



West Wycombe Park
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WINDSORS AT WEST WYCOMBE **A Definitive Exhibition of 18th Century English Windsor Chairs**

6 to 31 May 2012

West Wycombe Park, Buckinghamshire

The greatest collection of 18th century English Windsor chairs ever publicly displayed, comprising some 35 of the finest examples known, will be shown from 6-31 May 2012 at West Wycombe Park (National Trust). The venue, seat of the Dashwood family, is a natural one. The area around the nearby town of High Wycombe has been synonymous with the manufacture of Windsor chairs from the late 18th to the mid-20th century.



1. Pitt-type Chair, c1740s
(Wycombe Museum)

The earliest known documentary evidence of the term ‘Windsor’ chair is in 1720. At that time the style was also referred to as a ‘Forest’ chair, as they were designed primarily for use outdoors. One of the first recorded mentions of a Windsor chair was by Lord Percival of Hall Barn, near Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, in 1724 when he wrote that because of the numerous walks and paths on the estate *‘My wife was carry’d in a Windsor chair like those at Versailles...’*.

There is no conclusive evidence as to why ‘Windsor’ became the common name for the chairs, although recent research shows that the earliest Windsors, painted Forest chairs designed for outdoor use, were made in the Windsor area. Furthermore, Windsor was a convenient distribution centre from where locally made chairs could be transported by river to London and elsewhere. The Thames Valley region was certainly the centre for chair making in the South of England.



2. Early C18th Forest chairs (Private Collection)

In time the term ‘Windsor’ usually referred to the polished indoor chair whilst ‘Forest’ implied an outdoor chair. It was not until the 19th century that Windsor became the universal term for the design, by which time it had become so popular that, combined with the rise of mass-production methods, it is thought some 4,500 were made every day in the High Wycombe area.

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The Windsor chair is perhaps the most quintessential of all English furniture designs, and the essence of practicality. The defining characteristic of a Windsor chair is a one-piece wooden seat into which the legs are inserted from below, while the spindles and other elements supporting the back and arm-bow slot in from above (effectively a stool with a back). The design, light, strong and elegant, and relatively inexpensive, could be as simple or elaborate as taste or customer required, and thus the Windsor made its way in to houses both rich and poor, indoors and out, in the kitchen and hall, library and dining room, in wardrooms of Royal Navy ships and great noble households.

Windsors at West Wycombe will display more than 35 of the very best examples of finely crafted 18th century English Windsor chairs known to exist in the UK. Exhibits will be drawn from both private and public collections, offering an unparalleled opportunity for aficionados, connoisseurs, museum curators and lovers of this most ubiquitous of English furniture designs to appreciate the skill and diversity of styles used by a wide range of 18th century chair makers.

All unique and rare examples of their kind, the 18th century Windsor chairs in the display at West Wycombe Park will include:

- The Forest chair of poet Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774), one of the few chairs with a reliable provenance, which retains its original green paint (V&A Collection)
- The Hewett Chair, a comb-back and one of only four known Windsors to have retained its maker's trade label, which reads "RICHARD HEWET(T). CHAIRMAKER At Slough...ne(ar) Windsor MAKES and s(ells)...Forest chairs and all s(orts)". Hewett was also a wheelwright. (V&A Collection)
- The painted 'Pitt-type' comb-back, mid-18th century, one of five or six identified as by John Pitt (1714-1759), the earliest-known Windsor chair maker who worked in Upton-cum-Chalvey (now part of Slough). The identification is made due to a highly distinctive shape of the cabriole leg design. The chair features a painted armorial of the City of Bath. Slough was a major staging post on the coach route from London to Bath. (Wycombe Museum Collection, *see Fig. 1, page 1*)
- A cabriole leg comb-back with 'fetlocks', an impressive and rare chair made from fruitwood and ash, c1750s, notable for its four cabriole legs (more typical are cabriole front and straight back legs), which feature a stylised sweeping fetlock and hoof foot. (Private Collection, *illustrated right, Fig. 3*)
- Captain Cook's comb-back Forest chair, a simple style without a splat. It travelled with Cook on his last voyage, dating the chair to c1776. (Trinity House Collection)
- One the earliest surviving Forest chairs (Temple Newsam Collection), first quarter C18th, possibly the earliest Forest chair in existence. Recent research suggests that the first Windsor-type chairs were made in the early 18th century specifically for garden use; this was at the time when there was a new English fashion for naturalistic gardens. Also, as illustrated in a 1733 engraving of the Rotunda at Stowe, some of these early chairs are also known to have been mounted on trolleys so that they could be wheeled about, as was the custom in France (using chairs not designed on the Windsor model). These garden Windsors were given a protective coat of paint, usually green, and were known as 'Forest' chairs. Significantly, there is a surviving 1720 invoice for Forest chairs supplied from Windsor and thus it seems that a connection with Windsor Forest may be responsible for the name.



- A fine and imposing mahogany Windsor chair with a shaped cresting rail, of a form of construction not used in the Thames Valley; the chair is likely to have been made in a major (probably London) cabinet maker's workshop, for an aristocratic dwelling, in the latter part of the 18th century. (Red Lodge, Bristol Collection)
- A triple-pointed arch 'Gothick' chair circa 1756 (*illustrated right, Fig 5*). The 'Gothick' style is one of the most popular and highly sought after by collectors. The gothic revival popularised by Horace Walpole's remodelling of Strawberry Hill House is seen in Windsor chairs around 1754 when William Partridge of Banbury advertised a gothic (pointed arch) chair. They were still being made in the 1790s by William Webb near the Elephant & Castle in London. This example from St. Michael's Mount (NT), the ancestral home of the St. Aubyn family in Cornwall, is highly unusual in having a triple-point arch and being constructed of mahogany. It also features incised decoration and an heraldic shield with the arms of St. Aubyn impaled with those of Wingfield. It is one of a set that were probably made to celebrate the marriage of the fourth baronet, Sir John St. Aubyn (1726-1772) to Elizabeth Wingfield in 1756.



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NOTES TO EDITORS

West Wycombe Park (NT)

West Wycombe Park: The house is normally only open to the public from June through August, so this exhibition offers an extended opportunity to visit the house during May. The Windsor chair exhibition will be displayed within the public rooms, and will include all usual NT facilities to visitors. The Palladian villa is among the most theatrical and Italianate in England. Lavishly decorated, it has featured in films and television series, including *Downton Abbey*, *Wallis & Edward* (Dir: Madonna) & *Cranford*. The fine Georgian landscape garden was created by Sir Francis Dashwood, founder of the Dilettanti Society and Hellfire Club.

Exhibition Opening Times

From 6th to 31st May 2012, but following the usual NT opening times for West Wycombe Park; Sundays through Thursdays, 2pm to 6pm. Admission Charges: Please refer to the National Trust website for full details: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-westwycombepark>

Exhibition Curators

Michael Harding-Hill: an authority on Windsor chairs since 1971, his book '*Windsor Chairs, An Illustrated Celebration*' (published by Antique Collectors Club, 2003) offers a visual cornucopia of important chairs, many of which passed through his hands as a dealer over many decades.

Robert Parrott: a retired scientist and Council member of the Regional Furniture Society with a special interest in the history of the English Windsor chair. His recent research, which has been published in several notes and Journal articles, provides new information on C18th Windsor chairs and their makers.

Wycombe Museum

The exhibition is grateful to the generous assistance of Wycombe Museum (High Wycombe), which has several Windsor chairs in its collection. The Museum is open to the public Mon-Sat 10am-5pm and Sun 2pm-5pm and would make an ideal complementary visit to the *Windsors At Wycombe* exhibition. www.wycombe.gov.uk/museum

The Windsor Chair – Basic Forms

The Windsor chair commonly takes one of three different forms. These are referred to as:

- **comb-back** with a straight top
- **low-back** a reduced height comb-back
- **bow-** or **hoop-back** chairs with a curved top

Variations in design are widespread, including some exotic creations, such as the ‘Gothick’.



Fig. 6 High comb-back with large armorial splat, West Country, late C18th.

ADDITIONAL IMAGES FROM THE EXHIBITION



7. A Webb-type bow-back



8. 'Gothick' pointed bow armchair



9. Unusual bow-back with ribbon slats



10. Painted X-frame Forest chair



11. Chair from Enmore Castle



12. Mahogany elbow chair