

The Abbot's Chair¹

The chair was made between 1550 and 1700 and probably dates from the early part of the 17th century. Probably made in Pembrokeshire/Carmarthenshire area.

The shape of the turning on the upper front legs is very similar to another extant chair – this suggests one specific workshop with one individual having produced both chairs. Very few of the joints are pegged – the maker would use a combination of seasoned and green wood in construction and the unseasoned wood would swell and secure the different sections of the chair – pegged joints were used to give added strength to areas such as the seat – the joint at the top of the back leg is pegged – the seat is fixed with round tenon joints – two of the joints go through the front legs and project but are not pinned which is unusual – seats in examples of these chairs that survive are secured with a combination of a square and round tenon joints – together they give added strength – the presence of only round tenon joints to secure the seat is another characteristic of this chair maker.

Made of Ash with an oak plank seat – this is not unusual. The underside of the seat has been carved using an adze axe – this is not unusual.

All the planks from which the chair is constructed were riven – the wood would have been split before being worked – this can be seen in the chair as the split in the wood travels across the different sections of turning.

All the extant examples of these chairs are slightly different – there are no two early turned chairs that are identical.

The chair is riddled with worm – the worm is dead – the chair does not need to be treated further.

Covered in a 19th century stain – this is not unusual.

There are some nails – these are later and may be part of a repair.

There are two sets of holes on the upper arms – the larger holes have been created using a spoon bit and may have been made by the chair maker – it is very likely the new chair was fitted with a reading plank – there is an early illustration of a figure in a turned chair with a book resting on a reading plank – the plank would have been supported by two iron spikes which would have fitted into the holes – these (the spikes) would have been made by a metalworker and not the chair maker – the smaller holes on the upper arms are set at an irregular angle and were probably made at a later date – the reason for the smaller holes and what they supported is unknown.

The front stretcher has been replaced – extant turned chairs have all had their front stretcher replaced.

The chair probably would have had regular light 'ceremonial' use for the first 25-50 years of its life – and then regarded as a 'relic'.

Probably an upper middle class purchase – not a luxury item.

¹ Notes from the Visit of the V & A Specialists to the Bishop's Palace on Friday 1 April 2011

The Glastonbury Chair

The Glastonbury chair is a nineteenth term for a wooden chair, usually of oak, possibly based on a chair made for Richard Whiting, the last Abbot of Glastonbury, England.

The chair was originally made in Britain from a description brought back from Rome to Glastonbury Abbey in 1504 by Abbot Richard Beere, and was produced for or by John Arthur Thorne, a monk who was treasurer at the abbey. Arthur perished on Glastonbury tor in 1539, where he was hung, drawn and quartered alongside his master, Richard Whiting, the last Abbot of Glastonbury, during the dissolution of the monasteries. The Abbot sat on a Glastonbury chair of this type during his trial here at the **Bishop's Palace**.

The chair is richly decorated with Latin script on the arms and back. Across the top of the back are the words 'Monachus Glastome', indicating where it was made and on the arms are the phrases 'God save him', 'May the Lord give him Peace' and 'Praise be to God'. On the inner face of the right arm is 'Johnaus arthurus', the Latinized name referring to John Arthur Thorne.

Victor Chinnery (connoisseur, author and oak furniture expert) believed that the chair – or what remains of the original chair – is genuine although opinion is divided over its authenticity.

The arms & top rail & front panel & side seat rails are original and – according to Victor Chinnery – possibly early 16th century. The original portion of the chair is possibly made of oak.

Although termed a 'folding chair' the original chair would not have folded but dismantled – by removing the securing pins – and the separate elements of the chair packed and transported in a leather case.

The seat & legs are 20th century replacements – Victor Chinnery claimed that the son of one of the bishops carried out the restoration work in the 1990s despite his (Victor Chinnery's) **objections**; the work may have been carried out by the son of Bishop Bickersteth which suggests the restoration may actually have taken place in the 1980s – the recessed moulding on the legs are machine finished.

The back panel on the chair is 19th century – the seat & front seat rail & legs would have been 19th century replacements prior to the restoration in the 1980s/1990s.

The carving on the 19th century back panel is inferior to the work on the older parts of the chair – the carving is crisper and more accomplished on the older parts which would be in keeping with a chair of that period.

This is one of two original surviving examples seen today. The second chair can be seen at the Church of St John the Baptist in Glastonbury