

Regional Furniture Society

NEWSLETTER



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Mr Hamond's Seats

There is a well-known set of five mahogany windsor armchairs at Holkham Hall in Norfolk (Fig 1) plus six matching singles. They are not constructed in the traditional windsor manner, as each leg is secured to the seat by two rectangular tenons, side by side, which slot into blind mortises in the underside of the seat. Cotton documented a pair of joiner-made windsors with similar jointing of the back legs.¹ The Holkham windsors lack stretchers and the bows are made up of carved sections jointed together rather than the traditional bent lengths of wood. Both the timber and the method of construction suggest that they were made by a joiner or cabinet maker rather than a windsor chair maker. They appear to date from the third quarter of the 18th century or possibly earlier. At some stage the pad feet have been amputated from their back legs and probable castors removed from their front feet. There are several references in the Holkham Hall accounts to the purchase of windsor chairs, including a total of two dozen bought from John Brown (probably of St Paul's Churchyard, London) between 1739 and 1757, but as these cost around six shillings each they are unlikely to be the set in question, which would have been considerably more expensive.

On 25 November 2010 a set of four windsor chairs appeared at Cheffins saleroom in Cambridge, clearly modelled on the Holkham set but made of elm throughout (see cover illustration). The chairs were part of the contents of High House, Westacre, included in the sale. Westacre is 18 miles south of Holkham. Each chair carries a stencilled maker's mark under the seat (Fig 3), reading

G.A PLOWMAN
 Builder
 Cabinet Maker
 Paper Hanger
 WELLS

Plowman is recorded at High Street, Wells-next-the-Sea in trade directories from 1822 to 1845, initially as a cabinet maker, joiner and builder, but later just as a cabinet maker.² He has a single entry in the Holkham Hall accounts, dated 17 February 1837, for supply of wainscot to the value of £7 7s 10½d. Wells is two miles from Holkham Hall.

Chalked under the seat of one of the chairs is an inscription which is tantalisingly difficult to read (Fig 4), but the first line is 'A. Hamond Esq' and the last three words appear to be 'the bank Fakenham'. The inscription is presumably an instruction to the carrier, the customer being A. Hamond, and it is likely that the chairs were to be left for collection at 'the bank' in Fakenham.

The history of Westacre High House is well documented in *The Birkbecks of Norfolk* by H. Birkbeck.³ It was built in 1756. Anthony Hamond (1805-1869)



Fig 1 A Holkham Hall mahogany windsor

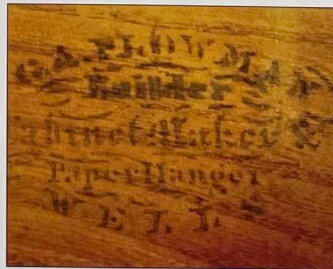


Fig 3 A G Plowman's stencil under a seat

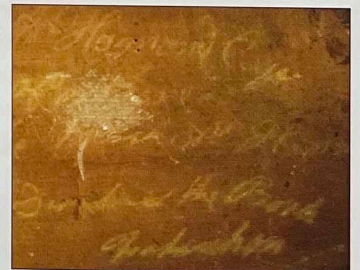


Fig 4 Chalk inscription under one of the Plowman chairs

inherited the house in 1824 and made extensive changes. To quote from the book:

Anthony wrote to his wife in 1829: 'I am building the front of the house with Holkham brick which is exceedingly good, indeed the most beautiful brick I ever saw, but like everything else that you buy of a gentleman – horribly dear! The bricks were carted from Holkham by horses and wagons, leaving Holkham at four o'clock in the morning.'⁴

It is clear from this that Hamond must have known Thomas William Coke, the famous agricultural reformer and owner of Holkham Hall. Hamond must have seen the

mahogany chairs and commissioned Plowman to make him a similar set in elm. Hamond was a banker, related to the Gurney family and interestingly White's 1845 *Directory* lists the manager of Gurney's bank in Fakenham as being RN Hamond, presumably a relative entrusted with the care of the chairs on their journey from Wells, before collection by staff from Westacre.⁵

The chairs, like the originals, are of generous proportions. This is not surprising as Hamond was a large man (Fig 5). They appear to share the structural defects of the Holkham originals, being made by a joiner who was unfamiliar with the traditional method of socketing Windsor legs into the seat. They have consequently suffered subsequent repairs to the joints. The original Holkham chairs, being of heavy Jamaican mahogany, have a certain gravitas that is lacking in the blond elm copies. Figs 6 and 7 show close-ups of the arms for comparison of the design and quality of the carving. At the sale the chairs made £15,000 against an

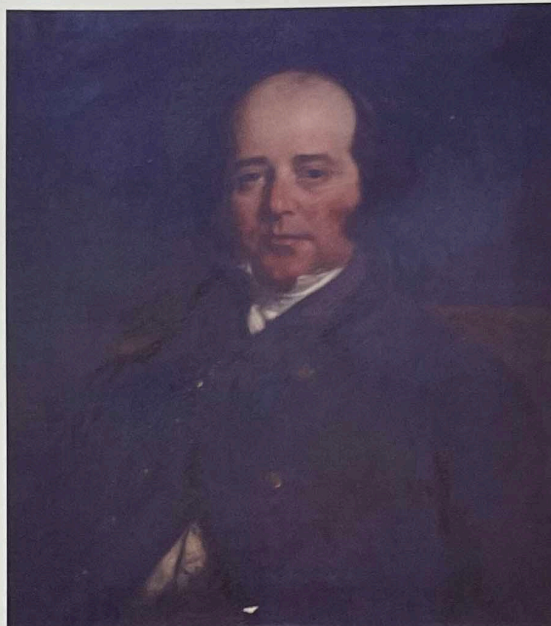


Fig 5 Andrew Hamond (1805-1869) of Westacre High House, owner of the Plowman chairs

estimate of £800-1200. A number of mahogany examples of the Holkham model have passed through the auction houses and dealers in the last 10 years, hammer prices ranging from £15,000 for a pair of c1880 to £23,000 for one chair of c1760.

We would like to thank Bob Parrott for his input and encouragement during the preparation of this paper, and Luke Macdonald, Henry Birkbeck and Colin Shearer for their help.

Photographs are by Paul A. Shutler with the exception of the cover illustration which is by courtesy of Cheffins, and Fig 5 which is by courtesy of Mr H. Birkbeck.

John Stabler & Paul A. Shutler

- 1 Bernard D. Cotton, 'Unconventional Windsors from the Cotswolds', *Regional Furniture II* (1988), pp 33-35
- 2 John Stabler, 'A Dictionary of Norfolk Furniture Makers, 1700-1840', *Regional Furniture*, XX (2006), p 198
- 3 H Birkbeck, *The Birkbecks of Norfolk*, Norwich (1993)
- 4 Birkbeck, p 41
- 5 William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk*, Sheffield (1845), facsimile reprint, Newton Abbot (1970), p 651

Fig 6 Detail of a Holkham Hall chair



Fig 7 Detail of a Plowman chair

