

The English Regional Chair

15 February to 12 June 2005



Mendlesham arm chair
c1830



High back double bow Windsor arm chair, c1790-1820
Ladder back arm chair with rush seat, c1820-1861



High comb back Windsor
arm chair, c1760

Think of the old wooden chairs in an English country pub, or your mother's kitchen...they probably have a longer and more important history than you think. They could well be part of a tradition of regional chair-making which stretches back at least 300 years. These are the 'common' or 'garden' chairs of old, and as significant to our cultural identity as more fashionable styles by Chippendale and Hepplewhite.

This exhibition aims to focus public attention on the English regional chair, once so commonplace as to be taken for granted, but now increasingly rare and deserving to be treasured as an important part of our history and cultural identity. It will show chairs made in the English regions in the 18th and 19th centuries, highlighting the regional variations in construction and decoration, and shedding new light on one of the domestic environment's most familiar objects.

Regional identity was expressed in dialect and local customs, but also in craft traditions such as buildings, pottery, costume and furniture, including the chair. For centuries, in the different regions of England, people made chairs for everyday use based on local, vernacular traditions, using timber and other materials readily available in the region. These traditions were passed from generation to generation and largely ignored the changing styles which inspired the designers and makers of more fashionable furniture. These distinctive regional forms were gradually lost during the 19th century as transport improved and manufacturing became centred on the larger towns and cities.

Interestingly, just two main forms of chair predominated across the whole of England: the turned ladder back chair with a rush seat, and the Windsor chair (see notes for full description). Within these two basic forms, makers developed an astonishingly rich variety of often locally distinctive structural details, decorative devices and patterns. Some of the chairs in the exhibition are over 200 years old, and many would have been treasured as family heirlooms. They bear the signs of much use, the seats and arms worn smooth, the colours and patina enhanced by years of wear and polishing.

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This exhibition is drawn from the Cotton Collection of English regional chairs, acquired by the Geffrye Museum mainly by gift in 2002. The collection of over 400 chairs represents 35 years of study by historian Dr Bernard Cotton and his wife Gerry, piecing together the evidence to link particular types of chairs or their structural and decorative features with a region or town and, if possible, a maker or workshop. The identification of these regional differences was almost lost, as the communities within which these chairs were made and used became fragmented during the 20th century and the furniture became widely dispersed. Very few chairs were marked by the maker or workshop owner, but those that were provide definitive information on local traditions. These rare, marked chairs form the basis of the Cotton Collection.

For the purposes of identifying chair-making traditions Dr Cotton has divided England into six regions: Thames Valley, East Anglia, North East (Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland), South West, West Midlands and North West. In this exhibition we aim to show the distinctive characteristics of chairs from each of these six regions.

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RELATED EVENTS

Study Day: The English Regional Chair

Leading experts of the regional furniture world, Dr Bernard Cotton, Dr Adam Bowett and John Boram, will present new ideas and scholarship in a morning of stimulating illustrated lectures. A master-class in the afternoon, led by Dr Cotton, will explore examples from the collection in-depth. Run in conjunction with the Regional Furniture Society

Saturday 9 April, 10.00am - 4.00pm

Tickets £35 (includes light sandwich lunch) must be booked in advance

Talk: The English Regional Chair

An exploration of the chairs on show in the exhibition gallery focusing on distinctive regional features, methods and materials. With David Dewing, Director of the Geffrye.

Saturday 12 March, 2.00 and repeated at 3.30pm. Admission Free. Sign interpreted.

Talk: Arts and Crafts in Focus

An informal talk in the Edwardian room, looking at the key objects which reflect the influence of the Arts and Crafts style on middle-class London interiors. With the Director.

Saturday 4 June, 2.00 and repeated at 3.30pm. Admission Free. Sign interpreted.

(This is part of a nationwide promotion of the Arts and Crafts Movement linked to the major International Arts and Crafts Movement exhibition at the V&A from 17 March – 24 July 05).

Craft Workshop: Crafty Chairs

A two-day course with decorative artist Cressida Bell. Participants will design and paint a chair to take home.

Saturday 7 May, 11.00am – 4.00pm and Sunday 8 May, 1.00 – 4.00pm.

Tickets £75 (includes full-size wooden chair and materials) – must be booked in advance.

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. For further information or images, please contact Nancy Loader, Press Officer, on 020 7739 9893 or nloader@geffrye-museum.org.uk.
2. The **Ladder back** is one of the most basic forms of chair, with four turned legs (ie rounded on a lathe), a number of cross rails, or 'ladders' in the back, and a seat either made of a wooden board or woven with rushes. Although this type of chair was known in England and many parts of Europe from at least the 17th century, few have survived which are earlier than about 1800. The joints on these chairs tended to work loose, and the rush seat needed a skilled worker to repair or replace it, so many would have come to the end of their useful life long ago. The making of these chairs since about 1800 is especially associated with the West Midlands and North West regions of England, but there is evidence to suggest they were made extensively across the country in earlier times and the tradition gradually died out.

The origins of the **Windsor** chair are more recent. The evidence suggests they were first made in or near Windsor just 300 years ago, around 1700. The distinctive feature of a Windsor is that the legs and back are fitted into holes in the solid wooden seat. They were more complicated than ladder-backs, and required more skill to make, but they were stronger and more comfortable, and therefore popular. This ensured they were made not just in the Windsor area, where High Wycombe became the major centre, but also in the South West, East Midlands and North East.

Both of these chair-making traditions spread to the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, along with other European forms, and were highly influential in the evolution of early American furniture.

3. Dr Bernard Cotton is the author of the highly-respected book *The English Regional Chair*, the only comprehensive book on the subject in print.
4. *The English Regional Chair* will be complemented by ***SIT? A Show of Contemporary Seating*** which will explore contemporary responses to the historical and traditional notions of what makes a chair. The exhibition will include examples of contemporary chair and seating design that have been selected for the way in which they challenge tradition: through the use of new forms, unexpected materials and surprising suggested uses.
5. The Geffrye's specialist area of research is middle-class domestic interiors and gardens. The museum presents the quintessential style of English urban middle-class interiors from 1600 to the present day through a chronological sequence of period rooms.
6. Admission: FREE
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Tel No: 020 7739 9893 / Recorded Info: 020 7739 8543
Web Address: www.geffrye-museum.org.uk Email: info@geffrye-museum.org.uk
Opening Hrs: Tue - Sat 10am - 5pm, Sun and Bank Holiday Mons 12 - 5pm
Travel: Buses: 149, 242, 243, 67 or 394
Tube: Liverpool St, then bus 149 or 242/Old St (exit 2), then bus 243