

Darvel Chairs: J. McKellar, a New Maker

At the Carlisle Conference furniture surgery in July 2016 a mystery chair I had purchased at Great Western Auctions in Glasgow was identified as Welsh. It was from a property in Ayrshire and had seen hard-wear and use as a chopping block. It had a comb-back with a scarfed-joint on the back rail and is illustrated in *RFS Newsletter 66*, Spring 2017, p. 31; the photo shows me holding the Welsh chair at the moment of identification, and the early Darvel with simple legs is the one behind me.

While discussing the chair with Richard Brown at the study day in the Lake District in March 2017, he said he had a Darvel chair by a previously unknown maker which he wanted to return to Scotland. I was looking for a Darvel chair with uncut legs and to find one with an unknown maker's stamp was a bonus. We exchanged photographs and eventually chairs. The Welsh one has gone in the direction of Wales, and I am now the proud owner of a Darvel chair by J. McKellar.

John McMath, one of the three known makers, was born in Darvel in 1797, with a business as a maker of chairs well established by 1840. The McKellar chair sufficiently resembles chairs by McMath to consider it as coming from the same workshop, an apprenticeship



Darvel chair by J. McKellar, mid-19th century (Photo Richard Brown)



Darvel chair detail showing the maker's mark and the 'ear' at the front corner of the seat (Photo Richard Brown)

with McMath in Darvel a possibility. Stephen Hunter has since found a J. McKellar in the nearby village of Galston, and a family of wrights named McKellar in Fenwick, with anecdotal evidence of chair making. With Hugh Shields, another Darvel chair maker, based in Newmilns, it would make sense for a newly qualified maker to move to a nearby village, thus avoiding competition with a mentor. Good earnings in the flourishing weaving textile industry created a market for these well-made chairs. See David Jones, 'Darvel Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, vol. 9 (1995), pp. 64–70 and Stephen Hunter, 'Darvel Chair Update', *Regional Furniture*, vol. 15 (2001), pp. 72–74.

Technical notes: The spindles on all Darvel chairs appear to have been made using the same size of rounding plane. The arms are scarf-jointed, not steam-bent. Legs, stretchers and arm spindles are turned. Darvel chairs have 'lugs' or ears at the front of the seat which house the turned arm spindles. This feature can also be seen in Charles Rennie Mackintosh's comb-back chairs designed for the Dutch Kitchen in the Ingram Street tearooms. Bob Parrott does not know of a Windsor chair with a similar feature.

With acknowledgement and thanks to RFS members for identification, Richard Brown for the chair and images and Stephen Hunter for his expertise.

Crissie White