

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

"The Chair in the North West: Regional Styles in the 18th & 19th Centuries"

Towneley Hall, Burnley, Lancashire.

Tel: Burnley 24213

Until 28th September, 1986.

Blackburn Museum, Museum Street, Blackburn.

Tel: Blackburn 667130

15th November - 13th December, 1986.

Warrington Museum, Bold Street, Warrington.

Tel: Warrington 30550

20th December, 1986 - 24th January, 1987.

The key to unlocking the vernacular chairmaking tradition of North West England during the Industrial Revolution has resulted from recent research into the numerous name-stamped chairs assembled in the exhibition at Towneley Hall.

Research by Bill Cotton has shown that a distinct regional tradition emerged from a number of workshops in the industrial towns and cities of the region from the late 18th century to well into the Victorian Age. Workshops making rush-seated spindle-back and ladder-back chairs were established by the Bancroft family in Stockport, Salford and Liverpool (between 1725 and 1830), the Leicester family in Macclesfield and Hyde, Cheshire (1816 to 1880), William Worsley in Manchester in the 1770's, the Steele family in Sandbach (1820-40), and the Simpson family in Lancaster (1848-1900).

Progenitors of the ladder and spindle-back regional chairmaking tradition have been included in the exhibition. Although linked by design association, there are some contrasting characteristics in terms of frame construction and finishing techniques.

The 18th century primitive ladder and spindle-backs used cleft timbers instead of machine prepared timbers, frames were painted blue, green, brown or red in contrast to later finishes using varnishes over mahogany and walnut stain or an ebonised finish. Pad footed chairs from the industrial towns of Lancashire and Cheshire contrast with the straight turning used in the front legs of primitive examples and later examples from the Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales. Nipple tops on the back-posts replaced the use of finials on the primitive chairs.

We are introduced to seven main sub-groups of the regional chairmaking traditions, which includes the "double and treble row spindle backs", the "bar-top ladder backs", and the "Empire" rush-seated kitchen chairs. One can but speculate about the competition which no doubt developed between the cabinet makers' workshops producing the "Empire" chairs with their square back-posts and woodturners' workshops producing the spindle and ladder-back chairs.

For me, the landmarks in the exhibition were the 18th and 19th century fan-back chairs, described as "Liverpool" chairs by Gillow of Lancaster in 1801, since they appear to exemplify the vernacular chairmaking tradition of the region. Locally available materials of ash, birch and rush are combined in an ergonomic and aesthetically satisfying

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design solution. There is no sense of the need to absorb or accommodate elements of classical tradition in order to find a market for the chairs.

The variations in chair design produced in any one workshop is well illustrated by the chairs made by the Bancroft and Leicester families. Between 1808 and 1816 the "Stained-Chair Warehouse" of John and David Bancroft in Chapel Street, Salford produced not only three-row ear-back armchairs, but standard two-row spindle-backs, incorporating very finely turned spindles.

The name-stamped chairs made by the Leicester chairmaker included spindle-backs and ladder-backs with turned top or bar-top stay rails.

Furthermore the W.L. stamped chairs associated with the 18th century workshop of William Worsley in Manchester used a standardised frame construction to take either ladders or crossrails with spindles.

An interesting reminder of the local pride in this craft tradition is illustrated by the carnival tableau celebrating the Billinge chair-making tradition at Wigan in the summer of 1932. The exhibition includes a child's chair which is very similar to that made by the Billinge chairmaker, John Jackson, for his grandson in the 1860's. The chair illustrates the high quality of wood turnery achieved by the Billinge chairmakers over a period from 1800 to at least 1870's.

Copies of contemporary paintings and 19th century photographs, used in the exhibition, provide a glimpse of the humble living conditions of folk whose living room included one or two rush-seated chairs. It is not difficult to understand why there are parallels between many of the turnery devices used in the wooden textile machinery and the turnery devices used in chairs owned by the operatives. For example the stay-rails or top rails of the rush-seated ladder-back chairs made in Macclesfield are very reminiscent of the weaver's picking stick. Likewise the straight ladders used in some of these ladder-backs bare a close resemblance to slub-trolleys used in the Macclesfield silk mills.

There is a sense in which these designs formed part of a new folk culture reflecting the dynamic social and technological change which was creating a new industrial society.