

Myth or reality?

Human nature being what it is, it is only natural for each generation of historians to view the preceding generation's work with scepticism. This is as true of furniture historians as of historians in general, and Adam Bowett's discrediting of the misguided dating of early walnut furniture is a case in point.

RW Symonds was one of the leading early twentieth-century furniture historians. In his 1940 work *Masterpieces of English Furniture and Clocks* he illustrates a mid-eighteenth-century mahogany side chair which he describes as being characteristic of the counties of Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmorland and Durham, featuring 'stump back legs, heavy shaped seat rail and workmanship and material of good quality'. He also refers to the tenons of the side rails going 'right through the member forming the leg and upright of the back'. He comments on the fact that these features are shared with chairs from Pennsylvania. From subsequent discussion it appears that he means Philadelphia, though there are chairs from Pennsylvania made with through tenons also. He postulates that craftsmen from the Northern counties may have emigrated to America, carrying these regional features with them.

The chair is notable for the features mentioned by Symonds but equally for the fact that the back legs are not only of stump format but also exhibit idiosyncratic shaping and the stretcher has a rather individual style of turning.

We have no way of knowing on what basis Symonds attributed this chair to the Northern counties. Was its source known to him or the owner? Its attributes cannot be ascribed to a regional basis unless other documented chairs bearing the same features come to light, bringing reality to what until then we must regard as myth. Maybe an RFS member can throw some light on the matter.



Chair attributed by R. W. Symonds to the northernmost counties of England. *Photo from R. W. Symonds' Masterpieces of English Furniture and Clocks (1940)*