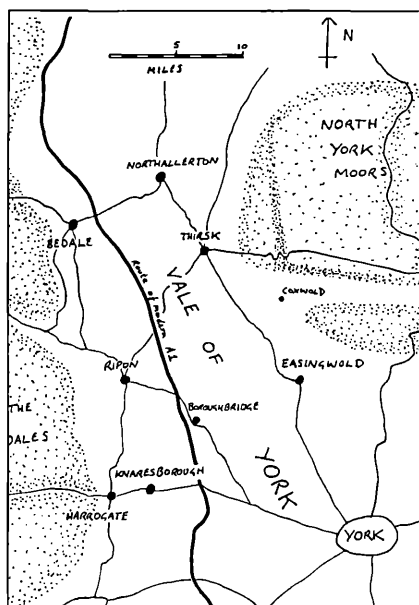


# WINDSOR CHAIRS FROM THE VALE OF YORK

Adam Bowett



1. Outline map of the Vale of York. The Windsor chairs discussed in this essay are found predominantly within the area enclosed by the line York-Harrogate- Bedale-Northallerton - York.

The published literature on Windsor chairs made in Yorkshire portrays them as a nineteenth-century phenomenon, developing out of the northward migration of High Wycombe chairmaking after 1800.<sup>1</sup> The typology of Yorkshire Windsors constructed by Ivan Sparkes, Bernard Cotton and others has established clear stylistic and technical links between Windsor chairs made in the workshops of the South and West Ridings and the East Midlands manufactory based around Worksop and Retford, which itself was founded by Wycombe-trained chair-makers settling in Nottinghamshire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Within a few decades chairmakers in the industrial areas of south and west Yorkshire had achieved a formidable output, and had established an identifiable Yorkshire style. The 'standard' Yorkshire Windsor is typified by the work of the Low Cringles workshop, near Keighley, which was published by Christopher Gilbert in 1995.<sup>2</sup> But while these chairs have characteristics peculiar to Yorkshire, there is no disputing their debt to Nottinghamshire and, by extension, to High Wycombe. They are undoubtedly a manifestation of 'regional' chair-making, but they cannot be said to be 'vernacular' in the true sense of the word.

## 2 WINDSOR CHAIRS FROM THE VALE OF YORK



2. Chair, late eighteenth century. Ash and oak spindles with sycamore seat. Original dark green paint beneath several subsequent finishes. This chair is unusual in having widely splayed rear legs, but the front leg turning profile is typical of many examples.

Provenance: house clearance sale in Bedale

*Private collection*



3. Side view of figure 2, showing the marked rearward curve of the top bow. This feature appears to be unique to Vale of York Windsor chairs

Beyond the coalfields of south Yorkshire and the industrial hubs of the Aire and Calder valleys, Yorkshire is a predominantly rural county, and the North Riding in particular is devoid of any large industrial centre. The products of the West Riding chairmakers can certainly be found here in abundance, but alongside them, languishing in small museums, in pubs, farmhouses and private collections, is a store of unclassified, locally-provenanced Windsors which do not fit the mainstream Yorkshire typology. They range in type from primitive comb-backs to sophisticated splat-back 'Chippendale' designs; from the bulky 'smoker's bow', clearly modelled on factory-made examples, to high bow-back chairs of surprising elegance and comfort.

This article is concerned with only one of these types, whose incidence is highest within a relatively small area in the Vale of York roughly defined by the line York-Harrogate-Bedale-Northallerton-York (Figure 1). Although varying much in detail, they share one feature which appears to be unique among British Windsor chairs. The top bow is round in section and has a two-dimensional or compound curve; it is not only arched, as are all Windsor top bows, but it is also curved backwards (Figures 2 & 3). This gives the chair a barrel-shaped back which is amazingly comfortable, and suggests a sophistication of design which belies their often crude appearance.

Other characteristic but not necessarily definitive traits are; a strongly raked posture, which is not entirely the result of wear on the back feet; a broad D-shaped seat, usually of sycamore or ash, rather than elm; substantial legs, widely splayed fore and aft, dowelled through the seat and usually cross-wedged; idiosyncratic turning profiles to the legs and leading arm supports which bear no clear relation to other regional types. Almost invariably, the chairs were originally painted, the most common colour being dark green, with light blue also popular.

Within the broad parameters outlined above there are many variations, but the most obvious division is between chairs with curved split-laths under the arms and those without; in the latter case the leading arm supports are usually decoratively turned. Although hard evidence is lacking, I have assumed that the former type is earlier in date than the latter, since the split lath appears to mimic the curved underarm supports of fashionable Georgian elbow chairs, whereas the turned arm supports presumably relate to those on nineteenth-century Windsors made elsewhere in Britain. The same broad division occurs in other areas. In the Thames valley, chairs by eighteenth-century makers such as John Pitt and Richard Hewitt have curved underarm supports whereas nineteenth-century manufacturers increasingly favoured turned supports.<sup>3</sup> The change ultimately derives from changes in fashionable metropolitan chairmaking, in which the swept-back underarm supports of the mid-Georgian era gave way to the baluster-turned supports of the neo-classical and Regency periods.

It is possible that the earliest Vale of York chairs with split lath arm supports date from the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This hypothesis is supported by paint analysis. The chair in Figures 2 & 3 has had five successive top finishes, as well as three different undercoats. The earliest topcoat is a typical late Georgian dark-green casein-based paint over a grey-green undercoat. Two subsequent topcoats were of an early nineteenth-century leaf-green and a late nineteenth-century Viridian green. In the twentieth century the chair was repainted with a black gloss, and finally with an opaque brown varnish.<sup>4</sup> The combination of grey-green undercoat with dark green topcoat as original finish has been found on a number of the chairs in this group.

#### 4 WINDSOR CHAIRS FROM THE VALE OF YORK



4. Chair, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Ash with sycamore seat. Original dark green paint with grey-green undercoat. A number of examples studied have similar leg turning profiles, with a characteristic tapered foot.

Provenance: house clearance from unknown location in the Vale of York

*Private collection*



5. Chair, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Ash spindles, one rear leg elm, ash seat. Traces of original green paint. Provenance: Frank Kirk collection

*Castle Museum, York*





6. Chair, early nineteenth century. Ash, with remains of original dark green paint. The split lath underarm supports are now missing. The leg turnings of this chair and that in figures 7 & 8 bear a clear resemblance to those on some Thames valley chairs.

Provenance: from a farm at Sandhutton, near Thirsk

*Private collection*

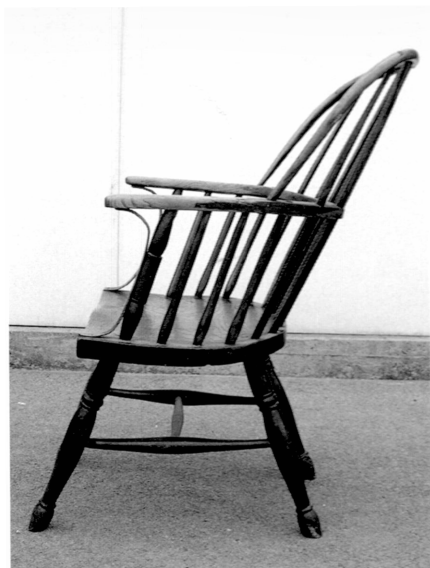


7. Chair, early to mid nineteenth century. Ash, with remains of dark green paint.

Provenance: from a cottage in Norby, near Thirsk

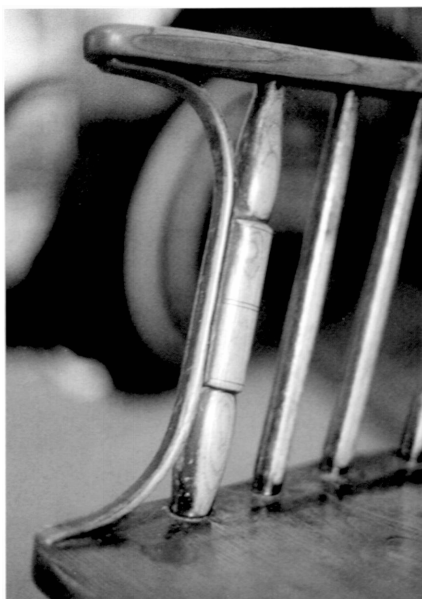
*Thirsk Museum*

## 6 WINDSOR CHAIRS FROM THE VALE OF YORK



8. Chair, early to mid nineteenth century. Ash with remains of dark green paint. Provenance: from a farm at Maunby, between Thirsk and Northallerton.

*Private collection*



9. Detail of figure 8, showing the barrel shaped leading underarm support with incised double ring. This idiosyncratic feature is shared by figures 6, 7, & 8



10. Chair, mid nineteenth century. Ash with elm seat. Modern brown paint over traces of original green. The underarm and leg turnings seem to be signatures of the 'Easingwold' group.

Provenance: from New Pilfit Farm, near Easingwold

*Private collection*



11. Chair, mid nineteenth century. Ash, with elm seat, two beech legs. No paint, traces of red-brown stain. The underarm turnings are identical to those in figure 10; the simpler leg turnings are common to several other chairs from the Easingwold area.

Provenance: from the Fauconburg Arms, Coxwold

*Private collection*

12. Detail of figure 10, showing square pinning typical of the 'Easingwold' group



The chair in figures 2 & 3 differs from most others in having very widely splayed back legs, otherwise the construction of all the chairs of this type is broadly similar. The seats are of ash or sycamore and often very thick (some over 1"), and invariably pit-sawn. In some cases the leading edge is chamfered on its underside to reduce its apparent thickness. The legs are dowelled through the seat and cross-wedged. The spindles for the arm and back are hand-drawn; they are dowelled through the seat and sawn off below, with kerf marks on the seat clearly showing that they were cut in situ. The upper ends of the short spindles are dowelled through the arm bow and usually (but not invariably) cross-wedged. The arm bow is roughly square in section and rounded at each end, sometimes with a notch on the outside edge, again mimicking the out-turned ends of fashionable Georgian elbow chairs. The split lath underarm supports are secured top and bottom with nails, and usually also nailed centrally to the spindle behind. The seat and arm are sometimes notched so that the lath 'snaps' into place. The long back-spindles pass through the arm bow and up into the top bow, where their ends are shaved to a taper to fit their sockets. Usually the sockets are blind, but they frequently break through, and are sometimes intentionally through-dowelled. Because of the twist imparted by the two-dimensional curve of the back bow, it has to be round in section rather than square. The bow is fixed into the arm directly on top of the third or fourth spindle (Figure 3); this is the weakest part of the chair, since the bow is only socketed into half the thickness of the arm, and frequently comes adrift as a consequence. A second weakness, though not a structural one, was in the fixing of the split lath underarm supports, which tend to come loose and are often not replaced (Figure 6).

The legs of all chairs are invariably turned, and several chairs have complex and unusual leg turnings which do not relate to any published models, either fashionable or vernacular (Figures 2, 3, 4). A distinct sub-group has much simpler leg turning profiles one of whose most common and distinctive features is a tapering 'sock' to the lower part of the leg. An example of this type is in York Castle Museum, and formed part of the famous Kirk collection of Yorkshire domestic life (Figure 5).

Given the high number of surviving examples, it is likely that chairs with split-lath arm supports were made well into the nineteenth century. A group of chairs associated with the small town of Thirsk seems to span the transition from eighteenth to nineteenth-century styles. The example in figure 6, which came from a farm two miles east of the town, and which now lacks its split lath underarm supports, conforms to the general model of figures 2-5 except in its leg turnings. These, with their ring and hollow upper and gaitered lower profiles, bear a clear resemblance to Thames Valley designs of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is possible, however, given the prominence of the lower gaiter, that the debt is more directly to Nottinghamshire or West Yorkshire, for the Thames Valley version is usually more delicately rendered. Two other chairs from the Thirsk area are probably later. Figure 7, from a cottage one mile north of the town, has a conventional Thames Valley-style leg turning, and an almost identical chair is from a farmhouse in the village of Maunby, about six miles north-west of Thirsk (Figure 8). All three chairs are linked by the design of leading underarm spindles, which have a bead at each end of the barrel and a double scribed line in the centre (Figure 9), an idiosyncratic touch which strongly suggests a common source.

The latter two Thirsk chairs also demonstrate two significant advances in construction which are characteristic of 'later' Vale of York Windors. First, only the leading underarm spindle is dowelled through the seat; all others are blind-socketed. Second, the top bow joins the arm between two underarm spindles, rather than on top of one of them. This eliminates the weakest point of the earlier style of construction.

The 'new' method of top bow construction is common to all chairs on which the split-lath underarm support is replaced by a decoratively-turned spindle. Further modifications are the use of lathe-turned spindles rather than hand-drawn, and these are usually blind-socketed into the seat. In many cases wooden pins are inserted at key joints to make the chair stronger. Within this category, the most clearly defined sub-group is associated with the village of Easingwold, about ten miles south of Thirsk (Figures 10 & 11). Chairs from this group are linked by a common style of turning on the leading underarm spindle. They also differ from the Thirsk chairs in having the back bow join the arm between the fourth and fifth spindles. Most have elm seats, rather than ash or sycamore, and are pinned at strategic points in the seat, arm bow and top bow with small square pins (Figure 12).

The most common leg turning profile found in the Easingwold chairs is essentially a reverse of the Thirsk type, with the ring below the hollow rather than above it. In many cases the feet are badly worn, but other examples have a nicely-detailed foot with a bold ring flanked by fillets above a tapered terminal bulb (Figure 10). A second rather crude style of leg with a single ring turning also common on the Easingwold chairs, occurring either on all four legs or on the back legs only. The example in figure 11 was for many years in a pub in the village of Coxwold. Other chairs of this type have come from locations to the south and west of Easingwold, placing the town roughly in the centre of their distribution. At least one example has a standard three-ring turning on the back leg, suggesting familiarity with Windsor chairs from further south or from West Yorkshire.

Finally, there is a rather disparate group of chairs which combine the compound-curved back with features more reminiscent of standard West Yorkshire types. Two examples are shown in figures 13 and 14; both have underarm turnings which are close to standard Yorkshire types identified by Dr. Cotton,<sup>5</sup> although in other respects they differ considerably from the normal West Yorkshire model. It may be significant that

both these chairs were found west of the present day A1, which effectively divides the Vale of York proper from the beginning of the Yorkshire Dales.

The chief difficulty in making further progress in this study is the lack of identified makers.<sup>6</sup> None of the chairs are marked or stamped, nor does any oral tradition of chair-making in the Vale of York seem to survive. It is not even certain that the chairs were made by professional chairmakers, rather than carpenters or farm hands. However, most are well made and some are skilfully turned. The Thirsk and Easingwold chairs in particular suggest a professional chairmaker and evince awareness of contemporary Windsor chair styles elsewhere. It is perhaps significant that both places had a disproportionate number of chairmakers for their size. At least seven are recorded in Thirsk between 1823 and 1889, while Easingwold, barely more than a large village, had no less than eleven over the same period. One extended family of turners and chair-makers named Banks had representatives in both places. This considerable presence may be compared with larger towns nearby such as Ripon, with only three chairmakers, and Knaresborough, also with three. In York itself there was a well-established furniture making sector, but this catered to the fashionable provincial market, and there is no evidence of a Windsor chair manufactory there. In every case where a chair has been found in situ, with a reasonable chance of it having been there for a considerable time, these locations have been either farmhouses or village pubs. This suggests a predominantly rural tradition which survived primarily because of its relative isolation from the larger manufactories of West and South Yorkshire. The small area in which they have been found tends toward the same conclusion.

As with all our vernacular traditions, the Vale of York Windsor chair is fast disappearing. Chairs corresponding in every respect to the types described here can be seen in antiques fairs throughout the country where they are invariably labelled 'Welsh' or 'West Country', depending on which commands the highest price. Even within Yorkshire itself, dealers and auctioneers seem totally oblivious to the fact that a unique Yorkshire furniture-making tradition is passing through and out of their hands without any attempt being made to record or preserve it.

#### REFERENCES

1. Ivan Sparkes, *The Windsor Chair*, Bourne End (1975), pp. 59-61; Bernard D. Cotton, *The English Regional Chair*, Woodbridge (1990), pp. 191-193; Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture, 1750-1900*, New Haven and London (1991), pp. 107-112.
2. Christopher Gilbert, 'Chairmaking at Low Cringles in Yorkshire', *Regional Furniture*, IX (1995), pp. 1-13.
3. The curved underarm support seems to be a generic feature of early Windsor chairs, although the form undoubtedly persisted into the nineteenth century. See Cotton, *op. cit.*, and Sparkes, *op. cit.*
4. I am grateful to Nigel Leaney for performing the paint analysis on this chair.
5. Cotton, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
6. Dr. Bill Cotton believes that there is a stylistic link between some Yorkshire Windsor chairs and some Cornish Windsors, and that this might be explained by the migration of Cornish tin or lead miners to Yorkshire. However, with respect to the chairs discussed in this article, there are at least two objections to this theory. First, there are no tin or lead mines in the Vale of York. Second, to the best of my knowledge there are no chairs of this type found in Cornwall. The only published analogy is shown as Figure sw34 in *The English Regional Chair*, but this has no provenance, merely an attribution to the West Country. In his caption to the chair, Dr. Cotton writes: 'This chair is a prototype form of hoop back which was developed in the West Country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century'. But the round-section compound-curved back bow is not found on the 19<sup>th</sup> century West Country chairs illustrated in subsequent pages. Judging from the photograph alone, Figure sw34 appears to have all the attributes of a Vale of York chair.



13. Chair, mid nineteenth century. Beech and ash with beech seat. Modern brown paint. This chair combines the round-section, compound curved back bow with underarm turnings which relate to standard West Yorkshire types. Provenance: Tennants saleroom, Leyburn  
*Private collection*



14. Chair, mid nineteenth century. Ash and beech with elm seat. This has a similar mix of features to figure 13. Both chairs suggest some degree of cross-fertilisation between Vale of York and West Yorkshire styles. Provenance: Morphet's saleroom, Harrogate  
*Private collection*