

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 1998

Bodging and other Woodland Crafts

Wargrave Local History Society began its 1998-9 programme with a fascinating talk by Lauren Williamson on *Bodging and other Woodland Crafts*.

Lauren began by considering the language associated with this topic. Although now-a-days a 'bodger' is thought of as slapdash, in the craft sense it meant someone who only did part of a job, rather than make a complete object - in this case a chair. The word chair derives from the Latin cathedra, and a cathedral was a place where a bishop had his chair - probably the only seat to be found there. Such chairs were large, heavy and immovable. The ordinary people would not have furniture in medieval times, and would sit on the floor. They might have a table, or board, but this would be a simple board put on trestles, and removed when not needed. Eventually such items of furniture would be kept in the house, but to one side, out of the way - a sideboard - or have an extra board fixed to it to store cups on - a cupboard. These would be made by the local carpenter, who provided anything required in wood - farm implements, furniture etc. The style of these varied from place to place, as the different kinds of wood lent themselves to different ways of making.

The Chiltern hills are not very good farming land, and so the forests were largely left intact. There are large numbers of beech trees, but beech is a wood that could only be worked in small pieces. This was not suitable for the grand chairs, but suited the 'Windsor' style for common use - even in the 1950s 80% of English chairs were made in the High Wycombe area.

Once the timber had been felled, in the autumn or early winter, the timber would be cut to length by hand over a saw-pit, and then split open using a molly (or 'beetle') and wedge, to form a billet - one with a lot of knots being a crooked billet. The timber was difficult to move, so the itinerant craftsmen made a shelter in the woods, lit by a candle in a jar maybe, and covered with wood chippings from the bark removed from the billet. Then, sitting on a shaving horse to clamp the wood, the billet would be reduced to a rolling pin size piece of wood, using a draw shave. To make the shaped chair leg, stretchers etc, this would then be turned using a pole lathe - a springy piece of larch or similar wood fastened outside the hut, connected to a treadle by a string wound around the piece of timber to be worked. The latter would thus be spun at 35 revolutions per second, and chisels used to shape the chair leg - which would then be left to dry in the open.

In Victorian times, many people tried to mechanise the production of many articles. As most chairs for domestic use were made in the Chilterns, furniture making centred on High Wycombe - easy to bring the timber downhill by horse, and to send finished items to London by river.

Although much of the process could be done by machine, the turning of chair legs they could not manage. As a result, hundreds of men were employed in the woods to make just chair legs, and similar items., and because they were no longer full chair-makers, became known as bodgers. It was hard work, often in the dark, as they worked in the winter, and would only be paid when they

sold their work at the factory gates. Eventually, machines were able to perform the task, and so the trade of bodger disappeared after the 1930s.

Laureen also spoke about tent peg makers, who used similar skills, except pole lathe turning - 21 different pulls being needed per peg, and a man could make 1000 per day. 30 million were made - by hand - as part of the 1930s rearmament programme, but eventually this also was mechanised.
