

# The Christopher Gilbert Memorial Lecture

Hans Piena: *The History of the Dutch Ladder-back Chair*

In excess of 200,000 objects make up the collection of the Netherlands Open Air Museum, Arnhem, which is housed in 82 buildings and is dependent upon a staff of 230 and the support of 450 volunteers. At present a further building is under construction near Amersfoort to facilitate further storage space. However this talk by Hans Piena, Curator of Domestic Culture, was primarily focused on the 225 ladder-back chairs out of the 2038 chairs in the chair collection. This study was facilitated by a previous examination of 5,000 genre paintings and drawings, some of which display such chairs especially during the period 1550 to 1660.

The earliest recorded Dutch ladder-back chair, excavated from a site near Rotterdam, has been dated to the thirteenth century. Such four-legged chairs, using riven timbers in their frames to support rush seats, continued to be made well into the seventeenth century. An example of such a ladder-back chair with knob finials is displayed in a seventeenth-century drawing of a lace-maker in the Rijksmuseum. By contrast, examples of three-legged chairs have also been illustrated in paintings between 1480 and 1660.

Genre paintings of Dutch interiors sometimes display family mealtimes with only the adults seated on ladder-back chairs, with children standing at intervals around the dining table, as was the tradition in wealthy households during the seventeenth century. A painting by Judith Leyster, 1635, also displays typical knob features on a low back rush-seated chair. The role of chair-makers is emphasised on guild medals or perhaps trade tokens with makers' names, which were being issued in Rotterdam during this period.

Mention was made of the significant scale of imports of Dutch green chairs to England, based on the Boston Port Records 1600–40, studied by Julian Parker and William Sergeant. Boston was a major port on the coast of Lincolnshire in the seventeenth century. Painted ladder-back chairs in the museum collection will be the subject of future paint analysis.



left to right Thirteenth-century chair, excavated from a site near Rotterdam; a reproduction of what the original would have looked like. Collection of the Netherlands Open Air Museum, Arnhem



Green painted rush-seated ladder-back chair, Dutch, eighteenth century. Collection of the Netherlands Open Air Museum, Arnhem

By the eighteenth century a much wider and diverse customer base had been established in the Netherlands, which is suggested in a painting by Cornelius Troost, 1742. In the foreground there appears to be an out-going employee in the process of carting away his belongings, inclusive of a rush-seated ladder-back chair strapped to the top of a cart, in contrast to the employer standing outside a substantial residence, surrounded by some of his furniture, including a number of cabriole leg chairs, preparing to move out of the city for the summer. A traditional time for such upheavals and changes in employment in Holland was the month of May.

Another feature sometimes found on the rear of the curved top rails of ladder-backs made in the nineteenth century was a numbering system relating to their row position within a church. One example had the number '66'.

By the twentieth century (1920–40) designers were resurrecting what they perceived to be regional style ladder-back or 'farmers' chairs' for a city elite. Such chairs were often heavily carved.

This lecture concluded with a film of the last ladder-back chair-maker at work in Holland, made in 1964. It was noteworthy that Guild regulations only permitted





### Transporting rushes in Holland

the use of ash or cherry in chair frame construction while salt-water or brackish rush was grown and harvested for the purpose of rush seating.

*John Boram*