

The Sergeant Exhibition of Lincolnshire Chairs, Belton House, Grantham, Lincolnshire

17 September 2016

A couple of dozen members visited Belton House to see the exhibition of Lincolnshire chairs and hear William Sergeant's talk on the subject. It was a large and impressive display of chairs, with chairs exceeding members in quantity and in style! It was pleasing to note that the National Trust curator had been very supportive of the project.

Rush chairs

William introduced the well-known Lincolnshire Rush chair with simple cabriole legs below a narrow baluster from which pegs rise into the front of the seat frame. Traditionally it has been difficult to determine the provenance of these rush chairs, as none has been found with a maker's mark on it.

Bill Cotton's research only allowed him to do a generic county-wide allocation. William had been able to refine this from discussion with a local woodworker and chair maker, Robert Ley, with whom he and Adam Bowett had discussed the subject. Unfortunately, a fire had destroyed Ley's archive but he had a wealth of hearsay evidence which William had recorded.

Chairs from the north of the county around Spilsby appeared to have the following features: rush seat, front cabriole legs, four or five bars to the back, trimmed by a riving axe, that suggested ash was the usual wood source. It seemed likely that the ash was coppiced every 10–15 years or so, by which time the trunks would be over one foot thick; the trunks would then be quartered. The light build of these chairs led to the vast majority being broken and disposed of.

Rush chairs with simple taper legs with off-centred turned pad feet probably came from the south of the county. One set had been provenanced to Thistleton near Corby Glen, another belonged to a family in Boston. The third type of rush seated chair that William finds locally has a distinctive bar top and more ornate front stretcher; he has found many such chairs with ties to Nottinghamshire.

It was interesting to speculate how soon after the adoption of the cabriole leg in fashionable chairs its use was adopted by vernacular makers. One family of chairmakers could be traced back to 1660 in Spalding. This meant there were local vernacular chairmakers working when the style was first introduced in the early 18th century. Early adoption was therefore a possibility.

Wooden Chairs

There were also c.1800 more conventional 'Windsor' style chairs with turned legs. They are more durable and hence more have survived. Some of these have makers' marks.



A group of
Lincolnshire
'Windsor' style chairs

There is a particular Lincolnshire variant with a bar top rail. A common Lincolnshire feature on both types is a concave reel turning (cove) some distance from the top of the leg rather than the usual three rings close to the top of the leg. Where Lincolnshire does use rings, it only uses two rather than three. Where there is a back bow, it is tapered so the ends fit into a hole in the arm. Reducing cost and speed of manufacture seems to be the driver in most of these features.

Chairmaking Family Traditions

Whereas chairs attributed to the Ashtons all seemed to follow the North Lincolnshire style, this was less true of other makers. There were difficulties in tracking down which Hubbard was involved in the trade around 1810. However, a Richard Hubbard advertised for three journeymen at that time and William has shown that he was the proprietor of a fine three storey town house in Little Gonerby in 1808. This hiring of journeymen could have allowed the introduction of different styles learnt during their apprenticeship elsewhere, in combination with the in-house Hubbard style of spindle backs.

Similar recruitment of journeymen by 'chairmakers' was carried out by Rowton, Amos and Tilson. In fact, Amos was a wheelwright who would have employed several journeymen in the business of building wagons, carts and ploughs for over twenty years before he changed to making Windsor chairs, again in Little Gonerby.

Two contributors and direct descendants – Mike Ashton and Christopher Goodwin – explained the genealogy of the Ashton and Taylor chairmaking families, which was helping to date some of the furniture. The Ashton family lived in North Lincolnshire and the business passed by a daughter's marriage to the Green family. Another female descendant married into the Spikens family of South Lincolnshire. It appears that the Ashton/Green business produced the rush seated cabriole chair. Spikens retained his South Lincolnshire style.

The Taylor business was started by Roger in the 1790s and taken over by his widow Sophia who ran the business for at least 10 years before she re-married a cabinet maker, John Bettison. It appeared that this led to the sons of her first marriage working initially as chairmakers and after a short while giving up their respective workshops to become mail coach guards. As a result, it was clear that any Taylor chairs must predate 1815 – the date of Sophia's re-marriage. Taylor chairs tended to be plain spindles and back legs and usually with ash seats and no bead around the bow – classics of their type: elegant but frugal.

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