

Two comb-back chairs, West Highland type, Auchendrain Township, Argyll, Scotland

The chance to view these comb-back, or cutty, stools/chairs arose on a visit in March 2020 to the newly instated store at Auchendrain, with Rachael Thomas, Curator.

Chairs were variously known as comb-back, stick-back, spindle-back or, in Scotland, cutty, as in 'cutty sark', an eighteenth-century Scots term meaning short undergarments. Robert Burns used the term to describe the scanty underclothes of the witch Nannie in *Tam o'Shanter* (1790):

Her cutty sark, o' Paisley harn,
That while a lassie she had worn,
In longitude tho' sorely scanty,
It was her best, and she was vauntie.

In the West Highlands of Scotland these chairs combine traditional skills: stopped and through wedged joints, rounded and tapered spindles or sticks from the hedgerow, and D-shaped seats. Most commonly arm bows are from a found shape, usually knife and scraper finished. Scarf jointing of split bent branches is found in South West Scotland as in Wales. Steam bending is known but rare.

The analysis of construction and finishes given below was made by Dave Hutchinson, a former member of RFS, following a visit to Auchendrain by the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group in 2008. He was the inspiration for bringing together this article. Among Dave's publications are *The Sutherland chair* (2002) and contributions to Bernard Cotton's *Scottish Vernacular Furniture* (2008).

Chair, possibly early twentieth-century, oak

This is the only chair which could have been made in quantity, possibly by Campbells of Bonawe, who are known to have made this type of chair into the twentieth-century.

Found in the township before it became a museum (1968).

Accession No. 60.A.06.19

Construction and Finishes: This oak chair is made using a combination of stopped and through wedged socket joints. The arm bow is a found shape, simple, rounded and shaped by knife and scraper finish. The spindles are well rounded and tapered top and bottom. The D-shaped seat is chamfered on the lower edges. The socket joints to the arm bow and legs are wedged. The legs are square in section and splayed for stability.



Chair, possibly early twentieth-century by Campbells of Bonawe. H 29 in (736 mm), W 21 in (533 mm), seat H 17 in (432 mm). *Auchendrain Township (60.A.06.19). Photo Crissie White*



Detail, showing the chamfered lower edges of the seat. *Photo Crissie White*

The original knife and scraper finish would give a reflective surface and deep patina. Latterly painted over, this has been partially removed by mechanical sanding leaving a rougher surface that appears dull and lifeless. The sanding could have removed traces of joint settlement and protrusion. Careful restoration with a cabinet scraper and linseed oil could return it to its original condition.

Child's chair, possibly early eighteenth-century, ash arm bow, red pine spindles, elm seat, legs of various hedgerow woods.

Condition: Rough repairs at an unknown date show both that survival of a much-loved chair was important and also judgement in the use of limited timber resources to hand.

Accession No. 83.H.14.01



Child's chair, possibly early eighteenth-century. H 17½ in (444 mm), seat W 19 in (482 mm), seat H 9½ in (241 mm). *Auchendrain Township* (83.H.14.01). *Photo Crissie White*



Detail, showing the repairs on the underside of the seat. *Photo Crissie White*

Construction and Finishes: A delightful child's chair constructed using traditional through socket joints, and with clear use of green timber. The arm bow, from a found shape, is knifed and scraper finished, the ends shaped to asymmetrical scrolls according to the available timber. Eight spindles, of ten originals (see photo of arm bow ends), are replacements and crudely knifed, either in an over-zealous attempt at conservation or by an insufficiently skilled repairer. The seat is D-shaped with a large diagonal shake. Crude attempts to counteract this and reinforce the seat show on the underside. The legs appear to be replacements and include unconventional repairs. At some point it has been shellacked, sadly losing its original patina.

With thanks to Dave Hutchinson, Bob Clark (Director of Auchendrain), Rachael Thomas, who provided access and helped to record dimensions and photography, David Jones, and Liz Hancock.

Crissie White