

Robert Williams: *In search of the elusive Mendlesham chair and other East Anglian Windsor chairs*

The name of the village of Mendlesham in Suffolk has been linked to these enigmatic Windsor chairs for over a century, with what must have started as an oral tradition about the Day family. It has been repeated many times in books about English furniture, although there are slightly different variations depending on whom their authors copied. This research is to try and identify these sources.

The standard one quoted in most bibliographies is R. W. Symonds in *Apollo* magazine in August and November 1935. He quotes a letter from William Hatfield, a partner in the old established firm of antique dealers Green and Hatfield in Ipswich. This is where Daniel Day, wheelwright of Mendlesham and Stonham, and his son, who worked for Thomas Sheraton and then returned to his father's workshop, where they made the chairs, seem to have first appeared in print.

F. Gordon Roe's book on *Windsor Chairs* (1953) states that they were called Scole or Mendlesham chairs, which were the main centres of production. Scole is a village very near Diss on the Norfolk-Suffolk border. From the bibliography it is not clear where this reference comes from. A search of the book, *The Sheraton Period* by A. E. Reviers-Hopkins, vol. IV in a series called *Little Books about Old Furniture* (William Heinemann, 1912), revealed the source. This has two photographs of Mendlesham chairs and includes the notes on 'Early English Bent-wood Chairs' supplied by Messrs. Horsfield Brothers of the East Anglian Galleries, 19, Orchard Street, Portman Square, London:

... of the best form of bent-wood chairs ever made in England are those made from 1780 to 1820 at Mendlesham in Suffolk and Scole in Norfolk, and known as Mendlesham or Norfolk chairs. Tradition has it that they were made by two brothers, who had been apprentices of Sheraton, the great cabinet-maker ... At one time, nearly every farmhouse in Norfolk and Suffolk could boast of several of these chairs.

William Horsfield, who supplied these details, was living in Ipswich from at least 1891 to his death in 1950. These early details come from local antique dealers, who would have been buying these chairs and knew the area in which they found them.