

East Anglian Chairs: A Talk by Robert Williams

After dinner on Friday Robert Williams gave a talk on the results of his newspaper researches into the origins and areas where the East Anglian hollow wood seat chairs were made. This research used the British Newspaper Archive, which in partnership with the British Library is digitising the Library's collection of newspapers. The archive came online about four years ago and can be searched using key words and date by decade, year or even month. Robert would like more early newspapers to be available, but the results so far point to the chairs appearing in the early 1770s in Eastern Norfolk and then spreading out rather conveniently into the four counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire, which now make up East Anglia.

Robert explained that he had found five different names for these wood-seat chairs and that the name 'hollow seat' seems to have been a London term mainly used for a concave seated upholstered stuff-over chair seat. He gave examples of it mentioned in bills from Mayhew & Ince and Haig & Chippendale in the 1770s and 1780s. He believed that the name was used by Norwich journeymen who had worked in London, when they produced the second edition of the *Cabinet & Chair Makers Norwich Book of Prices* (1801). The earliest record of it being used for a wood-seated chair is in a newspaper of 1798, which would point towards the name also being used in the unrecorded first edition of the book.

The earliest name found for these wood seats was 'moulded seat', which appears in an advertisement of 1773, found by John Stabler and recorded in the *Dictionary of Norfolk Furniture Makers* (2006), from Joseph Sharpe of

Yarmouth, who wanted 'one that can make mould and Wood Bottom chairs'. The name moulded seat is also used in 1778 in an auction sale advertisement in Diss, in Norfolk.

Robert illustrated eight maps of East Anglia, showing the distribution of these chairs as they advance over each ten-year period. Up to the 1780s these chairs were only found in Eastern Norfolk. In the 1790s they start appearing over the border into NE Suffolk. In the period 1800–1819 they spread west into Norfolk and south-west into Suffolk. By the 1820s they had reached Cambridge and in the 1830s Wisbech in North Cambridgeshire and into Essex as far as Chelmsford. The last map of the 1840s showed further advance into Essex.

Notes from Robert Williams