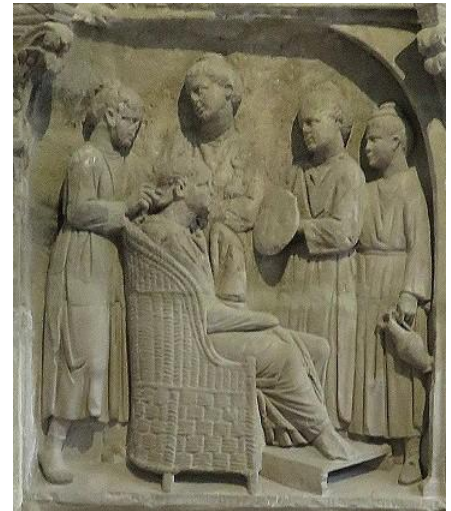


The Wicker Chair Makers of Stoke St Gregory

Origins

The combination of design and the craft of basket making enabled the development of seating that was more comfortable than a wooden plank or a rock, and the woven chair has its roots in antiquity. Materials would have been very different from the willow used in Northern Europe, but it is clear that the weaving of baskets and furniture was an extremely important part of the development of early civilizations. Two woven chairs were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. One, in the antechamber, was described as 'a rush work chair extraordinarily modern looking in appearance and design'.

When the civil war between Cleopatra and Octavian came to an end, Egypt came under control of the Romans. The victors were always happy to absorb parts of other cultures into their own, and woven furniture was one example. The Romans expanded on Egyptian practices, creating, for example, woven privacy screens. They may have also been the first makers of woven swings. The most famous example is the representation of a woven chair carved in stone at the Trier Museum in Germany. Members of the early church favoured the stately appearance of high-backed woven willow cathedra chairs. Various such items are depicted in ecclesiastical paintings through the centuries.



Relief in Trier Landesmuseum

The 19th Century



In Northern Europe, the combining of the basket makers' skills with seating designed for comfort, led to generations of chairs with distinctive national and local styles. Many designs will have changed little over the decades and even centuries. This example in Coates Museum, from the north of Scotland, is often referred to as the 'Orkney Chair'

Willow basketry chairs had been made in the Austro-Hungarian empire since the 1820s. The government sponsored the activity to provide winter work for agricultural labourers. The craft was even taught at the Imperial School in Vienna. By the end of the century designs began to be influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement, and more use was made of imported cane. The outside of the rattan plant had been used for woven chair backs and seats since the 17th Century, but this was a new use for the centre portion of Malaysian and Indonesian cane.

Woven furniture produced in Holland was often used for furniture in babies' and childrens' rooms, because it was considered a healthy material - more hygienic than solid wood. Belgium, Switzerland and France also became major producers. However, it was the English furniture makers who provided the greatest challenge to the German and Austrian firms' grip on the market.

In America, the earliest European settlers brought wicker, as all woven basketry came to be called, with them, usually as a matter of convenience because of its lightweight properties. To these Americans, wicker furnishings and luggage were part of the culture they brought with them from the old homeland. Not only did colonials bring woven articles with them when they sailed from England and Europe, they also brought their skills. The first furnishings tended to be limited to things such as baskets and cradles. As in Europe, the increasing affluence of the population led to the development of a woven furniture making industry. Many of the company catalogues had similar designs in Willow, Cane, and Reed.

Somerset

In Somerset, with further enclosure and draining of the local 'moors', the 19th Century saw major developments in willow growing and processing. This was accompanied by the growth of the basket making industry and many firms and individual craftsmen specialised in chairs, as demand grew from the urban markets. This Somerset nursing chair was traditionally made in white willow.

In 1885, Edmund Boobyer, great grandfather of Jonathan Coate, was apprenticed to Slocombe of North Petherton as a chair maker. In the 1891 census Edmund was himself listed as a chair maker. Edmund worked to satisfy the demands for fashionable willow furniture, while continuing his trade as a willow merchant. Other notable basket makers in the Stoke St Gregory area were Albert (Albie) Champion, and William Palmer. The 1901 census lists 56 boys and men as 'wicker basket makers'



Somerset Nursing Chair

When interviewed as part of the 'Somerset Voices' project, William explained that he used to work from seven o'clock in the morning to seven at night, with a shorter day on Saturday, earning 10p for the week. William explained that "gradually as I improved, you see, I'd get perhaps another threepence or sixpence each week as I come along, as I improved a bit. And then after that time, see, when I could do the work, it was piece work, you'd get so much for making a certain part of the chair, you see, tuppence for the seat and fourpence for the foot, well altogether you get about tenpence to a shilling (5p) for making a chair. Listen to part of the interview here: [Palmer, William \(b.1884\) \(somersetvoices.org.uk\)](https://www.somersetvoices.org.uk/b.1884-palmer-william)



When he began working for himself in 1907, his chairs would sell for 10p to 12½p. All the chairs would be sent by train to London, as at the time they were fashion items, with no local demand. The child's chair on the left was made by William Palmer in 1944, for Jonathan Coate's father, Chris. The front panel (right) was William Palmer's signature.



Special sidings were built at Athelney Station, Stoke St Gregory, to cater for the freight wagons that took Stoke's willow chairs to the London market. The sidings were put in when part of the old Taunton to Yeovil branch line was used for the new Great Western route to Penzance, completed in 1906. By this time wicker furniture had become very popular and was being used to furnish whole living rooms, hotel suites, and ocean going liners. The fashion was short lived, but during World War 1 the Athelney sidings were also put to a use of more national importance. It was from here that vast amounts of willow were delivered to the London basket making factories, for shell cases, pigeon baskets, medical panniers, and other military items. In 1916, Scotts of London, famous for developing the picnic hamper, placed an order with Edmund Boobyer for 4,000 bundles of hand stripped white willow for 'government use only'.

Several of the local basket makers specialised in chairs, and Frank Woodland's stick frame chair - made by Albie Champion - can be seen in the museum at Willows & Wetlands. In his eighties, Albie trained Jonathan Coate, firstly in furniture making and then in general basket work.

The Stick Foot Chair



This basket was made by Albert (Albie) Champion for Frank Woodland a willow grower in Stoke St Gregory. The diimensions are: Length 70 cm; Width 60 cm; Height 92 cm.

It was made on a 18in x 18in bow frame, with 8 scalloms and 2 bye stakes. It has a randed seat.

If a basket maker was to make another they would be given the directions (or 'recipe') - 13½in back legs. 24in front legs to arms. 28 stakes to form back and extra on arms. 2 rounds of waling forming 4 rod border on front of seat. Middle fitch at 10in, 2 diamonds high. Top fitch at 21in with another 2 diamonds, losing 4 stakes to form the shoulder. 2 pairs and a wale followed by plait border starting at the bottom of right front leg and finishing at the bottom of the left front leg. Cross piece and kinkers nailed to form stick foot. Decorative fitch, wale and trac border to base with corn dolly type binding to bottom front feet and plain binding on back legs. Twisted rods around front border.