

THE BLACKSTONE CHAIR

Stephen Jackson

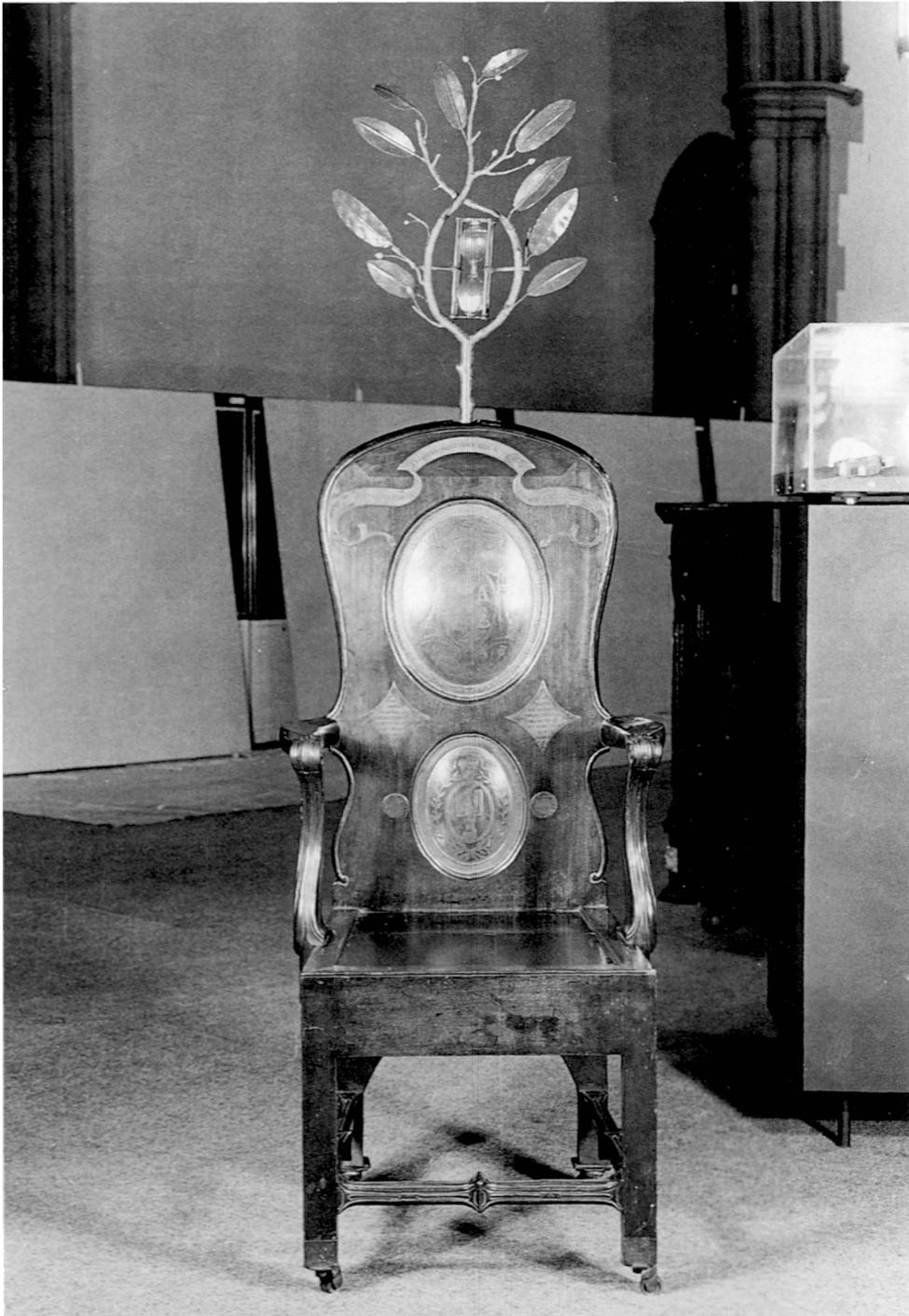
For over two hundred years students at the University of Glasgow have sat public oral examinations in a mahogany armchair emblazoned with brass plates, surmounted by a brass model of a bay tree in which an hour glass is suspended, and with a seat made in part from polished black dolerite (Fig. 1). The chair was already infamous in 1817 when an anonymous student penned these lines:

For I was born in Glasgow, and have sat
Upon that dreaded chair with bottom black;
Ah, seat of terror, to Collegian pale! —
And I have seen the Students gazing round,
And I have sat, and trembling seen the while
Two bushy eyebrows and an under lip,
Were big with meaning. While my every limb
With terror shook, and arch'd each quiv'ring hair;
And I have heard, and I was glad to hear,
Ad alium, Domine, from honest John.¹

The scene described was the qualifying examination taken during October in the Common Hall of the Old College on the High Street, for 'promotion' to the next stage in the degree structure. Students began with the Latin 'Humanity' class and moved through Greek, Logic and 'Ethnic' (the Bachelor degree) to Natural Philosophy (the Master degree). Conducted in Latin or Greek as appropriate, the examination tested the knowledge of two or more books chosen by the candidate. The examiners were the professors of the subjects from which and to which the student wished to progress. The hour glass in the chair was turned by the Bedellus, the College factotum, and when the time was up he announced *fluxit* before addressing the examiners, *ad alium, Domine*. This ordeal came to an end with the Universities Act of 1858 and the introduction of written examinations. The Chair has been used ever since, however, during the examinations for the Cowan medals in Latin and Greek (Fig. 2).

Although most graduates of the University have heard of the Chair, in recent years nothing was known of its origins. Authors on the history of the University dated the Chair to around 1716, on the basis of the inscriptions of the back, but attention was focused not on the Chair itself but on the examination of the same name.² Recently, however, I discovered that the making of the chair is extraordinarily well documented in records held at the University Archives. Accounts record in detail when and by whom each part of the finished chair was supplied, adding to our scant knowledge of the furniture making trades in Glasgow during the eighteenth century.³ Another compelling reason to publish an account of the Chair is that material from the universities of Europe has not to date found a place in the growing literature on ceremonial furniture.⁴

At one time each of the five ancient Scottish universities had a black stone, used to add a ritual element to examinations. An *examen quod appellat nigri lapidis* is



1. The Blackstone Chair. H. (including bay tree) 207.5 cm. W. 58 cm. D. 51 cm

Photograph: Media Services, University of Glasgow

mentioned in a regulation of St Andrews University in 1580 and references to stones in the context of the Master of Arts examination there go back to 1531.⁵ The University Commissioners of 1647 referred to the examination *on the Black-staine* as common to all the Universities and in 1659 a black stone is mentioned in a regulation at Glasgow to the effect that library fees should be paid before a graduand could proceed to 'laureation'.⁶ Laureation was a Scottish term for graduation and the connection with the present chair is obvious. Both Edinburgh and Marischal College, Aberdeen, once held black stone examinations, although no trace of the stone used survives, while at Kings College, Aberdeen, the black marble tombstone of the founder, Bishop Elphinstone, by one account was used at graduation.⁷ The identification of the black stone with a founder's tombstone may have been the case elsewhere although what is reputed to be the black stone of St Andrews University, now in the Parliament Hall there, appears to be the base of a column.⁸ The distinction should be made between oral examination upon the black stones and the wider mediaeval European practice of students sitting in the professorial *cathedra* during the disputation of a thesis or for the public *lectura* which followed graduation.⁹ No Glaswegian professor has ever had the right to custody of the Blackstone Chair.

During the mid 1770s, following the rigorous investigation of previous financial mismanagement on the part of the Factor by John Anderson, holder of the chairs in Oriental Languages and Natural Philosophy, the Faculty at Glasgow set about a number of improvements to the fabric of the College including a new chapel, new houses for professors, refacing the street frontage and extending the library. It was in this context of capital investment, which also included books and a new catalogue for the library, that a committee was formed to improve the conduct of the black stone examination and *Mr Anderson . . . appointed to fit up the Black Stone in a proper manner*.¹⁰ This resulted in the making of the chair that we see today and all but one of the relevant tradesman's accounts survives. The first relates to the stone itself:

Glasgow 20th Sept. 1775	
Acct The Coledge of Glasgow to Arch Shaw	
To Sawing & polishing the Black Stone	16
To a porter for Carying it to & from the Coledge.	— 6
	£o. 16. 6
Glasgow 13th June 1776	
Received payment of the above by me	
Archd. Shaw	

Archibald Shaw, listed in Tait's directory of 1783¹² as *marble cutter, Queen's Street*, was not among the dozen or so tradesmen with whom the College held an established account. William Martin, or Martine, however, supplied the majority of the College's needs for wright work during the 1770s and to the end of the century. Subscribing to a pattern common to several of the trades represented in the accounts. Martin had first worked for the College in 1766 when the principal wrights were Robert and Archibald Smith. Martin's dominance in turn gave way, rather abruptly in 1799, to one Andrew



2. The Chair in use during a Cowan medal examination, 1993

Photograph: Media Services, University of Glasgow

McFarlane. He appears in Tait's Directory as *wright, Bridgewater* and three years later in Jones's Directory¹³ as *cabinet-maker & house-wright* at the same address not far from the waterside timber yards. He purchased land for housebuilding from the University in 1777, no doubt taking part in the speculative western expansion of the City, and in 1791 was a subscriber to Sheraton's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*. University records of the 1790s describe him as *upholsterer*. During the 1780s and 1790s he traded in partnership with a son, James Martin, and on 25 July 1803



3. The
Blackstone
Chair. Rear
view

Photograph:
Media Service:
University of
Glasgow



4. The Scots Royal Arms

Photograph: Media Services, University of Glasgow



5. The British Royal Arms

Photograph: Media Services, University of Glasgow

petitioned for voluntary sequestration. He died between August and October 1803.¹⁴ In an account submitted and paid in June 1776 the following entries occur:¹⁵

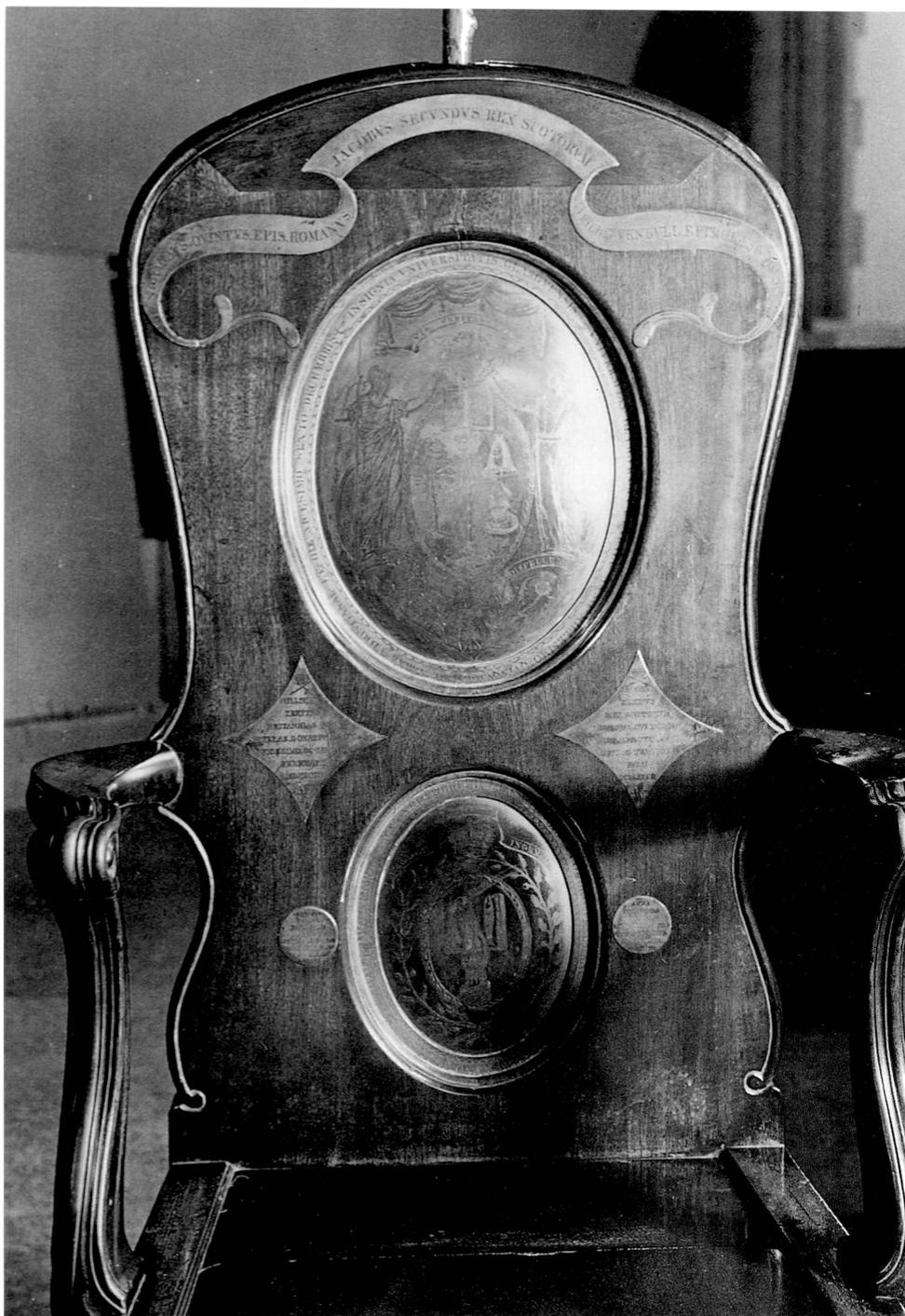
1775				
Octbr 14	To 44½ feet of Mahogany for a Chair for the Black Stone & Candelstand	1	9	8
	To wood for the frame for do	2	1½	
	To one Sett of Castors for do	1	6	
	To Turning the pillar for the Candel Stand Rushes and oil Glue & Nails	1	2½	
	To 6 Scrws for the Elbows of the Chair		6½	
	To a Brass Socit for the CandelStand		10	
	To 24 days six hours worke of Same Frame att do 20	2	1	;
		<hr/>		
		3	16	10½
Dbr 6th	To wood for a press for the Baytree		5	
	To 2 Locks for the presses for Chair & Baytree 2/6		5	
	To Nails used att do presses	1	3	
	To worke att the presses making	ii	4	
	To 2 pair of hinges & screws	1	8	
		<hr/>		
		i	4=3	

The gaps between stone and wood are filled with putty and an entry in the accounts of the Bedellus, John McLachlan (the *honest John* who was still crying *fluxit* in 1817) for 15 October 1775 states 'for wax roset and other staff [sic] for the Black Stone Chair -1/2'. 'Roset' is an obsolete Scots terms for resin. Square plugs in the base of the arms seem to mask a total of eight, not six, screws and certainly the rear and possibly the front castors are replacements. The casing at the foot of each leg is also presumably of a later date. The *Bay Tree*, the leaves and berries of which are presently painted green and red, is detachable and it is not surprising therefore, that it was stored separately. The candlestand does not survive.

There is no mention in June 1776 of the elaborate applied carving on the back of the Chair: the Scots Royal Arms above and, below, the Royal Arms current between 1714 and 1801, which included the arms of Hanover as the fourth quartering.¹⁶ (Figs 3, 4 & 5) These are, however, accounted for in Martin's submission of the following year and may not have been part of the original design:¹⁷

1776				
May 21st	To ii½ feet mahogany for the British arms put one the BlackStone Chair 10p foot	=	9	4½
	To 1½ days worke of one man preparing ditto	=	2	6
		<hr/>		
			ii	10½
			[ie: 11s. 10½d.]	

A further set of references describe the manufacture and fitting of the inscriptions and heraldic arms which are sunk into the back of the chair. The scroll at the top names those involved in the founding of the University in 1451: *JACOBVS SECVNDVS REX*



6. The Blackstone Chair. Detail showing engraved inscriptions and heraldic arms sunk into back of chair

Photograph: Media Services, University of Glasgow

SCOTORVM/NICOLAUS QVINTVS EPIS ROMANVS/WILL TVRNBVLL EPIS GLASGVENSIS. The larger of the two oval plates bears the arms of the University, the smaller those of the College. Each is surrounded by a separate inscribed border.¹⁸ On the concave-sided quadrilateral plates are inscriptions recording the *Nova Erectio*, or refounding, by James VI in 1577 and the important grant of £300 per annum by William III. The smaller circular plates record Queen Anne's contribution towards the salary of the Professor of Humanity and George I's additions to the revenues available for salaries including an endowment of the chair in Ecclesiastical History.¹⁹ All of these were worked by James Crighton, 'hammerman, grammer school wynd',²⁰ and Andrew Ready, engraver. On 2 May 1777 Crighton was paid, among other jobs, £2. 19s. for his part in the making of the chair:²¹

Novr 9th 1775	To Cast and Plate Brass for the following articles	£1 ; ;
	A Scroll bearing the name of Jas. the 2d	
	An Oval plate & border bearing the Glasw. Arms.	
	Two Square plates bearing the name of Willm. the 3d [sic]	
	An Oval plate & border bearing the College Arms.	
	Two round plates bearing the names of Geo.e the 1st and Queen Ann.—	
	To forming and preparing these plates for the Graver.	1 14 ;
	To preparing these plates, borders &c for gilding	; 5 ;

It was not until June 1779 that 'Margaret Boswell Widow of the deceased Andrew Ready Engraver' was paid the £8. 14s. incurred in engraving the plates on the chair.²² The relevant entries in the account are annotated in pencil BS in what I take to be a contemporary hand:

BS	A large Coat of Arms w th an Inscription & border	4.	4.	-
BS	1 do smaller do —do	2.	2.	-
BS	2 small square plates w th do	1.	4.	-
BS	2 do Round do		.12	-
BS	1 Large Scroll do		.12	-

Once ready the plates were affixed to the chair by one of Martin's employees:²³

1776 Octbr 5	To 1 foot 10 inch Mahogany for mouldings for the Brass plates for the Chair	; ; 9
	To one day six hours worke att ditto	; 2 8
		[2s. 17d.] ²⁴

The cost of the 'wax roset &c for fixing the plates in the BlackStone Chair', 1s. 6d., was again charged to the account of the Bedellus.²⁵

In all the Chair was one and a half years in the making, a conspicuous delay of twelve months possibly the result of Ready's death. The cabinetwork took just over 28 days. The only part of the structure not accounted for is the brass bay tree. Although clearly in existence in October 1775 none of the tradesman's accounts, as from May of that year

when Professor Anderson was appointed to oversee the construction of a chair, make mention of it. Several workers in metal apart from Crichton submitted accounts: the principal smith, Robert Hood,²⁶ John Thomson, an *ironsmith* who supplied lamps, and J. Wilson, *smith* working specifically in the observatory. Interestingly there is nothing surviving for that year from Margaret Thomson, *coppersmith*. She carried on a small trade with the College before and after 1775 and was clearly not the relict of Thomson the ironsmith. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the bay tree, including its hour glass, was already in use before the chair was made.

There is a thought-provoking postscript to the story of the Blackstone Chair. Looking under the seat, past the smooth yet uneven stone to the wooden board which makes up the rear half, a deeply incised inscription can be discerned: *JAMES FRAME x GLASGOW*. A thorough examination of a piece of furniture may occasionally yield such apparently informative 'maker's' marks. In the case of the Blackstone, however, an attribution to Frame would be erroneous. Frame, whose name occurs in aggregated accounts entered in the Faculty minutes between 1794 and 1807, was a relatively minor figure in the history of the University's works. Between June 1794 and June 1795, for example, Martin's account amounted to £40. 1s. 7¹/₂d., that of *Fram* £4. 19s. 1d. He appears to have been a self-employed worker carrying out tasks such as 'repairing one of the Elbow Chairs forehall new top rail -/2/6'. Unfortunately, no itemised accounts have survived for the period June 1795 to June 1810 but it is probable that Frame repaired the Chair, the stone seat of which might have been in danger of falling to the ground, between 1799, when Martin ceased supplying the College, and 1807. He may have introduced the cross-shaped arrangement of reinforcing members under the seat, dove-tailed and screwed to the three seat rails and morticed to the rear 'hips'.²⁷ The prominent addition of his name to the Chair, however, might be considered fraudulent.

The more extensive the evidence for the manufacture of an item of furniture, the more demanding the questions asked by the furniture historian become. Who can be credited with the design of the chair? The requirements for the commission were established by the practice of examination, the traditional symbolism of laureation, a desire to proclaim the several occasions of Royal benefaction, and the black stone itself. Although Martin was probably responsible for the form of the wooden frame and the eventual assembly of all the components, the project was coordinated by Anderson, and he and his colleagues presumably decided the inclusion and arrangement of stone, bay tree and heraldry. Martin remains an interesting figure, however, and it is hoped that more information concerning his business may be unearthed and further pieces from his workshop come to light.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. From *The Student on the Black Stone*, a supplement to the periodical *The Student*. Quoted by D. Murray, *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow*, 1925, p. 84. For a twentieth century literary allusion see R. A. Knox, 'John Buchan and the Black Stone' in *Avenue*, No. 13, January 1993, pp. 23-4.
2. Most accounts, including J. D. Mackie, *The University of Glasgow: 1451-1951: A Short History*, Glasgow 1954, follow Murray 1925.
3. Céline Blair and David Jones have noted that 'much of the fashionable furniture manufactured in early nineteenth-century Glasgow has remained tantalisingly anonymous'. 'Furnishing the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow Style, 1809' in *Regional Furniture*, Vol. V, 1991, p. 86
4. See, for example, Hugh Roberts, 'Royal Thrones, 1760-1840' in *Furniture History*, volume xxx, 1989, pp. 61-85, Christopher Gilbert, 'Three Masonic Chairs at Minerva Lodge, Ashton-under-Lyne' in *Regional Furniture*, Vol. VIII, 1994, pp. 53-57, or Clare Graham, *Ceremonial and Commemorative Chairs in Great Britain*, 1994.
5. Murray, 1925, p. 86.
6. Dalzel, *History of the University of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, 1862, Vol. II, p. 143. J. Coutts, *A History of the University of Glasgow: from its foundation in 1451 to 1909*, Glasgow, 1909, p. 138.
7. A. Bower, *History of the University of Edinburgh*, 3 vols, Edinburgh, 1817, I, p. 234, but no source is cited. That the Chapel was used for graduation see N. MacPherson, *Notes on the Chapel, Crown, and other Ancients Buildings of King's College, Aberdeen*, Aberdeen, 1890, p. 19.
8. There is no evidence that this is the black stone. See R. Cant, *The University of St Andrews, A Short History*, Edinburgh, 1970, p. 20, note 1.
9. The subject of black stones in other contexts is also worthy of study although sound information is elusive. Swearing stones were often recorded by eighteenth century travellers in Scotland, in particular the black stones, probably basalt, of 'St Columba's Shrine', Iona. Of the latter, however, Martin Martin wrote that they were 'so call'd, not from their Colour, for that is grey, but from the Effects that Tradition say ensued upon Perjury, if any one became guilty of it after Swearing on these Stones in the usual manner'. See *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, 1703, quoted in Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Argyll: An Inventory: Volume 4: Iona*, Edinburgh, 1982, pp. 138 & 233. The 'stones', probably a late medieval tombstone, were destroyed by a local lunatic around 1820.
10. Faculty Minutes, 26690, 6 December 1774, 2 May 1775.
11. Bundle 58285.
12. *John Tait's Directory, For the City of Glasgow . . . From the 15th May 1783, to the 15th May 1784*, 1783.
13. *Jones's Directory or Useful Pocket Companion For The Year 1787*.
14. Scottish Record Office, bundle CS230/SEQ/M1/16.
15. Bundle 58285.
16. The drawing in Murray 1925 incorrectly excludes the Hanoverian quartering.
17. Bundle 58274. It seems surprising that this carving took only one and a half days to achieve.
18. For transcriptions of the inscriptions see Murray 1925.
19. Coutts, pp. 162, 175, 188 & 192-3.
20. Tait, 1783.
21. Bundle 58274.
22. Bundle 58274. This may be the same Andrew Ready who engraved a map of Glasgow in 1775. See G. H. Bushell, *Scottish Engravers: A Biographical Dictionary*, Oxford, 1949.
23. Bundle 58274.
24. Comparing the one and a half days work at 2s. 6d. on May 21st 1776 it is clear that some at least of Martin's employees worked a ten hour day at a rate of 2d. per hour. The price of mahogany appears from these accounts to have fluctuated from 8d. in October 1775 to 10d. in May 1776 and 5d. in October 1776.
25. Bundle 58274. The date given is 8 November 1776 yet it seems unlikely that anyone other than a wright would put the finishing touches to the chair.
26. Possibly the father of Andrew and John Hood, *hammermen, High Street*, listed in Tait 1783.
27. A combination of screws of different dates points, in fact, to one or more subsequent repairs.