

# A Caned Library Chair by John Syers at Broughton Hall, North Yorkshire

Furniture from Broughton Hall which comes into my workshop for re-caning is always of interest as the Hall was furnished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mainly by Gillows.

Recently, two chairs arrived from the Hall, one of which was a bedroom chair stamped GILLOWS LANCASTER. The other was not stamped but was labelled on the underside of the seat frame: 'Exhibited at Temple Newsam House June 1971 Cat No. 25.'



Re-caned chair showing the mahogany fillets at the junction of the back and arm panels with the seat panel



Detail showing the re-caning of the back using the blind caning technique

Contact was made with Temple Newsam, Leeds and James Lomax, Curator Emeritus, confirmed details from the exhibition catalogue, *Furniture from Broughton Hall, Yorkshire made by Provincial Firms 1788–1909*, which reads:

LIBRARY CHAIR, one of a pair, made by John Syers, London.

Doc: 9 Nov. 1813 'To furnish'g two Mahy Library Chairs caned back & seats and Cushions to Do finished in purple Spanish leather all Complete ... £18.18

*To furnish'g an Iron Elbow to swing cover'd with leather and fitted with Brass apparatus for fixing on Chair & reading Desk all Comp. £1.14.6'*

Apart from references in contemporary Trade Directories nothing is known about John Syers other than his work at Broughton Hall documented by a single bill amounting to £95.9.0 and a letter giving his address as No. 3, Duffours Place, Broad Street, Golden Square, London.

Whilst this description refers to the chair as mahogany, observation showed that the seat frame is only veneered in mahogany. The chair does not exhibit the elegance of furniture by Gillows and timber cross-sections tend to be larger. An unusual feature is a triangular-section mahogany fillet fitted at the inner junction of the seat panel with the arm and back panels. The purpose of this fillet is not known. Examination indicated that all diagonal cane in the back panel had been incorrectly woven and existing holes in the frame had not been used, suggesting that the chair had been re-caned at least once. Where adjacent panels of cane share the same holes in a frame, it is not normally possible to remove cane in one panel without damaging cane in the adjacent panel. Although in this case only the seat panel needed replacing, all panels would have to be replaced. This was agreed with the client. Existing cane was removed, caning holes cleared and the frame cleaned and polished.

In most caned panels the cane goes into holes in the panel which go right through the frame. It is essential to lock tension in each strand and this is achieved by the cane being woven through holes in the frame and temporarily pegged to maintain the tension. The cane is then taken through an adjacent hole and the process continued. Cane is therefore visible on the rear face of the frame. However, in high-quality furniture cane on the rear face of arm and back panels is often sunk in a groove and concealed with a fillet of wood. When re-caning a chair with this form of construction, the decision is whether or not to remove this fillet and risk damaging the chair frame. Fortunately, there is another technique known as 'blind caning' where holes that only go part of the way through the frame are drilled. This requires cane to be cut to exact lengths, locked into the holes with a small amount of glue and temporarily held in place by tapered pegs until the glue has set. This technique avoids the need to remove the fillet.

The seat panel was caned normally but the blind caning technique was used for all other panels. Re-caning was undertaken in the sequence: seat, left arm, rear panel, right arm. Each panel was finished with a wide cane bead around the perimeter. The mahogany fillets were then fixed in position and French-polished.

Roger Tempest Esq. is thanked for his kind permission to publish this feature.

*Brian Crossley*