

THE ENGLISH REGIONAL CHAIR - NATURAL HISTORY AND REGIONAL CRAFTS

A course organised by Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, 28th January 1996.

The content of the day's course was introduced by Dr. Tristram Wyatt, Director of Studies. The course aimed to bring together the study of woodland ecology, woodland anatomy and chairmaking technologies utilising

underwood and seasoned timber resources.

Contributors included Dr. Oliver Rackham, lecturer in Plant Science and Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Dr. Barrie Juniper, lecturer in Plant Sciences and Fellow of St. Catherine's College, Oxford and Dr. Bernard Cotton, Visiting Professor of Furniture Studies, Buckinghamshire College. An audience, in excess of 100 persons, drawn from diverse interest groups, attended this event.

1.0 History and Ecology of trees and woods

Dr. Oliver Rackham not only referred to the similarities in the styles of the English and American Windsor chairmaking traditions but highlighted the important differences in the use of materials and surface treatments. For example, the use of hickory spindles in combination with a pine seat was unique to the Windsor chairmaking tradition in the U.S.A. and indicative of a keen understanding of materials and their properties. However, the use of painted finishes on American Windsors, indicates that the mix of timbers incorporated into all these chairs, took little account of inherent visual or decorative qualities, a factor particularly important to many English Windsor chairmakers.

Historically timber had been a relatively scarce resource in England since Norman times. Woodland only covered a very small part of the country relative to for example France. Only 6% of the land was covered by Woodland in the 15th century and 5% by the 18th century. Imports of oak and deal into England had become well established by the 13th century.

Important differences between the traditions of woodland and plantation management were highlighted. The beech woodlands of the Chilterns, sustained by coppice management, had supplied London with fuel in the Middle Ages. By the late 19th century it was interesting to note that a contemporary photograph illustrated wood turners preparing chair legs from cleft timbers derived from cleared plantation stands in the Chilterns. By definition mature plantations lack underwood; a feature to be found in abundance within coppiced woodlands. A brief summary was made of the distribution of indigenous woodlands throughout the U.K. in the 19th century, which in some instances provided a potential resource for woodturners and chairmakers. Such woodlands included elm, beech, ash, maple, hornbeam, sweet chestnut and limewood.

2.0 Timbers for Regional Chairs

Dr. Barrie Juniper provided an insight into the cellular structures of different timbers and an understanding of the attributes and properties which create strength, thermo-plastic qualities, elasticity, and colour etc.

We were introduced to the 'simple' wood polymer which constitutes the cellulose structure of wood. Felled timber was likened to a bundle of straws put together or a dead plumbing system.

Lignin (phenol propane) provides a glue to cross strengthen all aspects of cellulose. The source of colour in timber is via Anthocyaninidins.

A significant variation in elasticity is to be found between sapwood and heartwood. Sapwood is springy and flexible relative to heartwood which is stiff. The variation in elasticity between sapwood and heartwood can be used to great structural advantage as employed in the great-long bows which were made out of Spanish

Yew. Where the transition from heartwood to sapwood is absolute, as with laburnum, the visual effect is dramatic.

Tannin, present in all woods, protects them from insect infestation. An average oak tree, for example, houses in the order of 400 species of insect. Ash is low in tannin, while oak has a relatively high tannin content, a factor which contributes to its longevity.

The thermoplastic qualities of lignin can be manipulated by heating processes. English harpsichord makers often used steam bent half inch oak boards. Windsor chairmakers likewise employ this process.

Sapwood is essentially living tissue with its plumbing system working and starch in abundance. Such features make it prone to attack by woodworm. By contrast, heartwood is a dead system with no residual starch although an abundance of condensed tannins. The starch content of timber is believed to be one of the factors which makes wood susceptible to woodworm attack.

3.0 English Regional Chairmaking

Dr. Cotton introduced us to a cross section of case studies, representative of the diversity of vernacular chairmaking traditions to be found within the regions of England during the 18th and 19th century.

The Clissett family of chairmakers, based in Herefordshire, used coppiced timbers such as ash, poplar and elm for their chair frames, avoided the use of glue by using greenwood components, employed some pegging and perceived no requirement to stain their products to emulate the finishes used on fashionable furniture. Phillip Clissett, who stamped his spindle back chairs P.C., lived to the age of 96 years and died in 1913.

The rural population of Herefordshire provided a ready market for the output of the workshop. The longevity of such traditions into a period dominated by the Arts and Crafts movement was prolonged by the interest generated by Ernest Gimson, who not only visited the Clissett workshop but used these designs and skills in his workshop at Sapperton near Cirencester.

By contrast, another rush-seated chair making tradition, based in the industrial textile towns of North West England, produced chair frames from seasoned machine-cut timbers. The Leicester family of chairmakers, working in Macclesfield and Hyde in Cheshire, produced ladder back and spindle back chairs which were secured with animal glues and stained red or black.

It was usual practice for the Leicesters to name stamp the products of their workshops. Business flourished from the 1820s to the 1880s as the industrial population of these industrial towns expanded. Another important chairmaker and woodturner, working essentially in the same tradition, was Thomas Clayton of Stockport who supplied wavy ladder back rush seated chairs up until the 1820s.

The tradition of Windsor chairmaking was introduced as a totally different form of construction which evolved into a number of distinctive regional traditions by the early 19th century. Evidence suggests that initially Windsor chairs were made for garden, public house, library and school use. The late 18th century trade cards of Lockson, Foulger and John Ingram graphically display rustic chairs, Windsor chairs, rural settees and alcoves made for garden use.

Early chairmakers such as John and Robert Prior of Uxbridge worked from coppiced timbers and under-

wood to supply windsor chairs, arbour poles, bundles of pea sticks and stakes for supporting espalier fruit trees.

The lifetime of the 'tablet-back' Windsor armchair design was extended by Stephen Hazell (Oxford chair-maker), who supplied the Bodleian library in the 1860s, with chairs to a design developed by Robert Prior of Uxbridge much earlier in the century.

The longevity of certain vernacular traditions was extended into the 20th century by the incorporation of many designs into the products of the Arts and Crafts movement. Illustrated examples of those vernacular traditions, which had created this stimulus, include chairs from the Clissett workshop, the Simpson Workshop in Lancaster and those with Sussex origins.

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