

Triangular Gothic Stools: a Further Note

CHRISTOPHER PICKVANCE

In two recent articles Aidan Harrison has introduced readers to a joined three-sided gothic stool.¹ To place it in context he describes three other joined three-sided stools. Two of these are known only from sale catalogue images. This note concerns the third, which appears as Figure 1 in Harrison's 2017 *Regional Furniture* article and is considered to be earliest and to date from c. 1500. Each side has a pair of openwork cusped gothic arches, and there are simple scratch mouldings on the inside edge of each leg and under the seat rails.

This stool is well-known since it appears as Plate 265 in Tobias Jellinek's *Early British Chairs and Seats*, where it is described as English *circa* 1500. The author writes:

This apparently unique and amazing stool is a truly remarkable survival in spite of fairly extensive restoration. Four out of the six open-fretwork panels are replacements and the top has several replaced pieces. Its design is clearly influenced by earlier Continental furniture but is slightly more restrained in the generally simpler English Gothic style.²

The stool has some provenance. It was shown in the 1962 CINOA Art Treasures exhibition at the V&A and appears in the illustrated catalogue as no.161.³ The text describes the stool as Flemish c. 1500 and as exhibited by S. W. Wolsey. The catalogue description also states that the stool had previously been shown in 1958 by S. W. Wolsey at the Bath Art Treasures Exhibition where it was catalogue no. 341 (Plate 59). No earlier provenance is given.

On the face of it, the Wolsey stool provides a potential precursor to subsequent joined triangular stools. Unfortunately, I have to report that this stool is not what it seems. It was made by a (now deceased) antique dealer acquaintance. He told me in 2007 that he had made it and we discussed it again when Jellinek's book appeared in 2009. I made notes of our discussions. He said that he had taken the design from a French book (though unfortunately I did not ask him which). He also said that he had made a mistake in the carved arcading which no doubt refers to the replacements referred to by Jellinek. The dealer had an earlier connection with S. W. Wolsey which probably explains how it came to be exhibited by him.

This example points up the difficulty of studying furniture from the sixteenth century and earlier. The paucity of surviving examples and the extent of restoration has led to the creation of apparent early furniture, sometimes incorporating original fragments. Some of these pieces appeared in the large-format works of the early twentieth century and found places in the collections of major museums. In March 1983 when the 'oak hutch' shown as Figure 38 in Macquoid's *The Age of Oak* was sold, Victor Chinnery showed it to be made up of a mixture of elements ranging from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century.⁴ The 'oak double hutch' shown as Figure 39 in

¹ Harrison (2017, 2018).

² Jellinek (2009), p. 214.

³ Victoria & Albert Museum (1962), p.23 and Plate 116.

⁴ Norman (1983).

The Age of Oak is in the Metropolitan Museum collection where today it is described as ‘probably nineteenth or twentieth century’.⁵ The V&A has redesignated two chests with parchemin or linenfold panels as nineteenth-century structures using genuine earlier panels.⁶

The purpose of this note is not to question the existence of triangular joined stools. In their 1969 book *Furniture in England: the age of the joiner*, Wolsey and Luff included extracts from a 1556 inventory of the goods at Drayton, a house belonging to Sir William Paget, previously a high state official under Henry VIII. The entry for the ‘parlor’ includes:

One longe table of deale wt. his frame
a large turkey carpet
a square table wt. his frame
a carpit of norish [Norwich] worsted
3 fourmes
12 stoles three corned ioyned
one loe chayre of walnut tree
2 loe square stoles fotestoles⁷

The inventory is attentive to detail and refers elsewhere to joined tables, chairs and cupboards as well as stools. The ‘12 stoles three corned ioyned’ seem likely to refer to triangular joined stools, and if so confirms the existence of such stools in 1556 in England. The question of when joined stools were first made in England is a larger question which is not discussed here.

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<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/> (Victoria & Albert Museum, collections search)

⁵ www.metmuseum.org/art/collection, accession number 09.202.4.

⁶ <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>, accession numbers W.11-1938 and 1750:1, 2-1869.

⁷ Wolsey and Luff (1968), p. 98.