farmers. His research turned up two makers: John Hubbard and father Richard Hubbard, flourishing c. 1810–30. J. Hubbard was later referred to as corn factor and coal merchant, a career that might reflect the lower status of a chair maker.

We concluded with thanks to the exhibitors, the contributions from the assembled delegates, and to Vice President John Boram for his seamless stage-managing of the furniture surgery.

*William Jefferies*