

SHADFORD, SHIRLEY, AND THE CAISTOR WORKSHOP

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The vernacular chair making tradition which arose in Lincolnshire during the late eighteenth century, and which developed to its fullest extent during the first half of the nineteenth century, was part of a wider regional tradition extending from Leicestershire and Rutland to the south, Nottinghamshire to the west, and, predominantly, in the industrial conurbations of South Yorkshire to the north. Within Lincolnshire, the chair making trade was widely dispersed in towns and villages throughout the county. Although this tradition was predominantly concerned with the manufacture of Windsor chairs, a separate and persistent tradition of rush seated chair making also developed in a few centres. Elsewhere in the county, the towns of Sleaford and Grantham in the south-east and the inland port of Boston to the east, were important centres of Windsor chair production. Here many workshop owners name and place stamped their work, and in so doing, have provided evidence of a wide anthology of regional Windsor chair styles which can be firmly identified as specific Lincolnshire patterns. This evidence illustrates that the Windsor chair makers from this region were highly innovative, with numerous chair designs being made, often through the device of interchanging parts to create new styles within basic chair frames. The systematic tracing of the biographies of individual makers working in these centres has, too, enabled a correlation to be drawn between generations of makers and different Windsor styles, with the result that a chronology of designs has also been established in relation to changes in workshop owners.

Information about other chair making centres in Lincolnshire has been less forthcoming, but a series of exciting revelations about the chair making trade in the village of Caistor has produced vivid new evidence of a further local tradition. Caistor is a small market town lying in the Lincolnshire Wolds some twenty miles east of Lincoln, and has no immediately obvious qualifications for hosting a Windsor chair making tradition, and it is likely that the trade flourished here simply in response to local need for common chairs. The collage of information which has been traced indicates that Windsor chair making in Caistor was begun in the first quarter of the nineteenth century by John Todd, who had learned the trade from his father, William Todd, who worked in the High Street in St Botolphs in the city of Lincoln between 1805 and 1822. John Todd worked there too, until some time before his father's death when he moved to Caistor to set up in business as a chair maker, general turner, and coppice worker, in the Horse Market in the centre of Caistor. Although Todd is not recorded as a chair maker in a trade directory until 1826, a surviving invoice issued by him in 1825 (Fig. 1) shows that in addition to selling 'half a dozen of chairs' for £1 16s. *od.* in May 1825, he turned his hand to making other items, probably utilising coppiced ash, since in July he supplied four swathe (hay) rakes for £1 8s. *od.* to the same buyer, Mr Dixon.

Only one chair firmly provenanced to this maker has so far been recorded (Figs 2 and 3). This is a comb back Windsor chair variety of small dimensions, which has a sawn two part arm form, where the two sections are joined at the rear with a most unusual method of

tenoning. This chair, again atypically within this regional tradition, is decoratively painted and varnished to resemble the japanned finish so fashionable in the early nineteenth century, and the comb rail is 'lined out' with gold paint. Similarly the ring turnings on the legs are also embellished in this way. This remarkable chair is faintly stamped towards the rear underside of the seat 'I. TODD. CASTOR [*sic*] 1844'. Although Windsor chair makers from many traditions habitually stamped their chairs with their name, and sometimes the place of manufacture, it is rare to find chairs dated as well, and this may indicate that this example was not a typical design from Todd's workshop, but was made for himself, or, given its small dimensions, perhaps for his wife or daughter.

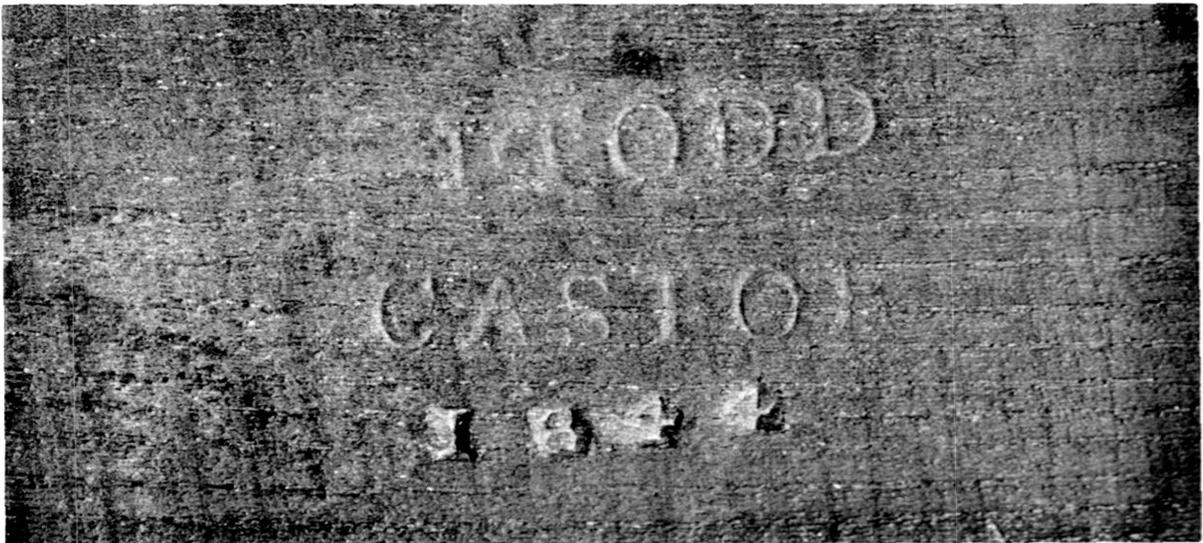
John Todd continued working in the Horsemarket, Caistor, until about 1856 when he is last recorded in a trade directory. It seems probable that Todd had raised a successor to himself since by 1841 another chair maker, Edward Alcock, who was then aged fifteen, was also recorded in the town as a chair maker, presumably being employed by Todd, as was Ann Sanderson who was also recorded as a chair turner. Alcock continued to work in the town for some thirty years, being recorded as a chair maker in 1841, and although absent in the 1851 census, is shown as a master chair turner in both the 1861 and 1871 census in the Horsemarket, a term which indicates that he was a workshop owner during this latter period. Other chair makers are periodically recorded working in the town between 1851 and 1881, and although it is not clear whether or not they were self-employed, it is possible that they were employed by Alcock, or by a further workshop owner, William Shirley (see Appendix). It is probable that all of these makers were working within the regional tradition, producing designs of chairs which would have been recognisable as local Windsor styles. However, no name stamped chairs from Alcock's workshop have so far been located to firmly identify his work, and it is through the evidence of chairs stamped by William Shirley, and through the workshop diary kept by one of his employees, John William Shadford, that the clearest picture of the Caistor chair making tradition is achieved.

William Shirley was born in Grantham in 1821, the son of an established Windsor chair and spinning wheel maker, also named William. William Shirley, senior, had been admitted as a Freeman of Grantham in 1815 following a seven year apprenticeship to John and William Taylor respectively. In turn, William Shirley the younger learned his trade in what was one of the most innovative and dynamic centres of Windsor chair making in the county. He moved to Caistor in 1843, when, in his early twenties, he set up his own workshop in Fountain (Duck) Street. A photograph taken some time during the second half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 4) portrays a rare image of Windsor chair making workshop, and shows that Shirley was a resourceful man who had harnessed the power of the spring which gave Fountain Street its name, and had channelled the water along a wooden aquaduct to drive an overshot wheel, which, in turn, was probably coupled to the machinery used in the chair making works. Shirley's workshop appears to have had a stable history with little alteration in the workforce over a thirty-year period. In addition to William Shirley. John Shadford worked there from 1843 for fourteen years. William Shirley's brother, Frederick joined the workshop in about 1851 as an apprentice, and stayed for at least twenty years. William Shirley's son, Alfred had also joined the business by 1871, and continued working there until its close. At no time does a large workforce seem to have been employed, and in 1861, Shirley employed two men and three boys, and in 1881, just three men were employed and one apprentice.

M^{rs} Dixon
 Dixon
 To John Todd
 May 13th 1/2 a Dozn of Chairs - 1. 16. 0
 July 19 2 Swathe Rakes to Rotherwell 14. 0
 2 Ditto to Holton 14. 0
 Billed by John Todd £ 30 0
 Nov 10th - 1825

1. Invoice issued by John Todd (fl. 1825–56) chair maker of Caistor, Lincolnshire, dated 1825, for '1/2 a dozn. of chairs' at £1 16s. od. The invoice shows that he also made another coppice product, swathe (hay) rakes

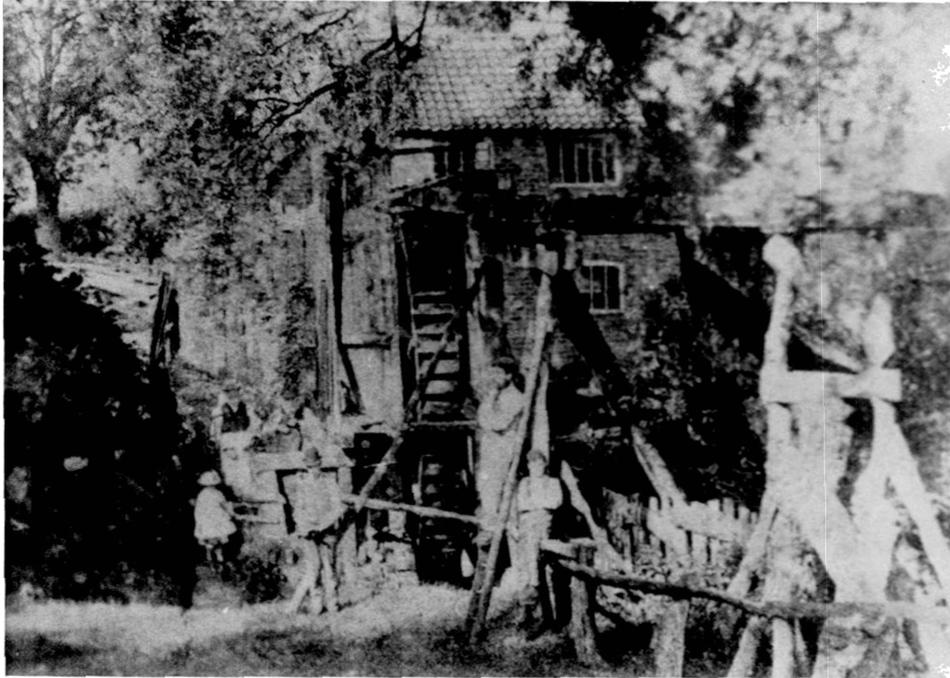
Photograph Courtesy Mr P. H. Gibbons, Holton-le-Moor and Lincoln Archives Office



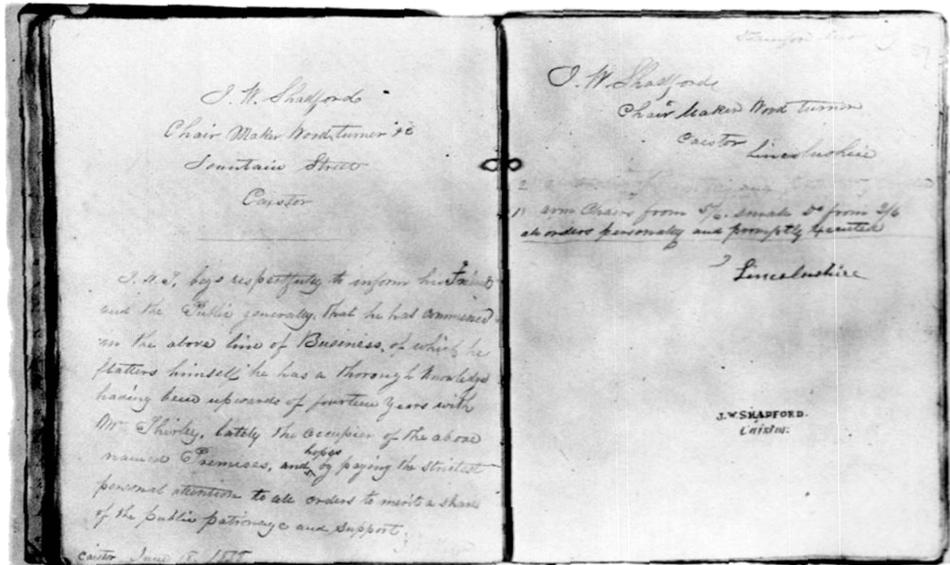
2. Stamp of James Todd, chair maker, of Caistor, Lincolnshire (fl. 1825–56) impressed towards the front underneath the seat of the chair shown in Figure 3



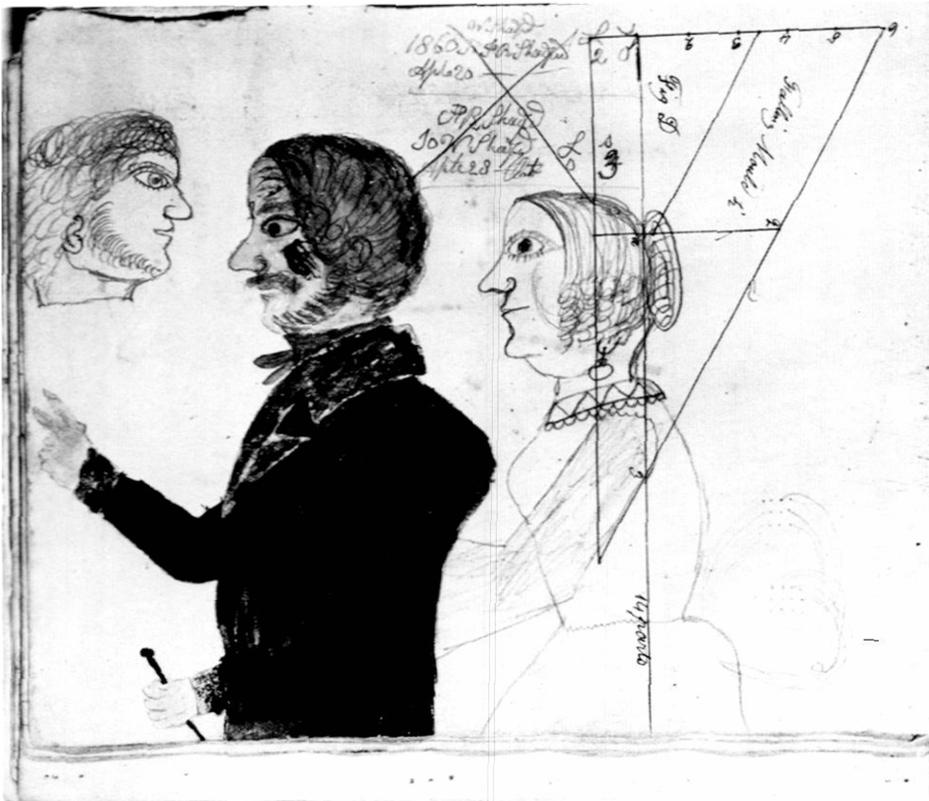
3. High comb back Windsor. Elm with ash legs, stretchers and spindles. 110 h, 76 bh, 46 w, 37 d. Painted in original black paint, with gold lines on the comb rail. Stamped 'I. TODD. CASTOR. 1844' under seat
Courtesy Dr & Mrs Foord



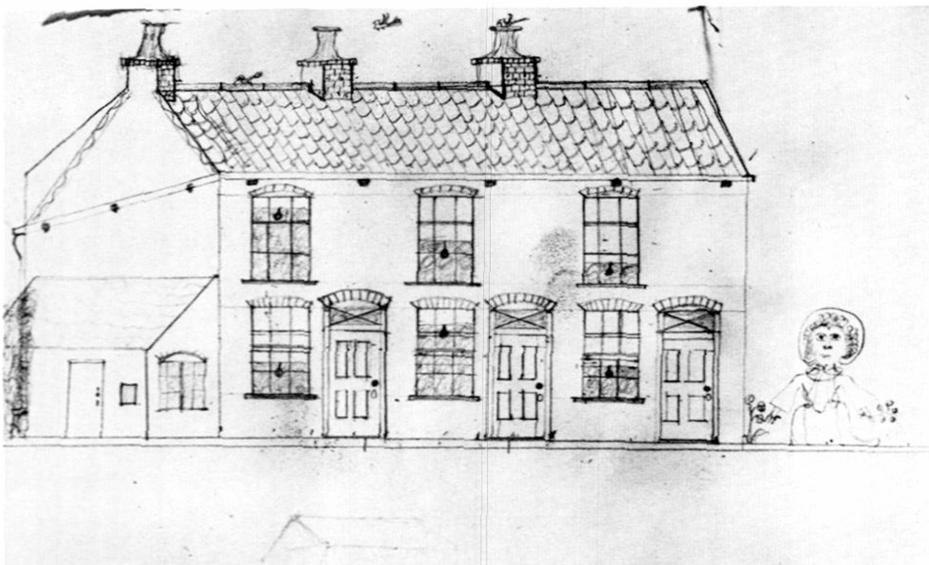
4. Photograph of Shirley's wooyard and workshop, Fountain (Duck) Street, Caistor, second half of the nineteenth century. Running water was channelled to operate an overshot wheel.
Wellholme Gallery, Grimsby



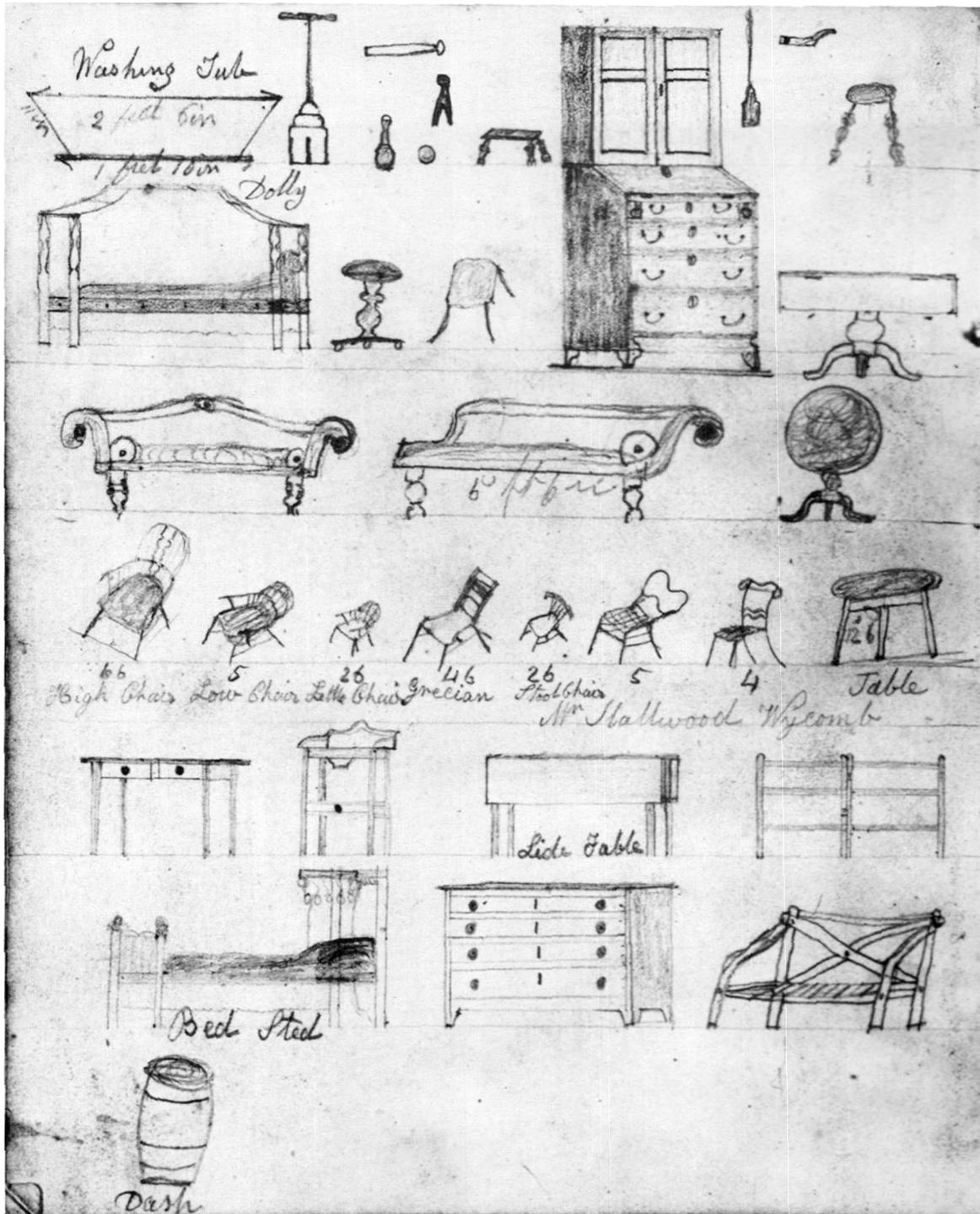
5. Letter, 18 June 1858, written by John Shadford in his notebook, probably as a draft of a hand-bill, announcing to prospective customers that he was about to set up in business as a chair maker and wood turner in his own right



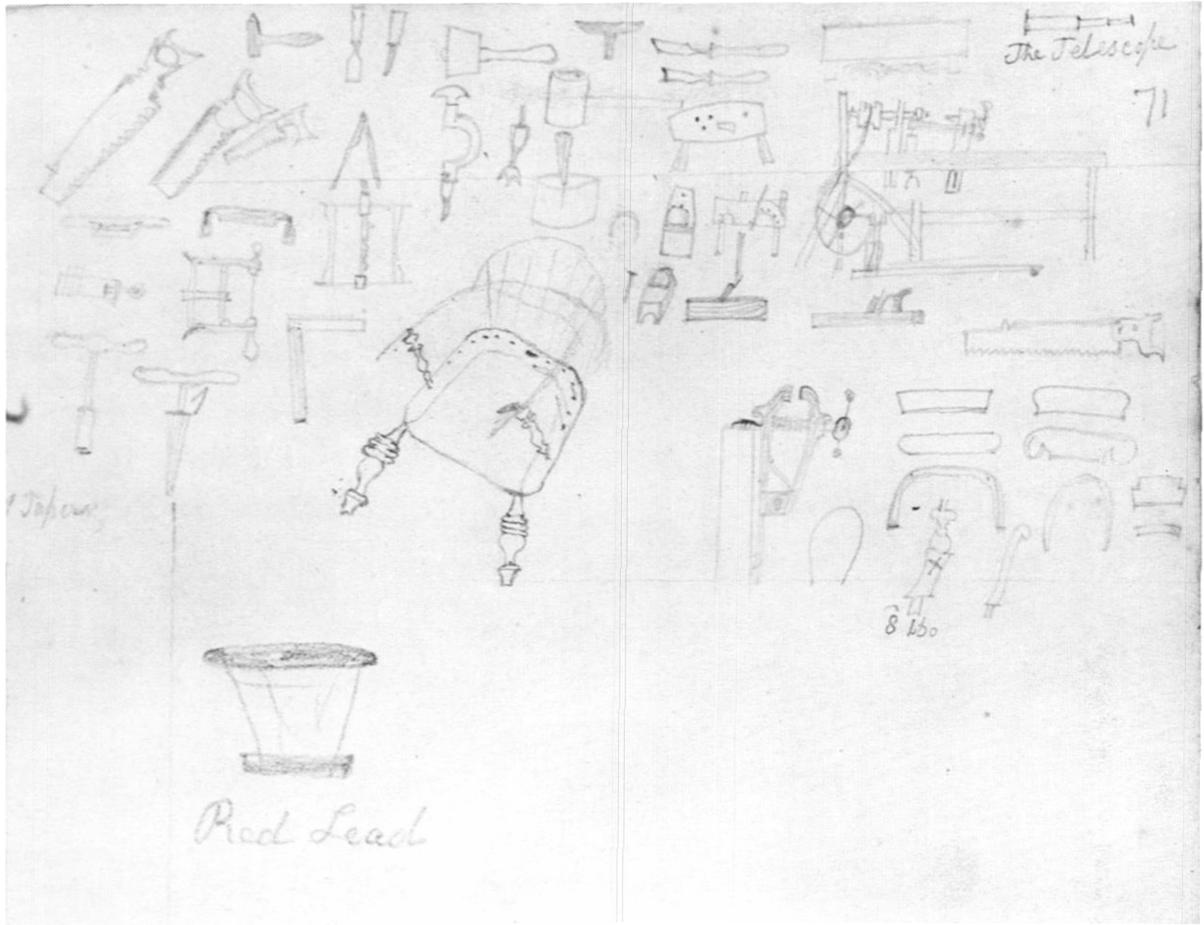
6. Drawing from the Shadford notebook, c. 1860, probably a self-portrait of John Shadford and his wife, Harriet



7. Drawing of a row of terraced houses, one of which was probably Shadford's home, the lean-to building to the left may have been his workshop



8 and 9. Shadford made two pictorial inventories in his notebook, including his household furniture and his workshop tools and devices. These drawings are unique visual records of a woodworking craftsman's possessions



9.



10. This form of footstool commonly made in the Nottinghamshire Windsor chair making centre of Worksop, was used alternatively as a decorative item to stand a prized piece of pottery on, or as a pancheon for proving dough before the fire. Poplar top, walnut legs one replace c. 1845. Attributed to Caistor, Lincolnshire. 16¹/₂ h, 23 w, 16¹/₂ d

Courtesy Mrs E. Mumby, Nettleton, nr Caistor

The Caistor chair making tradition might have remained part of the deep anonymity which characterises so much of the history of working people and their material culture. That a partial history of the local tradition has been achieved is due to the survival of remarkably diverse forms of evidence which have been revealed following different types of research. The rare photograph of the Shirley workshop, for example was found by accident in a search of the County Photographic Archive as part of a search for regional cottage and farmhouse interiors. Field research in Caistor and in surrounding villages has also been fruitful in revealing a small anthology of chairs stamped 'SHIRLEY' and which are still in every-day use. This form of research continues, and other chair designs may yet be revealed. Those that have been firmly provenanced in this way are shown in Figures 11, 12, and 15.

It is, however, from the astonishing survival of a workshop notebook that a more vivid sense of the tradition may be drawn. This common-place book has survived as part of the Dixon estate papers, as has the Todd invoice. The book measures $7\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ in. and contains some 133 pages held between hard covers. Its origins are obscure, and initially appears to have belonged to a formally educated person named John Scail, who may have been an agricultural engineer. Into this book, are neatly entered examples of Euclidian geometry, problem solving exercises, and working drawings of agricultural machines and devices. How John Shadford came to own the book is not known, but he used it as a place in which to draw naive scenes, people, and animals, recipes for stains and medicines, furniture including chairs and a measured drawing of a turned stool leg. Perhaps the most revealing drawings include those of his household furniture, as well as the tools and devices contained in his workshop. In another section he copied out correspondence he had received and written, as well as rough drafts of a trade card and hand bill. This disparate information is of inestimable value in providing information about the design of chairs made by Shirley and Shadford, as well as providing a unique record of workshop tools and devices. The other forms of information which Shadford included in the book give rare texture to our knowledge of the life of a practising vernacular craftsman. The reason why Shadford kept his notebook may be accounted for by the fact that he was deaf from birth, apparently profoundly so, since short part-sentences found in various parts of the book suggest that he occasionally asked questions and received answers in written form. In one place, he asks a question of someone else in written form, 'Will you lend me your sit bath if you please my wife want it' (p. 23). The book therefore takes on the role of a channel of communication for Shadford, enabling him to express himself in iconic and written form.

John William Shadford lived all his life in Caistor, being born there in 1828. He was probably William Shirley's first apprentice, aged fifteen years when Shirley set up his workshop in 1843. He lived with his mother and two sisters in Fountain (Duck) Street, close to his place of work. Little is known of the first part of his life, but the notebook shows that John Shadford's career underwent great changes during 1857-58, when, following the death of his mother in January 1857, he inherited the family home. In the following year the draft of a letter to prospective customers shows that he left the employment of William Shirley after fourteen years, and became self-employed as a chair maker and wood turner (Fig. 5). In August 1858, he married Harriet who was seven years his senior, and she seemingly brought to the marriage one or more properties, since at about this time, Shadford drafted an advertisement for the rental of a property in Fountain Street, 'with two

lower rooms and four bedrooms at 5 guinees a year'. Accounts show that in fact he let three properties and a shop, the latter to William Shirley between 1859 and 1861.

A sense of Shadford's appearance is given in what is probably a self-portrait of John Shadford with his wife, Harriet, which is drawn and water-coloured in the notebook, and shows him to be a prosperous looking person with side whiskers (Fig. 6). A further detailed drawing in his notebook suggests that his home was one of a row of terraced houses with pantiled roofs, typical of the region, and to the left, a lean-to building may have been his workshop (Fig. 7). Shadford seems to have prospered as a self-employed chair maker, and on two facing pages of his notebook, he carefully drew a detailed visual inventory of both his household furniture to the left, and on the right-hand page, he made a unique record of the tools and devices used in his workshop, and in so doing, created the only known visual record of the contents of a nineteenth-century Windsor chair maker's workshop (Figs 8 and 9).

The inventory of furniture shows that John Shadford and his wife enjoyed a well-furnished home, with both a half-tester and a canopy bed, two upholstered settees, and a rustic one which was perhaps used out of doors: five occasional tables of different kinds: a chest of drawers; a dressing table, wash stand and towel rail; and a bureau bookcase. A row of seven designs of chairs, each with a number below, is also included, but these may relate to an inventory of designs supplied or bought from Mr Stallwood of Wycombe, whose name is written below the drawings. Richard Stallwood is recorded as a chair maker and manufacturer in High Wycombe, Bucks, between 1844 and 1891. Other items include a washing tub, dolly and pegs, a skittle and ball, a barrel with the word 'dash' written below, suggesting that this was a butter churn. Finally three forms of stools are shown, of which the example in the upper row, some seven items from the left, is of a small decorative type, hitherto thought to be peculiar to the Windsor chair making community who worked in Worksop, Nottinghamshire. Shadford's drawing suggests that they were part of this local tradition too, and an example located in a cottage some three miles from Caistor supports the view that they were probably part of this local tradition too (Fig. 10).

The drawings of the tools and devices contained in Shadford's workshop are particularly valuable, since in addition to illustrating a conventional anthology of tools common to the woodworking trades, specialist items are included which were specifically part of a Windsor chair maker's utensils. For example, in the centre of the drawing, a mallet and wedge is shown splitting a sawn log to gain segments for turning. To the right of this drawing, are two 'straining' benches, used to bend Windsor hoops. To the upper right hand corner, is a 'steaming tank' with a fire burning below, in which cleft sections were steamed before being bent to shape. Below this drawing, Shadford's major item of workshop machinery, a treadle lathe, is shown, above a group of sawn and bent chair parts. In the left hand corner of the picture is a vessel with 'red lead' written below, confirming that the red stain found on some Caistor chairs is this substance.

John Shadford also drew many sketches of the Windsor chairs which he made both as an employee of William Shirley, and later as a self-employed man. These designs show that the Caistor chair makers were working within a tradition in which some chair designs followed certain common patterns made in other Lincolnshire centres, including, for example, high and low hoop back Windsors made with plain spindles in the back, and high back varieties with splats. These include examples with stylised fleur-de-lis motifs, as well as the more



11. High back Windsor chair. Beech with elm seat. Stamped 'SHIRLEY' on the side of seat, c.1870. 107 h, 70 bh, 49 w, 38½ d

*Courtesy Mrs E. Mumby.
Nettleton, nr Caistor*



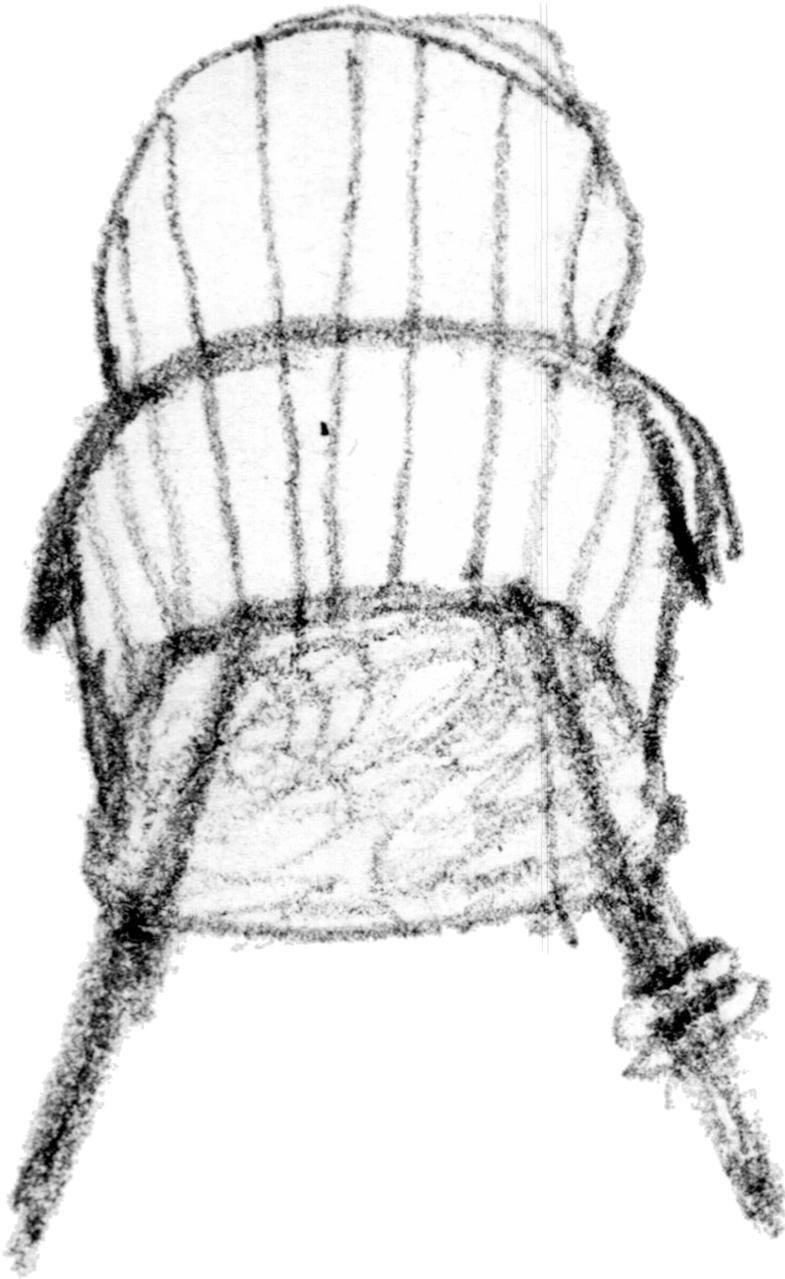
12. High back
Windsor chair,
mounted on
original rockers.
Ash with elm seat.
103 h, 68½ bh,
49 w, 38 d. c.1850.
Stamped 'SHIRLEY'
on side edge of seat



13. Child's low Windsor with plain spindles. Ash with elm seat. A common Lincolnshire chair pattern drawn by Shadford many times in his notebook (See Figure 14)

Courtesy Mrs E. Mumby, Nettleton, nr Caistor

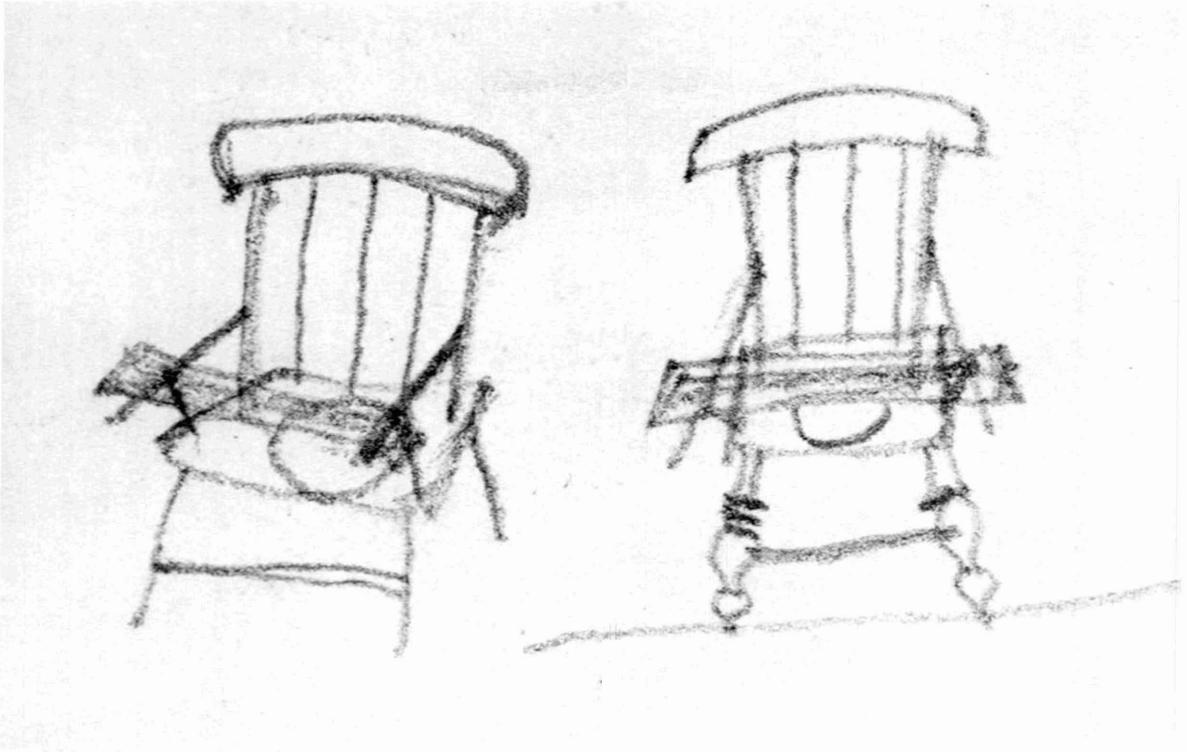
14. Pencil drawing from Shadford's notebook, showing the common regional form of low Windsor with plain spindles



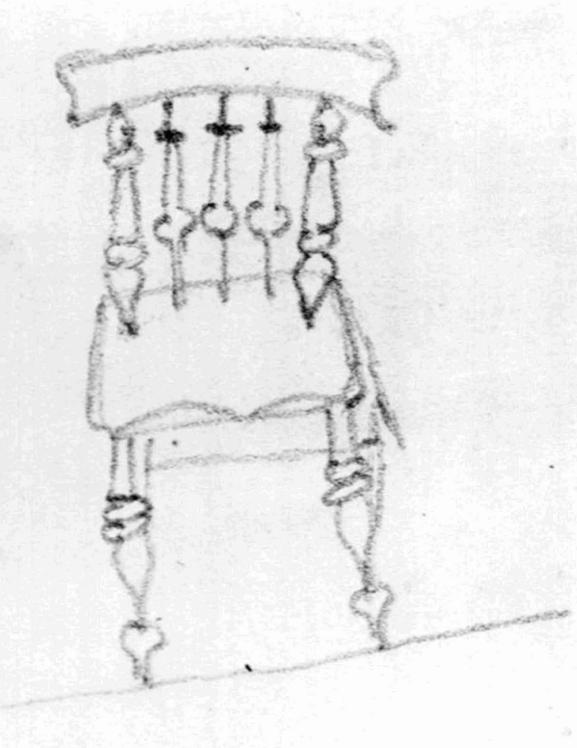


15. 'Grecian' kitchen chair. Alder with elm seat, 81 h, 40 bh, 37 w, 36 d. c.1850. Stamped 'SHIRLEY' on rear edge of seat

Courtesy Mrs E. Mumby, Nettleton, nr Caistor



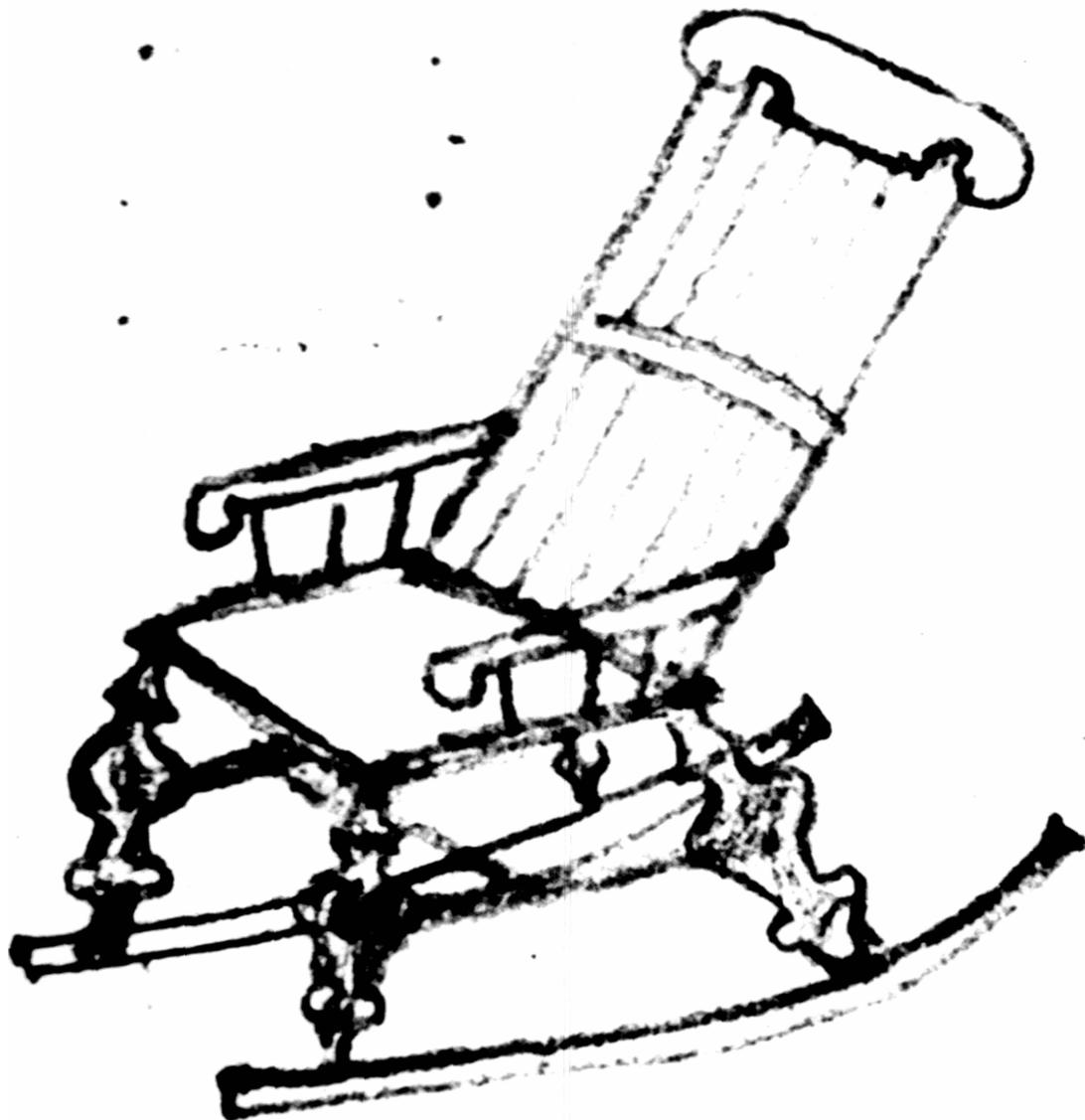
16. Pencil drawing from Shadford's notebook, showing child's comb back Windsors with food trays and holes in the seats, for chamber-pots



17. Pencil drawing of a 'Roman' kitchen chair from Shadford's notebook, indicating that this pattern was probably also made in Caistor. This style was made as an alternative to the 'Grecian' pattern in Worksop, Notts but was uncommon in the Lincolnshire tradition



18. High spindle back arm chair with low arms and original rockers. This form of 'nursing' or fireside chair was drawn many times in Shadford's notebook. Ash with elm seat. 108 h, 78 bh, 48½ w, 39 d. Stained with red lead and varnished over c. 1860



19. Pencil drawing from Shadford's notebook, showing one of a number of drawings which he made of the chair shown in Figure 18

decorative fretted splat usually reserved for chairs made in yew. Examples of these two latter varieties stamped by Shirley, have been documented in homes local to Caistor, (Figs 11 and 12), and a drawing by Shadford shows an example of this chair on page 89 of his notebook. He makes no usual reference to the chair shown in Figure 11 and this omission suggests that although many chairs are drawn in the notebook, they are not a complete record of all the designs made in Caistor.

Examples of both adult and children's plain stick back Windsors appear in many places in the notebook, and an example of a child's chair of this type from a cottage in Nettleton, near to Caistor, is probably an example of Shadford's work (Fig. 13). An example of the style drawn by Shadford, shown in Figure 14, illustrates how he emphasised the use of the two ring turning on the leg, a design motif common to Lincolnshire Windsor chairs after about 1845. The Nettleton child's chair also embodies a further, secondary turning device uncommon in Lincolnshire Windsors from elsewhere. This is a single ring turning on the foot, a detail which is also shown in the Grecian chair (Fig. 15). Further styles of plain stick back kitchen Windsor chairs of a simple comb back variety were also drawn by Shadford in his book, although no examples have yet been discovered to confirm their existence. Shadford drew both adult and children's versions of this type, and examples from the notebook show the children's chairs to have had a food tray, as well as a hole for a chamber-pot (Fig. 16). A kitchen chair variety, regionally known as the 'Grecian' was also made in Caistor, and the example shown in Figure 15 is stamped 'Shirley', and a small drawing of this design by Shadford appears in the notebook. A further design of kitchen chair, known as a 'Roman', of which no actual example has yet been located, is also drawn in Shadford's notebook (See Fig. 17). Both of these designs are interesting, since although they were patterns made in the major Windsor chair making centre of Worksop in Nottinghamshire to the West of Caistor, they were probably not made in the main centres elsewhere in Lincolnshire, and illustrate that the Caistor makers were producing chairs within at least two different regional codes of design.

In addition to recognisable patterns from elsewhere in the North East Midlands, the Caistor makers made at least one design which was probably produced nowhere else. This is a design of low nursing chair which has two rows of elaborately turned spindles in the back, and was set on rockers (Fig. 18). These chairs are commonly found in North Lincolnshire, and appear to have been popular. Their surface finish is typically different from that of other chairs from the region, being painted with red lead and then varnished over. The use of this preparation is confirmed by the drawing of a vessel of red lead in Shadford's workshop contents drawing. This and the several times that Shadford drew the design of chair in his notebook (Fig. 19 for example), suggests that he could have been both designer and maker of this truly local Windsor style, and it is tempting to surmise that in addition to the innocent revelations of his life and work which his notebook reveals, he left a further legacy in the form of his own design of chair.

The chair making trade in Caistor was a truly vernacular furniture making tradition in which a group of men following a common specialist trade came together to make chairs for local consumption. That they were successful in supplying that need is reflected in the long duration of their working lives in the same craft. In the manner of many similar traditions, the end of the nineteenth century saw the end of the true vernacular expression of many furniture traditions and as younger men failed to enter into these trades, so they died out,

and mass produced furniture finally filled their place. Research into many of these traditions reinforces the view that such was the longevity of many workshops, that examples of furniture by local makers can often be located within the locality where they were made. This and other evidence of the lives of the craftsmen and the social context in which they worked, is the focus of Regional furniture studies.

NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

All measurements are in cm. h, total height; bh, height from seat to top; w, width of seat at widest point; d, depth of seat from front to back. All photographs from the Shadford notebook appear courtesy of the Lincoln Archive Office and Mr P. H. Gibbons, Holton-le-Moor.

APPENDIX
CHAIRMAKERS INCLUDED IN CENSUS RETURNS
FOR CAISTOR, 1841-81

1841	Alcock, Edward	age 25	Chair turner
	Sanderson Ann		Chair turner
	Todd, John		Chair turner
1851	Bingley, Freshnay	age 19	Chair maker. Duck St
	Chapman, Matthew	age 40	Chair turner
	Pearl, William	age 18	Chair maker. Horse Market
	Shadford, John	age 23	Chair maker. Duck St
	Shirley, William	age 33	Chair maker. Duck St
	Shirley, Frederick	age 15	Apprentice chair maker
1861	Allcock, Edward	age 46	Master chair turner. High St
	Chapman, Matthew	age 51	Chair turner. Fountain St
	Durham, James	age 18	Chair turner. West Rd
	Johnson, Daniel	age 44	Chair maker. High St
	Pearl, William		Chair turner. Back St
	Shadford William	age 34	Chair maker. Fountain St
	Shirley, William	age 43	Chair maker. Fountain St
1871	Alcuck, Edward	age 50	Chair maker
	Foster, George	age 25	Wood turner
	Shadford, John W.	age 43	Chair maker
	Sheck, James	age 13	Chair turner
	Shirley, Frederick	age 35	Chair maker
	Shirley, William	age 51	Chair maker
1881	Maddison, Charles	age 18	Apprentice chair maker
	Shadford, John W.	age 53	Chair maker. Currier's shop
	Shirley, Alfred	age 36	Chair maker
	Shirley, William	age 63	Chair maker. Fountain Villa
	Speck, Jesse	age 21	Chair turner. Unemployed.