

BAFRA Chair Day – Part One: Wycombe Museum

To find out how the ‘Buckinghamshire Weed’, or Beech trees of the Chilterns, led to a major industry for a small town, producing a staggering 4700 chairs a day at its peak in the 1870s, members of BAFRA gathered at Wycombe Museum in late June.

The Museum is found in a beautiful Grade II listed house and garden dedicated the heritage of High Wycombe and the surrounding area. Here BAFRA members and guests were treated to a lecture by Dr Catherine Grigg, Curator, about the history of the ‘Windsor’ chair. The talk outlined how a localised cottage industry producing humble, vernacular



The beautiful house where the Wycombe Museum is to be found.

chairs became a major producer of furniture that conquered the UK and beyond. Today, little is left of this phenomenal enterprise, which declined in the late 20th Century and has just one major producer, Ercol, still in existence today.



*A typical Windsor chair from the area.
Image courtesy of Wycombe Museum.*

We started with the question of what constitutes a ‘Windsor’ chair. Most people will be familiar with the term and be able to picture such a thing. In essence, it is a stool with a back added but the range of design options was wide. The chairs have the seat as a linking element into which the legs are inserted beneath, and the back (and sometimes arms) into the seat top. The joints typically used were socket and wedge and blind tenon. The back can be a comb back made with spindles, but often chairs from the Chilterns/Thames valley feature a splat at the centre of the back, with either a top crest or bent ash hoop. Splats come in many varieties, but the wheel back pattern was developed in the area (other regions did copy the wheelback design, although it is most associated with the Wycombe area). The legs would have stretchers for strength. Often the front stretcher was curved into what is variously known as a Cow Horn, Crinoline or Spur.

Chairs of the Windsor type were known from the 17th and 18th Centuries. Sometimes these were painted and used as garden chairs by the gentry. Chairs were not commonplace in humbler households which would only be used by the head of the house. These may have had arms but did not come in sets as dining chairs.

The /Upside-Down Chair in the Museum. It was thought be made for the garden and if the seat got wet in the rain it could be inverted ready for use again immediately after the rain had stopped!



The name Windsor Chair is thought to be due to the main route of transport. Chairs made in the Thames Valley were taken to Windsor for onward shipping by barge up the Thames to supply the London market and beyond. Similarly, bricks made from the local clay which do not burn easily were known as Windsor bricks.



Chairs by Glenister piled high and packed with straw for onward transportation. Image courtesy of Wycombe Museum.



The Museum holds the famous 'Pitt' Chair which dates from the 1740s and is an early example of a Windsor chair. It is thought to have been made by John Pitt of Upton cum Chalvey, Slough. Painted black and with cabriole legs, the chair unusually features the City of Bath coat of arms on the splat. It is thought it may have been ordered by

someone travelling on the coaching route from London to Bath. The attribution to John Pitt has been given, as it is very similar to a period chair which has this maker's label.



What started as a cottage industry, making vernacular furniture in the 17th/18th Century, began to develop in the late 1700, with a local military recruitment audit of 1798 noting 58 men carrying out work associated with chair-making out of 970 eligible men aged 15-60. The local ready supply of native woods used for manufacture – beech, elm, ash and sometimes yew and cherry, together with good transport routes and an increasing population in Britain - saw businesses starting to spout up to meet demand. The first of these was Treacher's in the 1790s advertising Windsor chairs – Dyed and Fancy (*rush/caned seated*).

In the early 1800s the development of 'factories' (often family run businesses), such as Treacher, Glenister and Edwin Skull, increased rapidly, and the 1860s there were around 150 workshops and factories. The method of manufacture, however, remained rooted in the vernacular right up into the 20th Century. This meant the chairs were mostly hand-made by various specialist skilled workers, pieceworkers and outworkers. The makers could produce a high volume of chairs, quickly responding to increasing demand. Chairs became varied in style or made for a specific purpose. Crucially the chairs became affordable to an increasingly numerous and wealthy population arising from the Industrial Revolution. One commission in 1873 was for an order of 19,300 chairs for an Evangelical Meeting in London. Apparently High Wycombe came to a standstill as all the makers combined to help meet the order, which is said to have taken just two weeks to fulfil.



Poster by Edwin Skull displaying the range of chairs they could make. Image courtesy of Wycombe Museum.

The trades of the chair makers were:

The Turners (often referred to as Bodgers) -who produced the legs, stretchers and spindles by pole lathe from green timber in a shelter in the local abundant beech woods.

Bottomers/Benchmen/Framers – who would make non-turned elements, saddle seats and splats, and who would assemble the chairs.

Outworkers – often women – who made the caned and rush seats.

Sometimes initials can be found on an old chair, but this is not believed to indicate the manufacturer/business but the framer, who, as a pieceworker, would record his work to ensure he was paid accurately. So skilled were the specialists that much was done by eye, such as boring the holes for the seats. Using a simple, specially shaped wooden bib, the craftsman would know the precise angle to drill for each leg, using a bit and brace.

More on the various crafts mentioned above will be outlined in Part Two of the day.

High Wycombe was very proud of its significance to chair-making in the UK and beyond. In 1877 a Chair Arch was made in the town, which was reputedly thrown up overnight. The arch was created for a visiting Queen Victoria, with another put up in 1884 for the Prince of Wales, which has so many chairs it completely hid the structure. This tradition continued into the 20th Century with an arch in 1962 for Queen Elizabeth II used chairs by G-Plan, Ercol and other major manufacturers of the town.



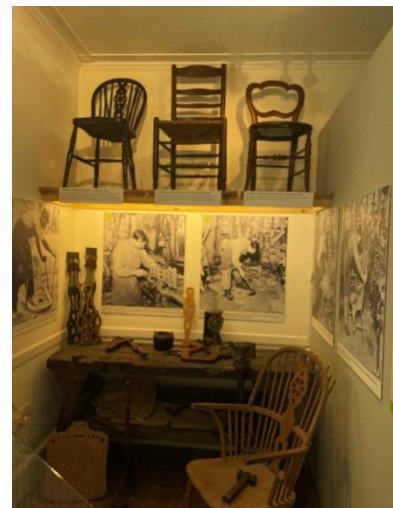
The 1877 Chair Arch
Image Courtesy of Wycombe Museum.

The decline of the industry began in the late 20th Century. Increased mechanisation and efficient modern practices, increased costs and cheaper imported furniture, etc. saw larger factories close or move elsewhere and traditional makers close their workshops. The last three bodgers hung up their tools in the 1960s and today there is little left of the chair and furniture manufacturing industry in the area. A walking tour map with key sites is available from the Museum.

A tour of the Chair Museum followed our lecture, with Dr Griggs on hand to enable BAFRA members to closely examine the chairs.



The museum boasts over 270 examples of chair, with around 50 on display representing the chairs of the area, as well as many specifically designed chairs, that provide an excellent resource for the researcher. There are also recreations of a work bench and an example of the turner's pole lathe.





A charming arch arrangement of children's chairs (left) including high chairs and potty chairs.

Chairs on show include a fine Yew wood chair (right),



and many specialist chairs such as:



a chapel chair with iron brackets (for holding an umbrella), book rack and hassock rack,

a mess room chair with only one arm allowing the occupant to sit down whilst keeping a sword to hand (seen top centre),



and a teacher's chair (right) with long legs and a convenient footrest – no doubt our educators would appreciate that today!



Professional caner, Fiona, takes the opportunity to examine the underside of a caned chair. (image left)



Exhibits included a display of miniatures and more modern examples by 20th Century local manufacturers, such as G-Plan and Ercol.



A prototype of an Ercol chair being scrutinised by BAFRA members.



Our morning at Wycombe Museum concluded with a fine lunch of sandwiches and refreshments before BAFRA's afternoon visit to the High Wycombe Chair Making Museum at the workshops of Kraft in Wood, where the group learned more of the skills and processes for making Windsor chairs, which is detailed in Part Two.

(Images reproduced Courtesy of Wycombe Museum.)