

## BAFRA Chair Day – Part 2

Having followed the brown tourist signs marked Chair Making Museum, BAFRA members found themselves on a rather unprepossessing trading estate in High Wycombe for the second part of our Chair Day.

The KraftinWood unit gave little clue of what lay in store here. Greeted by Robert Bishop, PRT (Register of Professional Turners), who briefly showed us his huge electric lathes and the turned articles he produces, the group were led into the inner sanctum housing the High Wycombe Chair Making Museum.

With the walls flanked on one side with antique examples of the tools of the trade and a stunning array of antique chairs along the other, we were invited to choose a chair to sit in. And what comfortable chairs! An entertaining talk of over two hours about the chair-making process ensued,



without an ache or pain at the end of it. A testament to the turners, bottomers and benchmen (and in some cases, women caners), who really knew how to make a chair! Photography was only allowed for personal use, so you will have to visit the museum for the full chair-making history experience and for now enjoy these word pictures of how a vernacular chair such as that shown on the left was made.



*Members sitting comfortably!*

*Robert Bishop shows a typical Windsor armchair before going through the making processes.*

## Making the turned elements

Robert began with tales of the skilled artisans who came to be known as bodgers. For over 200 years, using only simple tools, these men would produce the turned elements for Windsor chairs - legs, stretchers and spindels - from trees freshly felled in the plentiful native woodlands in the Chilterns. 'Bodger' has become a pejorative term possibly by conflating the term bodge (a job done using the tools/materials available) with the word botch (to do a poor job)? The workers referred to themselves as chair leg turners but were referenced as 'bodgers' throughout the talk as a term of respect and common parlance.

A bodger would select and rent at an agreed price two stands of wood a year from a local landowner. A stand was around a hectare (or 2.5 acres) with around 180-200 trees - two stands was about a year's worth of work. The deal was that the bodger was to leave no mess and would start to pay rent after they had sold their first week's worth of product. The trees were felled and worked in-situ as unseasoned 'green' wood.

Typically, a wooden shelter with pitched roof and four corner legs would be set up with a bent sapling entering at the front apex and extending to the rear of the structure to power a pole lathe. Using a foot-operated treadle to turn the reciprocating lathe, the green wood would be turned with chisels into chair legs, stretchers (which prevent the legs from splaying) and spindles. This however was the final process of preparation. The bodgers were not itinerant (as compared to charcoal burners), nor would they sleep in the shelter - there was no bed inside - but return home each night. The shelter gave protection from the elements whilst the bodger was at work, particularly when at the lathe.

First the trees would have been felled, sometimes with the assistance of a nearby sawyer working in a neighbouring stand, using a two-handled cross-cut saw. The bodger sold the larger beech trees on to the sawyer. The remaining felled trees would be cut into shorter log sections. An 18" long stick (no tape measures here), which was generally the length of a chair leg, would serve as a guide to mark the length of each log. A measuring stick belonging to Silas, an old bodger pictured in the museum, is on display there. The log would then be cleaved along the grain into around 8 wedges using



*Robert astride the Shaving Horse*

a special L-shaped splitting tool, called a Froe, hit with a large mallet (beetle) on the back of the blade. The resulting triangular shaped pieces of wood were known as billets. These should be straight, not crooked (as in many a pub name). The billet was then roughly shaped using a side axe which was sharpened on one side only and had a short handle, so the worker could get near to the wood but not injure his leg. Once the billets were a little rounder, they would be put by the shaving horse. The craftsman would sit astride his 'horse', using a leg-operated clamp to hold the billet in place. The worker then used a two-handle drawknife pulled towards him to shave down the wood, turning it as he went by releasing the clamp. This process made the billet more rounded for turning. Often the bodger would sit in the entrance way of this shelter on the shaving horse and work through a pile of billets. As each billet was completed, he would throw it over his shoulder towards the back of the shelter where the pole lathe was sited.

Once the bodger had run out of billets, he would move to his pole lathe for final finishing. The designs could be straight or of baluster form with varying numbers of beads or rings for decoration. Whilst legs could be shaped to a basic guide, none would be identical as they were individually made. Once fitted in the chair, the legs would of course match to the eye, such was the skill of the turners. At the end of the week the turned elements would be sold and delivered to the various workshops around High Wycombe to be used for making up the chairs.



*At the pole lathe.*

The shavings produced would be piled around the sides of the shelter to give more protection to the inside. Once the immediate area of trees was cleared, it was time to move on to another section of the bodger's stand. With help from friends each at one corner the shelter would be lifted and carried to a new location. Literally, he upped sticks and moved.

### **Seat making**

The seats (generally in Elm) were sourced from local sawyers in the woodlands, who would saw them through and through (lengthways) and cut the lengths into square blanks. Next the 'Bottomers' would get to work. The seats were generally shaped like saddles for comfort. The shaping would be done by the bottomer using a long-handled adze. He would stand on the seat to hold it down to the floor and swing the adze between his legs to cut the saddle shape. This job was not without risk, and it was common for these men to injure their feet. An old man, William Neville, well known in the town at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was called, 'Billy No Toes'. It was said a good bottomer would make 24 seats before breakfast!

### **Legs, Splats, Bows and Assembling the chair**

Old images of craftsmen outside the workshops often feature the Benchmen, who worked there. Some men in these photos can be seen to be wearing a strange wooden 'bib' hung from their necks and tied with leather and across the chest. These curious bibs were an essential tool for these men. The rectangular bib had a round scooped hole in the centre. This scoop would be where the head of the brace would sit to drill the holes in the seat to take the legs. The bib effectively gave the craftsmen a third hand. One hand would hold the seat down and the other hand would turn the brace to

make the hole. The bib (third hand) would hold the brace at the correct angle and exert pressure as the benchman leant over to drill the four holes for the splayed legs. This was all done by sight and experience. No jigs or angle setters needed, and the bib made for speedy work.

Boys, as young as 11 would often have the laborious and boring tasks in the workshop, including the making of back splats using bow saws and riffles. It wasn't until the age of 17 that a boy would be ready to become a benchman. The wheelback splat is closely associated with High Wycombe and the design registered to protect their interests. To hear the tale of how the iconic wheelback splat came about and the measures the men of High Wycombe would take to protect the design is best heard direct from our host, and I don't wish to steal his thunder!

The Framer would assemble all the parts by push fitting them together, using wedged tenons for more expensive chairs. With Standard chairs, the legs would be a tight fit into the seat, requiring no glue. Glue was not used until exporting began to hot countries and the climate would cause the chairs to fall apart. Once house boilers and central heating became the norm in the UK, glue started to be used here as well. 'Fancy' chairs would often have bows or curved elements as part of the frame. Whilst the bodgers could make a bow by gradually bending a stick of ash around a former, this may take around a week or so to accomplish. The advent of steaming wood in the workshops in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century greatly sped up the process. A chair with five bows (as seen on Page 1) would command around six times the price of a plain chair.

## **Conclusion**

And so, this was largely how the chairs were made that saw a small town in Buckinghamshire become arguably the chair making capital of the world for nearly two centuries. Using only simple tools and manpower, thousands upon thousands of chairs were made and exported around the British Isles and Empire, which could be said to have led to the democratisation of the chair as a piece of furniture - no longer the preserve of the wealthy classes as in previous centuries and affordable to the masses.

For more local social history and tales such as: how the lacemakers turned their skills to seat caning, how Treacher married an orphaned farmer's daughter and eventually set up the first chairmaking firm, how the railways failed to monopolise the delivery of chairs whereas the horse and cart and then the steam engine did, to see images of the chairmakers and examples of the humble tools of their trade, not to mention a wide array of the chairs and chair designs, a visit to the Museums of High Wycombe is a must. It gives a small glimpse into the proud past and history of a town that now shows few remnants of this 'cottage industry' that came to lead the world.

***Images used with the kind permission of Robert Bishop RPT, trading as KraftinWood - inc High Wycombe Chair Making Museum CIC, Contemporary Art Gallery & Craft Gift Shop.***