

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **THE ENGLISH REGIONAL CHAIR**

by Bernard D. Cotton

(Antique Collectors' Club £49.50)

The long-awaited publication of our chairman's great work is a cause for special celebration for the Regional Furniture Society, many of whose members have contributed to it in one way or another, and almost all of whom have followed the long course of its gestation - roughly the existence of the R.F.S. itself - with personal interest. But the excitement goes far beyond the confines of our society: this is the first major publication by the man who has turned furniture studies upside down during the past ten years, both in method and subject matter.

Largely because of Bill Cotton and his energetic harnessing of country-wide enthusiasm through the R.F.S., it is no longer possible for respectable furniture historians to dismiss vernacular furniture as a subject unworthy of serious consideration. One suspects that until recently it was too large and uncharted an area for anyone but a maverick to tackle. Regional furniture has now found its champions, and let him sneer who dares.

The English Regional Chair not only delineates the rich variety of 'dialects' in country chair-making, but it embodies Bill Cotton's characteristic and revolutionary brand of analytic thoroughness. The general Introduction includes an examination of construction methods illustrated by 'skeletal' views of different regional types of chair as well as a survey of manufacturing techniques and workshop practices in various parts of the country.

The book is then divided into chapters according to region: Thames Valley and The Chilterns, North East, East Anglia, South West, West Midlands and North West, with subdivisions within these broad areas. Thus, the North East Region begins with a survey of the 'dynamic Windsor chair making traditions' of Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, goes on to look at the 'less extensive but identifiable tradition' of the West Riding of Yorkshire, and finally examines the small but stylistically connected production of Northumberland and Durham. Other subdivisions are made according to structural differences, as in the South West Region where three-part are Windsors, single bow arms, continuous arm Windsors and side chairs are given separate treatment.

In some areas the discovery of rich archival treasures has allowed Dr. Cotton to build vivid accounts of the work of individual chairmakers.

Examples are the workshop notebook of John Shadford which enlivens his analysis of the Caistor chair-making tradition of the North East Midlands, and the particularly full records of the Clissett family in the West Midlands.

The book ranges from intensely human interest such as this, often gleaned from first-hand oral accounts and sometimes with evocative photographs to match, to the strictly analytical bar charts, graphs and distribution maps that have clearly grown out of his background as a sociologist.

His analysis of the Mendlesham chair exemplifies his statistical approach to furniture studies at its most extreme: 32 'numeric variables' (measurements) and 31 'qualitative variables' (other characteristics like woods used, stringing patterns and spindle arrangements) were recorded on a selection of 45 Mendlesham chairs, and with the help of a computer the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between each example was assessed. The conclusion that Medlesham chairs were produced by several individuals working in the same chairmaking tradition but exhibiting variations in 'handwriting' may not come as a surprise to many: what is new to furniture studies is such rigour of examination. No one before has combined field work, documentary study and statistical analysis so completely.

On a different level, this book has a fascination for those eager to 'place' their homely and once disregarded seating. There are over 1400 illustrations to send us scurrying round the house turning up our chairs to see if they are stamped, and counting the buttons in the backs or the rings in the turnings: while we may not discover precisely who made our chairs or where, we are likely to come up with a better idea of their provenance than ever in the past.

At the end of the book an Index of Regional Chair Makes and Turners 1700-1900, compiled from trade directories, census returns, parish records, wills, inventories and other archives, not only fills in the names of many makers whose stamped initials are found on chairs, but provides information about where they worked and when. Bill Cotton emphasises that 'the Index is intended as a starting point for research, rather than a final statement' - a remark typical of the man who takes almost as much pleasure in stimulating the researches of others as in making furniture history himself.

Noel Riley