

THE BOARD-SEATED TURNED CHAIRS PROJECT

Robert F. Trent

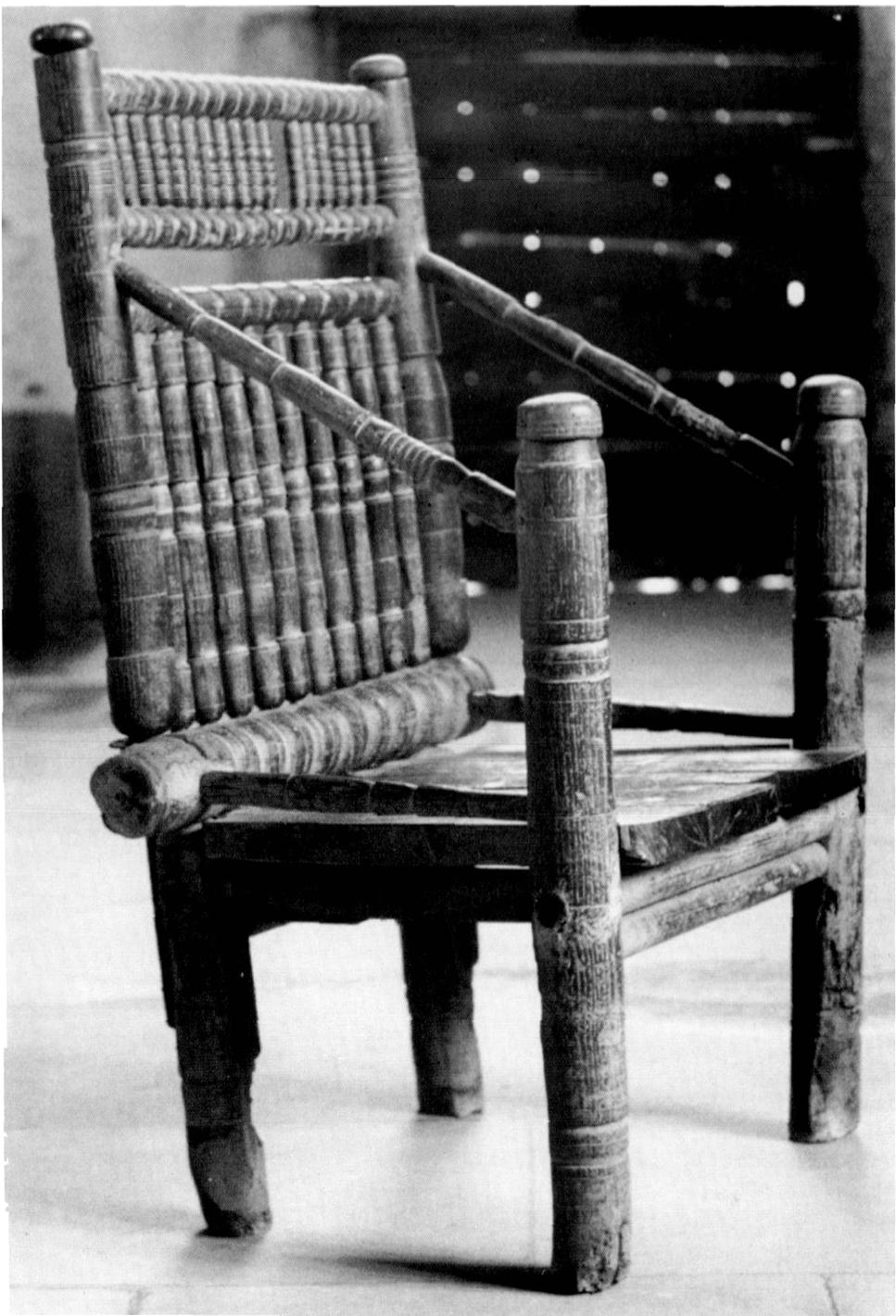
For the last five years, I have joined with John D. Alexander, Jr., of Baltimore, Maryland, and Allan Breed of York, Maine, in a study of board-seated turned chairs. While thousands of fibre-seated turned chairs exist, only a few hundred board-seated ones are known, and they therefore provide a convenient locus of inquiry. They are also conspicuous as 'high-end' productions, the finest chairs their makers could provide. Another rationale for the study is that the writer will provide the art historical narrative, but that Alexander and Breed will contribute other important insights.

Alexander is a renowned historian of the technology of working wood in a partially seasoned state. His 1978 book, *Make a Chair from a Tree: An Introduction to Working Green Wood*, is regarded as a bible by those devoted to modern artistic production of Appalachian draw-shaved chairs, one of whom is President Jimmy Carter! At the instance of the late Benno M. Forman and Robert Blair St George, Alexander's interests shifted to those great monuments of American chaisemaking, the Bradford, Brewster, Standish, and Carver chairs at Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth, Massachusetts. In short, Alexander has agreed to discuss how one can infer wet wood technology from surviving turned chairs, something that is easy to assume but difficult to demonstrate.

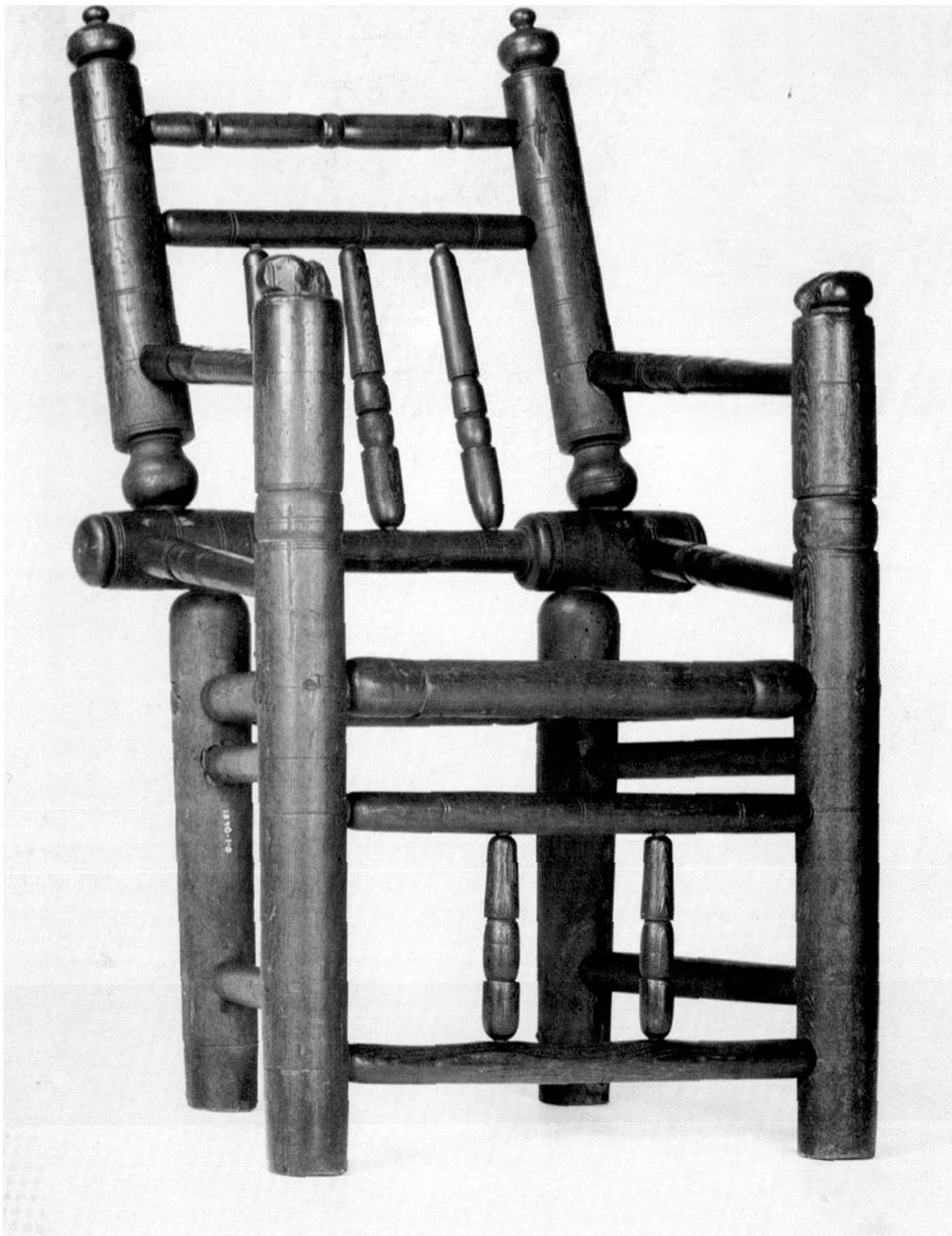
Allan Breed is a commercial cabinet maker and has extensive experience in working wet wood. His job is to make a dozen reproductions of the Bradford chair in order to test Alexander's hypotheses. Making only one will not do, because only production in quantity gets the artisan into the rhythm of turning the components and drilling the joints with the facility of a period workman.

Last August, Bill Cotton, Christopher Gilbert, Anthony Wells-Cole, Pauline Agius, and Lionel Reynolds of the RFS kindly housed me and drove me about England, searching for English analogues for American chairs. In particular, I was eager to see four examples: the two chairs at St Marnarck's, Lanreath, Cornwall, the Erasmus chair at the Master's Lodge, Queen's College, Cambridge, and the Ridley chair in the chapel of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

I learned of the Lanreath chairs from Bradford Rauschenberg's survey photos in the archives of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The three-posted chair need not concern us here, because it relates to recognised Welsh chairs, but the four-posted chair (Fig. 1) is of great importance, for two reasons. It does not seem to relate directly to Welsh chairs, and it might be a rare surviving example of a distinctly Cornish tradition. In addition, the Lanreath four-poster provides a direct antecedent or parallel for two famous American chairs, the Strycker chair at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Foote-Robbins chair at the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford (Fig. 2). Formerly both these American chairs were assumed to be Dutch in style, because of the obvious Dutch name associated with the Metropolitan chair. Now I believe we can state that these chairs have West Country roots, and the history of the Foote-Robbins



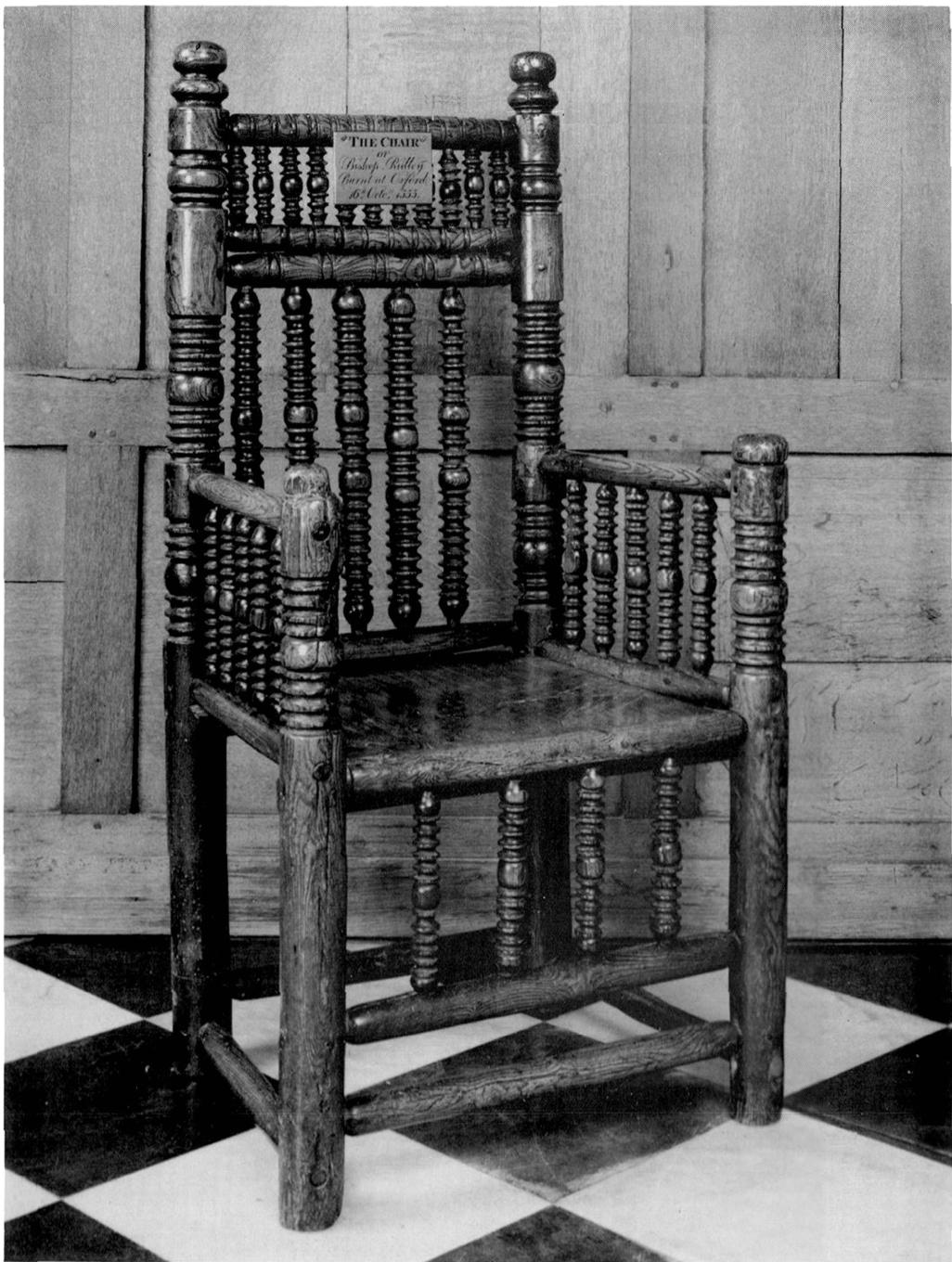
1. Board-Seated Turned Great Chair. Probably Cornwall, 1650–1700. Elm. OH: 41 in. (104.1 cm) FW: 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (60.6 cm) RW: 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (64.5 cm) OD: 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (49.2 cm) SH: 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (34.3 cm) St Marnarck's, Lanreath, Cornwall



2. Board-Seated Turned Great Chair. Wethersfield or Branford, Connecticut, 1650–1700. Ash and oak. OH: 41 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (104.5 cm) SW: 23 in. (58.4 cm) SD: 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (41.9 cm) SH: 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (44.5 cm) The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut



3. Board-Seated Turned Great Chair. Cambridge or London, 1510-14. Ash. OH: 49 in. (124.5 cm) OW: 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (62.5 cm) OD: 17 in. (43.2 cm) SH: 18 in. (45.7 cm)
Queen's College, Cambridge



4. Board-Seated Turned Great Chair. Cambridge or London, 1530–55. Elm. OH:
46 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (117.5 cm) OW: 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (59.7 cm) OD: 18 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (47.3 cm) SH: 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(44.4 cm) Pembroke College, Cambridge

chair has been firmly tied to either Wethersfield or Branford in Connecticut, where the maker was likely to have been of English extraction. While examining the Lanreath chair, Bill Cotton and I noticed that a *third* chair was present in the church. Upon examination, this chair turns out to be an eighteenth-century (or at least a pre-industrial) copy of the earlier one, and this is of great importance, because it suggests that the earlier chair has been in the church at Lanreath for most of its lifetime and is not a nineteenth-century gift to the church from a local antiquarian, as we might fear.

As RFS members know, American scholars set great store by traditional histories of ownership. In view of our almost total ignorance about the provenance of turned chairs, I was immediately drawn to the Erasmus chair and the Ridley chair at Cambridge. On page 101 of his magnificent *Oak Furniture* Victor Chinnery casually referred to the 'famous' Erasmus chair, which astonished me, because I had never heard of it nor seen it illustrated at all! The college bursar kindly escorted Lionel Reynolds and myself to the Master's Lodge, with suitable disclaimers along the way about these 'preposterous legends' associated with antiquities. Fortunately, the chair turned out not only to be legitimate, but very probably as old as it is said to be (Fig. 3). It has suffered a number of losses. The feet were extended $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches (6.35 cm) during the late seventeenth century. The front stretcher, six associated spindles above it, the rear stretcher, and one back spindle are gone. The seat board is a softwood replacement. A later top rail has been added to the back. Iron braces have been added under the seat.

However, what's left is exceedingly important. The primary wood is ash, and that is highly unusual among such English chairs, most of which are made of elm or yew. The turnings are severely plain compared to those of Welsh chairs, and they relate closely to those displayed by Dutch chairs illustrated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings and prints. What's more, the turnings are devoid of the mannerist motifs seen on most Welsh chairs. The towering finials are picked out with systematic gougework that almost never appears in Welsh chairs.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536) was a lecturer at Cambridge between 1510 and 1514, and I see no reason not to accept this chair as his own. If we can, for the sake of argument, accept the chair as an early sixteenth-century one, then we are in a position to speculate about its technological implications for the tradition as a whole. The chair displays one of two basic types of interlocking seat rail joints seen among board-seated turned chairs, wherein rectangular tenons on the front and rear seat rails are intersected and locked in place by round tenons on the side seat rails. (The other common version utilises large round tenons intersected by small round tenons.) These joints shrewdly solve three problems. If a board is to be held in grooves run in all four seat rails, then necessarily all four rails must enter the posts at the same level. Interlocking joints can do so without unduly weakening the posts. Second, these joints prevent the seat rails from withdrawing from the posts. Third, the intersecting joints are an anti-rotation device; they inhibit the seat rails from rotating in their joints as the weight of the sitter is transferred from the seat board to the seat rails. Altogether, the various interlocking seat rail systems to be seen in board-seated turned chairs represent one of the most advanced of the turner's secrets, and their existence militates against the traditional collector's view that these chairs are obscure monstrosities.

Of equal importance is the Ridley chair (Fig. 4). In fact, it ranks in importance second only to King Stephen's Throne at Hereford Cathedral. Bishop Nicholas Ridley (1500?–

1555) most definitively left this world on 16 October 1555, when he was burned at the stake at Oxford along with Hugh Latimer (Archbishop Cranmer had to wait until the following 21 March). The chair was donated to Pembroke College in 1928 by a descendant (Ridley was secretly married). Once again, the chair has been repaired over the years. The rear feet are pieced out 5 inches (12.7 cm). The grooves in the seat rails have been reinforced with slats. Fifteen pronties or buttons are missing from the crest rail. The lower back rail is a replacement. The central back spindle was accidentally flipped when the chair was apart at some point for repairs.

And again, what's left is supremely important. Like King Stephen's Throne, the seat board of the Ridley chair is held in the front and rear seat rails only. The only anti-rotation device visible is pegging of the seat rails, not the most dependable approach. Note also that all the joints of the chair are through-drilled; that is, the mortises extend completely through the posts, and the tenons are back-wedged to prevent them from withdrawing. This is an extremely primitive assembly system, seen elsewhere only in King Stephen's Throne, and all the more remarkable for the fact that it postdates the relatively sophisticated construction of the Erasmus chair by half a century.

Are we looking at a peculiarly English tradition of workmanship, distinct from the Dutch-inspired workmanship of the Erasmus chair and all Welsh and Cornish chairs? The difficulty resides in accepting the Ridley chair as a product of the 1540s. The reel and ball turnings of the frame seem strongly reminiscent of Cromwellian chairs of the 1670–90 period, yet I see no reason why this style could not have reached England directly from France or possibly Italy during the mid-1500s. Many Italian tables of that time have such ornament.

Even as I write, Alexander and Breed are working away at their manuscripts, and RFS members can anticipate reading the results of our research within a few years. However, it is never too late to examine chairs that might be discovered in English churches and private collections, and the extraordinary importance of the Lanreath, Erasmus, and Ridley chairs leads me to suspect that many more important monuments are lurking in obscure places.

While this research effort might not secure a definitive chronology and regional distribution for board-seated turned chairs, it already has amplified the traditional view that such chairs are 'merely Welsh', and that is a good beginning. Ultimately we hope to establish when and how Dutch chairs and Dutch artists transferred their style and technology of chairmaking to England, what medieval traditions they may have confronted when they arrived, and how waves of successive styles survived in the Celtic fringe, as they certainly seem to have done. I see no reason not to speculate that the Welsh chairs of the seventeenth century might not have had metropolitan antecedents — the difficulty resides in identifying them. This task is complicated by the collecting activities of eighteenth-century antiquarians like Horace Walpole and his friend Dickie Bateman, which may have prompted a fad among country house owners for collecting West Country and Midlands board-seated chairs that now reside in East Anglian houses. However, if we can discover enough chairs with strong histories of having descended from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century East Anglian owners, we may be able to identify the traditions introduced in ports where Dutch artisans settled. In other words, while a certain regional paternalism might insist that the Welsh chairs are an autochthonous development, I sincerely doubt it, and every effort must be made to establish the European origins of the style.