

# The Great Grenadier's Chair

I got the email out of the blue: 'By the way, I've got 'The Chair'. Would you like it?' The person emailing was Angela, my second cousin, who had compiled an impressive family tree going back to our mutual great-great-grandfather Pool Field Davis. Known as 'The Great Grenadier' on account of his size (width as well as height), he fought in the Crimean War. Angela had told my Mum that the GG had had a chair specially made for him and that it was currently in the possession of 'Cousin Peggy in Ticehurst'. I first met Angela after my Mum died in 2006, and then the email arrived.

'The Chair', like the man it was made for, is huge. A standard Windsor lath back chair in all but size, the seat is 2½ inches thick at the edges and 2ft 2 ins (0.67m) wide at the front. The arms are 2ft 7 (0.79m) from the floor, the maximum height of the back is 4ft 1½ (1.26m) and the massive turned legs have a maximum diameter of 3½ inches. By comparison our 'normal' Windsor chair has a seat 1¼ inches thick, 1ft 5¼ (0.44m) wide at the front, arms 2ft 4¼ (0.72m) from the floor and a maximum height of 3ft 4½ (1.03m).

The side stretchers and the double cross stretchers have very simple turnings; one side stretcher has had a new section spliced in at one end. The arms have two supports, a heavy curved splat and a much more delicate turned spindle made from a darker wood. The chair back has six laths, two of them pegged top and bottom (the third and the sixth from the left when viewed from behind). The underside of the seat is painted black and there are no discernible maker's marks.

Pool Field Davis, born in Inkberrow, Worcestershire in 1820, enlisted in the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards in 1837 aged 18. In 1841 he was in barracks in Hanover Square, London. In 1844 he married Anne Price at Milton-by-Gravesend, Kent; children were born in Warwick in 1845, Worcester in 1849 and London in 1851 and 1853. In February 1854 he embarked for the Crimean War, accompanied by his wife who served as one of Florence Nightingale's nurses. They arrived home in April 1855 and their fifth child was baptised later the same year in Portsmouth. They then settled in Claines just north of Worcester, where he set up a stone masonry business, the family trade for generations. Two more children were born there in 1857 and 1861. Strangely the official documents say that he wasn't discharged from the army until 8 June 1858. As is typical of many soldiers who have been through the nightmare of war, he didn't settle. In 1861 he is listed as the first Drill Sergeant at Marlborough College, although still working as a stone mason in Worcestershire; an 1865 bankruptcy notice lists him as stone mason of North Barbourne (near Claines). In 1868 he was granted a licence to run a pub in Sheffield, but must have moved up there the previous year as his eldest daughter was married there in 1867. He finally settled in London, living in Tower Hamlets in 1871 and West Ham in 1881; both censuses list him as Chelsea Pensioner and Insurance Agent. He died on 6 December 1888 aged 68, at the home of his youngest son in Bristol, a small terraced house; the story is that he was so large that his coffin wouldn't fit down the stairs but had to be lowered from the upstairs window.



*left* Windsor lath back chair made for Pool Field Davis, c. 1870s or 1880s. Photo Linda Hall

*above* Detail of the arm with its two different supports. Photo Linda Hall

It is perhaps most likely that he commissioned 'The Chair' sometime after his return from the Crimea. It is clearly designed for him when he was at his maximum weight, but he was ill (dysentery presumably) in the Crimea and lost so much weight that people didn't recognise him. He was still slim in 1861 when a photo was taken at Marlborough College. Perhaps he had it made in the 1870s or 1880s when his life became more stable and he had settled in London. A chair attributed to High Wycombe *circa* 1840–1880 (Fig. TV193, p. 88 of Bill Cotton's *The English Regional Chair*) has the same shaping on the arms, the double cross stretchers and two underarm supports (although both are turned) and seems a close match. If anyone can shed any further light on its likely date and provenance I would be most grateful.

*Linda Hall*