

No Prior Example?

In 2020 I drew attention to the apparent absence of stamped side chairs, as opposed to armchairs, made by the Prior family of Uxbridge, Windsor-chair makers. No one has recorded or published a stamped bow-back side chair of the triple splat design with turned central roundel in curved symmetrical arrangement.⁵ Such armchairs and side chairs with roundels, whether stamped or not, are routinely, and not always accurately, attributed to members of the Prior family.

Since that article was published, two RFS members have drawn my attention to more stamped Robert Prior designs. William Sergeant has unearthed from his archive four pictures of two chairs which were sold in a Lincolnshire auction house over ten years ago. The photos are of low resolution but have been edited in Photoshop so that at least the overall design is clear. The armchair and side chair are of a design not previously recorded. The armchair has a tablet-shaped curved stay rail passing over the sawn back uprights, above a broad cross rail. The sawn curved scroll-shaped arms join shaped and flattened sawn underarm supports mortised into the sides of the seat. All four legs are turned with five rings at the top, with the flare of the top leg turning almost giving the appearance of a sixth ring. The lower



Detail of the armchair showing the distinctive turning of the stretchers.
Photo William Sergeant



Armchair by Robert Prior of Uxbridge, found in Lincolnshire.
Photo William Sergeant



Side chair found in Oxfordshire, stamped 'Robert Prior Maker Uxbridge', showing the distinctive graining of the elm seat. *Photo John Boram*



The maker's stamp on the chair found in Oxfordshire. *Photo John Boram*

parts of the legs have a thin double ring above a dumpy bell-like turning terminating in a straight foot. The unusual H-form stretcher is decorated on both side- and cross-stretchers with a central barrel turning symmetrically met on either side by bell-like turnings which echo the lower leg turning. The side chair is of entirely similar design, absent the arms and arm supports. It is lost in the mists of time whether the picture of the stamp reading ROBERT • PRIOR MAKER • UXBRIDGE is from the armchair or the side chair. Either way, it has been impressed upside down.

Entirely by coincidence John Boram has also kindly sent me two pictures of a stamped Robert Prior side chair, recorded by him many years ago in Oxfordshire. It turns out to be of identical design to the pair recorded by William Sergeant. Even the stamp is also impressed upside down. Tim Garland pointed out to me that the elm seat of all three chairs has the grain running from front to back and that all three have a group of growth rings in the middle at the saddle. Is it possible that the three seats were made from adjacent slices of the very same elm tree?

This group of chairs appears unique. Many Thames Valley chairs in Cotton (1990) have three rings turned at the top of the leg.⁶ None has four, let alone five. The scroll-shaped arms are also a rare feature.⁷ The stretcher turnings are equally unusual. Robert Prior senior died in 1853 and Robert Prior junior not much later in 1859; these chairs have an 1840s or 1850s feel, whether it was father or son who made them.

I am grateful to William Sergeant and John Boram for drawing these chairs to my attention. It remains true that no Prior bow-back side chair decorated with

roundels has yet been recorded but now we have (at least) one stamped Prior side chair of a previously unrecorded type!

Julian Parker

⁵ Julian Parker, 'Windsor Chairs, Children's Carts, German Stools, Rustic Chairs, Summerhouses and Perambulators: The Webbs (and Bunce and Carter), Dells, Priors and Trotmans', *Regional Furniture*, XXXIV, 2020, pp. 123–124.

⁶ Dr B. D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, (ACC, Woodbridge, 1990), pp. 32–99.

⁷ Figure TV110, *ibid.* p. 68, seems to be a lone example.