

Taylor-made Chairs from Stamford

As vernacular furniture historians, we are fortunate in that Windsor chair makers from Lincolnshire occasionally impressed their name and town on the seat of their chairs. Consequently, unsigned examples can easily be assigned to the rightful workshop where they were produced. If a Master chooses not to sign any of his chairs then it becomes extremely difficult, but not impossible, to successfully identify the output from his workshop. One way that this can be done is by identifying a group of chairs with similar features and collecting the provenances which go with them, then trying to establish the region or town as to where they may have been made, based on the collected evidence.

A long time ago, while collecting and studying Lincolnshire chairs, it became apparent to me that there was a distinct design feature that appeared on a group of chairs, none of which had ever been recorded with a maker's name impressed upon it. The feature that united this group was the emblematic front leg turnery motif and at least half a dozen appear in the Lincolnshire chapter of Cotton's *The English Regional Chair*, none of which are attributed to one particular workshop. I had become used to seeing these turnings on items offered for sale in Lincolnshire auctions and antique shops, especially in the south of the county and I was determined to solve the mystery of who made them and where they were produced.

The first image compares two front legs of Lincolnshire side chairs, produced in different workshops. The left hand one is stamped with the maker's mark of MARSH SLEAFORD whereas the right hand one is unmarked. While both have the ring & cove design to the upper part of the leg, the unsigned one has a



Comparison between two Lincolnshire chair legs; on the left a chair made by Marsh of Sleaford, on the right an unmarked chair with a ball-like ring.
Photo William Sergeant



Lincolnshire chair made entirely of ash with a similar ball-like ring moulding to the legs. *Photo William Sergeant*

much enlarged ring, almost like a ball, whereas the MARSH has a very slim and flattened ring. Secondly, the middle plain section of each is distinctly different; the sides of the unsigned one are largely parallel and tapering towards the foot whereas the other has a graceful taper top and bottom with no hint of parallel sides.



One of a set of three comb-back Lincolnshire chairs with similar mouldings. *Photo William Sergeant*

The second image shows a simple and typical Lincolnshire Windsor armchair, made entirely of ashwood that I purchased at the Grantham saleroom of Golding Young in August 2015, with a provenance of being consigned from a local house. It features the large ball-like turning to the front leg, like the first image.



A Lincolnshire chair originally purchased in Bourne near Stamford. Photo William Sergeant

The third picture is one of a set of three comb back Lincolnshire side chairs that I purchased from the Stamford saleroom of Batemens in April 2015, again consigned from a local house. The distinctive ball-like turning is clearly evident, along with parallel sides to the middle section of the front leg.

The last shows one of a group of kitchen chairs that I found advertised on Ebay during October 2014. On collection, the vendor stated that they were purchased from a second-hand furniture dealer in Bourne, which is nine miles to the North East of Stamford, several years before. Note once again the ball-like feature on the front leg turning and the parallel turning to the middle section. It is all of ashwood except for the seat which is made from beechwood.²

All his evidence suggests to me that these chairs were manufactured in the same workshop while the provenance of them, along with others that I had seen, indicates that they were produced in the south of the county, maybe in the Stamford area.

Several years ago, my research led me to the conclusion that the tradition of Windsor chair making in the Grantham area was started by Roger Taylor in about 1800. His wife Sophia took over the business after Roger's death in 1802 and continued to expand production until 1810. During that time, she was helped by her two sons. Firstly John, who ran his own workshop between 1808–1811 and secondly by William,

who also produced chairs from his own workshop during 1811–1815. Both John and William had left the Windsor chair-making profession by 1815 and spent the rest of their lives as mail coach guards. The impact of the Taylor family on the production of vernacular furniture for this short period was profound but not well known, when a huge quantity of these items were made. I gave a talk to the Regional Furniture Society in London during the spring of 2019 on this very subject, a copy of which can be found on YouTube titled 'The Beginning of Windsor Chair making in Grantham'.

However, what has never been published before is that John Taylor had a son called James, who was baptised in Grantham in 1815. As a young man, he went on to serve an apprenticeship in the workshop of Windsor-chair maker William Shirley in Grantham about 1829–1836.³ In the census of that town for 1841 he was noted as a chair maker of Sandpit Lane. However by 1846 it appears that he had moved his family 20 miles down The Great North Road to Stamford as he was noted as working in North Street of that town. During the following nine years he was mentioned in the parish registers on the baptisms of his children as a Chairmaker of North Street, Stamford. As you might expect, he was noted in the Stamford census of 1851, as a chair maker of North Street employing two men, and in 1861 as a chair manufacturer, now employing three men and two boys. The 1871 census has him living in East Street and working with his son aged 32, who is also a chair maker. Eventually his death was announced in the Stamford Mercury in 1875, aged 59.

In conclusion, James Taylor was a third generation Master Chairmaker who had been raised in a family steeped in the tradition of making chairs, producing his wares for well over 35 years of which 30 years were spent in Stamford. The output of his workshop must have been prodigious, running into many thousands, yet not one single item has ever been recorded with his name impressed upon it. The circumstantial evidence that I have collected over several years would lead me to conclude that the chairs that I find in the south of the county, with the distinctive ball turning to the front leg as well as the parallel turning to the middle section shown here, were in fact produced by the workshop of James Taylor in Stamford during the period 1846–1875. Several other models of Windsor chairs with the distinct ball-like turning to the front leg and attributed to the workshop of James Taylor of Stamford have been found; they will be illustrated in a later article.

William Sergeant
Lincolnshire Chair Museum

² Adam Bowett confirmed that the seat was made from beechwood. He pointed out that beech trees, while indigenous to Britain, had not naturally spread up to Lincolnshire at this time. This is reinforced by a survey that I carried out, of dozens of Lincolnshire side chairs both signed and unsigned, that showed over 85% of the seats were made from ashwood, while this is the only chair that I have ever found being made of beechwood.

³ William Shirley snr started his apprenticeship in 1808 under John Taylor and finished in 1815 after serving the second half of his time under William Taylor. James Taylor served his apprenticeship with William Shirley snr during the period 1829–1836, which overlaps with William Shirley jnr who served his time during 1831–1838 under his father William snr.