

A Lecture by Professor Bill Cotton

Dr Cotton was asked to talk about a Windsor armchair with cabriole front legs from the Parker Knoll collection. This chair is illustrated in 'The Windsor Chair' by Ivan Sparkes P53, ISBN 0902875361, published by Spurbooks 1975. An illustrated history of a classic English Chair.

His lecture started with an initial examination of the chair. The cabriole leg was said to be an interpretative feature and with anthropomorphic language he suggested that this chair was feminine and held dark secrets.

The chair had a typically Scottish feature of a crossed and turned stretcher configuration (which was a later addition) and had been repaired with the replacement

of sections on the seat front and back. There were also a few coats of dark varnish masking the underlying tones of oxidised wood. A label under the seat which reads 'Art treasures Exhibition 1928 no 177' was described as a 'false passport'. One leg was also replaced with an old leg of a different date and source.

A discourse on the possible origin of the cabriole leg then followed: the term was suggested to be of nineteenth century origin and named after a French dance, the capriole. Examples of geomorphic legs from antiquity were shown with the Egyptian Tutankhamun chair, Roman chairs from Pompeii carvings and the legs of a Greek incense burner being illustrated. A Griffin illustrated in a Landall & Gordon advertisement (dated 1750 by Heal and 1765 Gloag) could also be a 'cabriole' forerunner, perhaps being used in an example of a Kentian leg on a chair from Chiswick House. A Chippendale French style gilt chair showing Chinese and Rococo influence also had a 'cabriolesque' scroll foot.

Descriptions of Chinese style design by John Platt 1750 and the Chippendale Directoire 1754 also show this design similarity.

Similarity between a Chinese Dog with a claw foot on ball and the English version of Eagles claw on pearl were illustrated. An eighteenth century library mahogany Windsor chair was shown with cabriole legs and carved knees. This was compared with a Ming period stool with a similar animalistic foot, again drawing the design influence back to Chinese origins.

Hogarth's analysis of the 'curve of beauty' with seven types (number four being the pinnacle of beauty) was described and all Windsor cabriole legs can be ascribed to one of these seven definitions. Since almost all American Windsors are painted, the harmony of the oxidation of the various woods used in their construction (yew, elm, cherry, walnut) is not a design feature, whereas English Windsor chairs often rely on this to produce a pleasing finished appearance. A Windsor by John Pitt (c. 1754), wheelwright and chair maker, and another by Richard Hewett of Slough (c. 1750s) show the early use of these features in the traditional Windsor chair.

A Windsor chair of cabinet maker type owned by the Feoffees of Tetbury, was shown which dates to the eighteenth century, and which was constructed with formal mortice and tenon joints and sawn parts in contrast to the traditional methods of manufacture of Windsor chairs which, again, illustrated the versatile use of the cabriole leg form, being produced with carved animal paw feet in this example.

Another extraordinary Windsor chair example which came originally from the 'White Swan' in Banbury and which had a pierced symbolic crown and Celtic symbols also exhibited unconventional (compared with the traditional Windsor) constructional details. A West Country Windsor with traces of its original yellow ochre colour finish and rope twist edge decoration with simulated bamboo turned legs was also shown to illustrate the wide variety of Windsor chairs with

cabriole legs made in this area too. Another Windsor chair very similar to the example from the Parker Knoll collection, was shown with the crinoline or cowhorn stretcher configuration, wheat sheaf motif carving on the splat and husk or bluebell carving to the knee and even unworn pads under the feet. This chair was as perfect as the Parker Knoll chair was imperfect and still had process marks of scalloping under the seat (from a travisher or a curved bladed plane), as well as the pin mark (from the lathe mount) under the footpad. This type of chair could stylistically be dated as early as 1740 but a known example was illustrated by William Webb of Stoke Newington which dated much later since he was active between 1792/1808, so perhaps the Parker Knoll chair is of a similar date, or even dating to the early nineteenth century.

This fascinating and perspicacious lecture was concluded with a slide of a similar style of Windsor to the Parker Knoll example, which was shown being made by Jack Goodchild of Naphill in Buckinghamshire (c. 1954). A slide of the workshop of William Birch and Co from a contemporary date also showed a similar chair in the background, apparently being made as part of the mass-produced chair making industry and illustrating how certain chair designs have the capacity to be re-invented in different times and places.

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