



Delegates and speakers gathered in the Music Room at Marchmont House. *Photo Nick Haynes. Courtesy of Hugo Burge*

The Rush Seated Chair: A Celebration of Past, Present and Future

14–15 September 2018 at Marchmont House, Greenlaw, Berwickshire

This two-day conference on the rush seated chair was organised by David Jones and our host, Hugo Burge. Fifty-three delegates from a range of backgrounds attended, from rush cutters to rush weavers and restorers, chair-makers, basket-makers, curators, dealers, collectors, and historians. Nine students and young practitioners in the creative sector, mainly crafts, woodwork and heritage, were awarded bursary places. The meeting was generously sponsored by Christie's and Turcan Connell. Bursary places were sponsored by H. Blairman & Sons Ltd.

We were welcomed by Hugo Burge who talked about his own passion for rush-seated chairs, which he traced back to his school days at Bedales, where the library furniture is by Gimson and the Barnsleys.

David Jones, in his talk *The Rush-Seated Chair*, examined evidence for the early use of matting as seats of chairs, stools and screens in rural communities and, by the eighteenth century, as chairs mass-produced for mills, factories and urban back-to-back houses. The fashion for rush-seated chairs as garden chairs and 'fancy' bedroom chairs in middle-class households, as well as light, easily moveable seating for churches and as 'rout' chairs, hired out for events, reflects their widespread use. Production seems to have been clustered around major centres of industry, with the ladder-back type centred in Lincolnshire c. 1800, spreading to Nottinghamshire and the west and east Midlands, Cheshire and areas further south. In contrast, the spindle-back type was produced in Yorkshire, Lancashire and the Lake District. It is perhaps not surprising that the rush-seated chair became the subject of the Arts and Crafts revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, designed by most of its celebrated figures.

Felicity Irons, rush cutter, merchant, weaver and maker, spoke on *Rushes and Rush Seating*. Her business

was set up in 1992 with a grant from the Prince's Trust. She harvests English freshwater bulrush for five to six weeks a year on the Great Ouse in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Using a rush-knife, it is cut and loaded onto an aluminium punt; a full-size bolt weighs up to 20 kilos. Recent commissions include matting for Hardwick Hall (National Trust). For further details see Rushmatters.co.uk.

In his *The Origins of the 'Fancy Chair'*, John Boram used a wide range of sources including drawings and watercolours, billheads, pattern books and extracts from the *Gentleman's Magazine* as evidence of the fashion for fancy chairs in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For a full account of John's research, see his article, 'Makers of 'Dy'd, Fancy and Japan'd' Chairs' in *Regional Furniture*, vol. 24 (2010), pp. 49–82.

Simon Feingold, in *The Rush-Seated Chair in the North West of England*, defined the characteristic features of these chairs, which are mostly ash and birch (and elder). Made from the 1770s, the heyday of production was between c. 1800 and 1850. Often with a cupid's bow top rail that extends beyond the uprights, they have either a single or a double rail, with bobbin-turned spindles, normally three or four per row. The cupid's bow shape was possibly derived from Chippendale's *Director* and the bobbin-turned spindles



A North West two row spindle-back side chair. Ash with birch/alder cross stretchers. Stamped J. Bancroft on the back leg. Although often listed as fl. 1808–18, a maker with this name is found in the *Elizabeth Raffald Directories* for 1781, at 141 Chapel Street, Salford, the same address as J. and D. Bancroft in later directories. *Photo John Boram*

may be linked to mill work. There is often a delineation between the leg and the upright, marked by a change from a square-cut to a round-turned section or with a block. In the simpler chairs, the uprights commonly end in an extended pommel with nipple top. Two side stretchers and two front stretchers (the latter sometimes decorative) are common, with only one stretcher at the back. Front stretchers often show wear from hob-nailed boots. Black stain, in imitation of lacquer, and later red stain, intended to look like mahogany, were both used.

Janet Pennington, in *The Sussex Chair*, referred to her article, co-authored with Joyce Sleight, 'Furniture in Steyning, a Sussex Parish, 1587–1706: A Study of Documentary Sources' in *Regional Furniture*, vol. 1 (1987), pp. 41–49, as an earlier investigation into the value of local archives. Her lively telling of the detective story involved in trying to establish the origins of the Morris & Co. 'Sussex Chair' revealed more questions than it answered. This is intriguing research in progress.

Terry Rowell, in *The Clissett Chair – Origins and Legacy*, discussed the revival of the rush-seated chair, with Philip Clissett's distinctive extended ladder-back chair, and its three, four and five rail variants, with very fine rushing. Copies by makers including Gimson/Edward Gardiner, Heal's, Morris and Co. and Liberty show the enduring legacy of these chairs. More detail is available at <http://www.philipclissett.co.uk/contact.html>

Paul Holden spoke on *James MacLaren and the Rush-Seated Chair*, discussing MacLaren's meeting with Clissett in 1886. Although there is no evidence that MacLaren was responsible for the Art Worker's Guild commission for chairs from Clissett, he may have influenced it. With two further sets of chairs bought later to accommodate the increasing membership of the Guild, the chairs became the height of fashion among progressive society.

Angus Ross, furniture maker, described the making of 125 black stained ladder-back chairs and 40 tables for the Willow Tea Rooms, Glasgow, in his talk, *The Mackintosh Rush-Seated Chair Project 2018*. Modifications from the original chairs included steam-bending the rails, rather than cutting them from the solid, and pegging the joints. Thames rush was used instead of seagrass and, because of the time scales, the seat frames were made first. For further details of recent commissions see <http://www.angusross.co.uk/>

On the second day we were privileged to see the first public viewing of the film *The Chair Maker*, the story of Lawrence Neal's career. He has been making chairs for over fifty years, from when he helped his father in the workshop.

This was followed by Annette Carruthers' talk, *Ernest Gimson (1864–1919) and the Rush-Seated Chair*, in which she examined his career as an architect, designer, and chair-maker. Gimson was taught by Clissett for only about six weeks and then learnt by continual practising in the workshop. The ladder-back is the best known of his chairs, with graded rails and spaces. His spindle-backed chairs, initially with three rows of spindles, were later made with two rows, following the North West tradition. Many were made for institutions, including churches, with rush-seated chairs designed for use with oak tables. They were not intended for middle-class interiors. Production increased



Angus Ross seated on his latest rocking chair, with a reproduction Mackintosh ladder-back chair with twisted rush seat in the foreground. *Photo Nick Haynes. Courtesy of Hugo Burge*

from late 1903, when he employed Edward Gardiner. After the war Gardiner standardised manufacture, continuing to produce rush-seated chairs in the Gimson tradition. Neville Neal joined Gardiner as a pupil and in turn trained his son, Lawrence Neal. Richard Platt and Sam Cooper, currently apprenticed with Lawrence Neal, will continue the tradition at Marchmont.

Lawrence Neal, Paul Shutler, Hugo Burge and David Jones discussed the place of the rush-seated chair as a living tradition, concluding with thoughts around its future. After a splendid tour of the house and collection, we walked around the estate buildings where Richard Platt and Sam Cooper will work. This event, which brought historians, collectors and makers together, was an immensely enjoyable period of intensive engagement, study and discussion of both historical context and current practice. There were opportunities to compare and discuss chairs brought to the event by delegates. We look forward to hearing the next stage in the development of Marchmont House as a home for

makers and creators. Further conferences will be held on new subjects, maybe beginning next September.

Marchmont House is the winner of the 2018 Historic Houses/Sotheby's Restoration Award.

Liz Hancock and Crissie White



Lawrence Neal's workshop. *Photo David Dewing*