

Joseph Newton, Windsor Chair Maker of Fenton, Lincolnshire

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Two extraordinary advertisements were placed in the *Stamford Mercury* in 1725 and 1729; this article highlights the significance of them. They were placed by Joseph Newton, a Lincolnshire carpenter who was making Windsor chairs for sale to the public. They are extraordinary for two reasons; firstly, because Newton emerges as the earliest Windsor chair maker ever recorded and secondly, because of the wealth of additional information that they contain.¹

Joseph Newton was buried in the village of Fenton in Lincolnshire and the entry of this event in the Parish records states that he was a carpenter aged 76, the burial date given as 1 December 1752. His baptism has not been traced but it appears that he was born in 1676 and was married in 1701 to Anne Mapletoft in Fenton. The records indicate that they had six children over the next twelve years but only two or three still living when Anne died in 1733. Joseph remarried in 1734 to Elizabeth Clifton; she outlived Joseph by 15 years, eventually being buried in 1767.²

The will of Joseph is a simple document which he signed with a capital J, identified as his mark; it was witnessed by two people on 23 December 1749, three years before he was buried. He bequeathed half a crown each to his son Henry and daughter Elizabeth and a shilling was pledged to John Jellet of Wigtoft. The rest of his worldly goods he left to his wife Elizabeth, the sum of which did not exceed £90.³

On three occasions Joseph Newton had his profession described as a carpenter and as such he must have been a self employed master as in 1717, at the age of 41, he took James Barnes as an apprentice for the premium of £3.⁴

FENTON, LINCOLNSHIRE

The village of Fenton is like so many villages in Lincolnshire, having a long agricultural history of nearly a thousand years, an unusually large church dating back to the thirteenth century, a single road running through its centre and a population that appears to have peaked in the 1841 census at 120 souls.

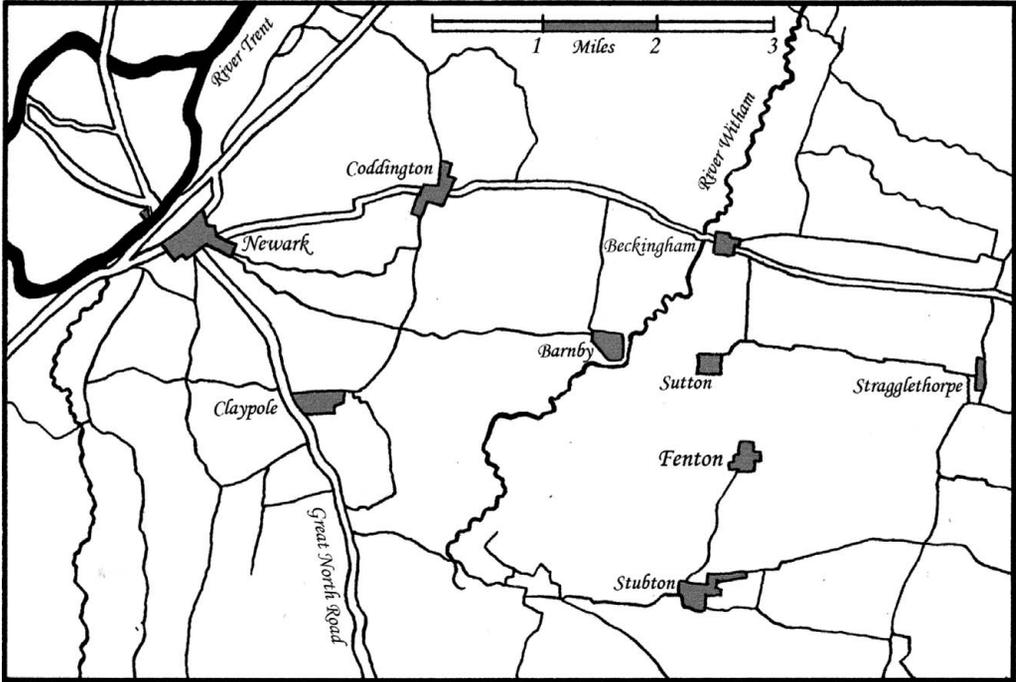
The village has had a long association with Beckingham and Stragglethorpe, as the main church in Beckingham had dependant chapels at Fenton and Stragglethorpe (Figure 1) Today there are only two structures in Fenton of any great age, the church and the Hall (greatly reduced after a fire in 1771). All other buildings present today were built in the Victorian times or later. However, it is worth noting the proximity

¹ Parrott cites a receipt of April 1720 recording the sale of eight 'forrest chairs' by John Kennedy to Lord Irwin. However, it is unclear if the maker was John Kennedy or if he was acting as an intermediary [Parrott (2010)].

² Lincolnshire Archives, Fenton Parish Register. Also at www.lincstothepast.com; www.findmypast.co.uk.

³ Lincolnshire Archives, Will of Joseph Newton.

⁴ The National Archives, Register of Duties for Apprentices' Indentures, 1710–1811. Also at www.ancestry.com; www.findmypast.co.uk.



1 Map of Newark, Fenton and adjacent villages in the eighteenth century. *Kevin Maddison*

of the village to the town of Newark-on-Trent in Nottinghamshire; it is a distance of approximately four miles as the crow flies but nearer double that in the winter when a bridge would have to be used to cross the River Witham. In the seventeenth century it would have been an easy walk of less than two hours to get there, to sell goods in its fine market square, a short distance from which barges carrying loads along the Trent (which was then tidal up to this point) could be observed, along with the excitement of coaches passing along the Great North Road, bringing goods, people and news from London, York and Edinburgh. Be left in no doubt that the people of Fenton would be well acquainted with the latest news and fashion coming out of the capital and beyond.

THE STAMFORD MERCURY

The brief history of Joseph Newton and the village of Fenton sets the scene for an extraordinary newspaper advert that appeared in the *Stamford Mercury* on 1 July 1725 (Figure 2):

THIS is to give Notice to all Gentlemen
and others that have a desire to furnish
themselves with New-fashioned Windsor Chairs
of the best sort, may be furnish'd by Joseph
Newton, the Maker, living at Fenton in the
Parish of Beckingham, Lincolnshire, four Miles
from Newark upon Trent in Nottinghamshire,

and there is a Chair to be seen at the White Hart in Newark for a Sample, and one at the Angel in Grantham; He proposes to deliver them at the[s]e Place[s] at 7s. 6d. per Chair, and at Lincoln at 8s. and with as much speed as possible, after Notice given.

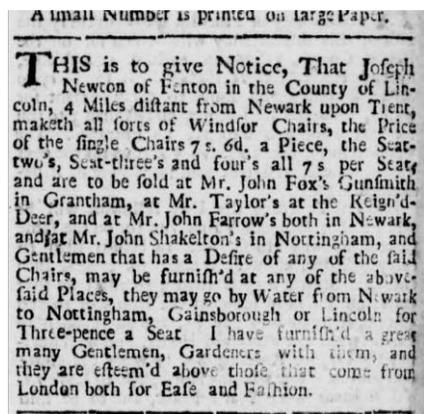
THIS is to give Notice to all Gentlemen and others that have a desire to furnish themselves with New-fashion'd Windsor Chairs of the best sort, may be furnish'd by Joseph Newton, the Maker, living at Fenton in the Parish of Beckingham, Lincolnshire, four Miles from Newark upon Trent in Nottinghamshire, and there is a Chair to be seen at the White Hart in Newark for a Sample, and one at the Angel in Grantham; He proposes to deliver them at the e Place at 7 s. 6d. per Chair, and at Lincoln at 8 s. and with as much speed as possible, after Notice given.

ON Tuesday the 27th of July next will be Run for on Kugby Heath in the County of Warwick, a Plate of 20l. Value by Hunters

2 *The Stamford Mercury*, 1 July 1725.
© British Library Board

Until now, the earliest recorded Windsor chair maker has been noted as John Pitt of Slough, Berkshire (1714–1759), who is known from a label underneath the seat of one of his chairs.⁵ Pitt is thought to have finished his apprenticeship about 1735/6 but here was a carpenter from Lincolnshire advertising to the public that he was already making Windsor chairs at least ten years earlier. In the advert he stressed that he was the maker of these ‘New-fashioned’ chairs and living in Fenton which is four miles from Newark. The fact that he felt the need to describe his chairs as ‘New-fashioned’ is significant as this gives a vital reference to the design of the Windsor chair being a recent event. He went on to state that an example of his chairs could be viewed by potential customers at the White Hart in Newark and the Angel in Grantham. These were two ancient coaching inns serving the traffic coming into these two towns and would have fresh potential purchasers arriving every day. He made it clear that his chairs could be delivered to these two places at a price of 7s 6d per chair and if need be, they could be delivered to Lincoln for an extra 6d. Having the prices specified is a great bonus for it can be put into the context of the economic climate of the time. For instance, a manual labourer could expect to earn 7s 6d per week and a journeyman in rural areas could expect 12s. The cost of a chair indicates that they were out of reach for ordinary households but meant for the well-off as the advert suggests, for ‘Gentlemen’ of wealth and property. He made no differential for the delivery of them to Newark or Grantham and the only method available would have been by horse and cart. However, to cover the cost of transport to Lincoln, either an extra 15 miles from Newark by horse and cart, or closer to 30 miles by barge via the Trent and the Fossdyke to the Witham in Lincoln, the additional charge of 6d was applied.

⁵ Parrott and Harding-Hill (2005). This article includes an excellent image of the Pitt chair.



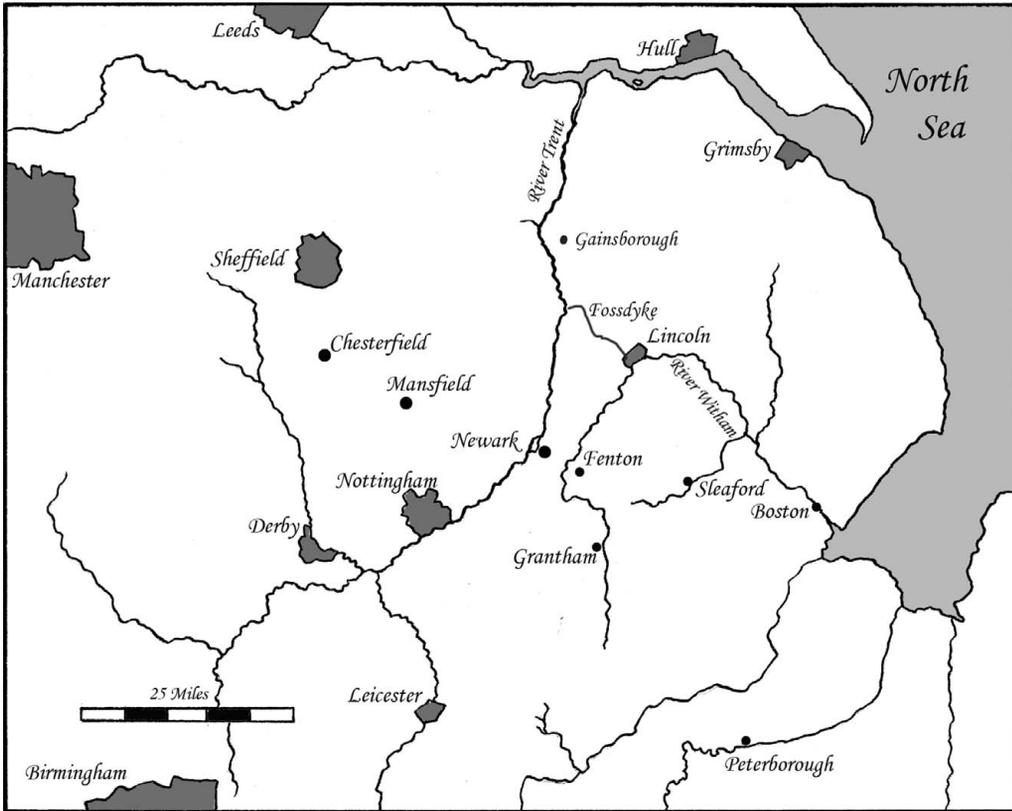
3 *The Stamford Mercury*, 8 May 1729.
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The second advertisement, which was placed on 8 May 1729, contains even more fascinating information about the style and distribution of these Windsor chairs (Figure 3):

THIS is to give Notice, That Joseph Newton of Fenton in the County of Lincoln, 4 Miles distant from Newark upon Trent, maketh all sorts of Windsor Chairs, the Price of the single Chairs 7s. 6d. a Piece, the Seat-two's, Seat-three's and four's all at 7s. per Seat, and are to be sold at Mr. John Fox's Gunsmith in Grantham, at Mr. Taylor's at the Reign'd-Deer, and at Mr. John Farrow's both in Newark, and at Mr. John Shakelton's in Nottingham, and Gentlemen that has a Desire of any of the said Chairs, may be furnish'd at any of the above-said Places, they may go by Water from Newark to Nottingham, Gainsborough or Lincoln for Three-pence a Seat. I have furnish'd a great many Gentlemen, Gardeners with them, and they are esteem'd above those that come from London for both Ease and Fashion.

Once again Joseph Newton proudly announced that he made all sorts of Windsor chairs at the village of Fenton in Lincolnshire and once again emphasised that this is only four miles from Newark-on-Trent. He stated that a single seat chair cost 7s 6d each and that he made two, three or four-seat chairs, costing 7s extra per seat.

Whereas the first advert from 1725 noted that Newton's chairs were to be viewed at inns in Grantham and Newark, the second advert clearly stated that they were now to be sold at four separate establishments in three different towns, namely Grantham, Newark and Nottingham. Also, the Angel Inn in Grantham was replaced by Mr John Fox, the gunsmith in Grantham and the White Hart in Newark was replaced by the 'Reign'd Deer'. He also mentioned Mr John Farrow in Newark but whether this was another inn has not been established. The final place for sale was at Mr John



4 Map of Lincolnshire and adjacent counties in the eighteenth century, showing navigable rivers and principal towns. *Kevin Maddison*

Shakelton's in Nottingham. Newton went on to imply that there was a carriage of 3d per seat if they were to be delivered to Nottingham, Gainsborough or Lincoln where they would be carried by the river Trent to Nottingham or Gainsborough or by the Trent and Fossdyke navigation to Lincoln, improvements to which were made in 1671. These included a navigable sluice or lock at Torksey and warehousing for storage and wharves for unloading were built at the Brayford pool, where the Fossdyke meets the River Witham in the centre of Lincoln (Figure 4).

In this advert the cost of delivering a chair to Lincoln was halved from 6d to 3d and Newton specifies that transport is by water. It seems very likely that Newton would have travelled to all of these places himself, possibly via the River Trent, to visit the people who had agreed to take his chairs. He may well have travelled in a barge that was operated by the Newark Boat Company as this business advertised its services in 1743 for transporting goods and freight between Newark and Gainsborough. It also stated that it had several good boats as well as useful warehouses; the prices for transport of different commodities were given, for example 2s 3d per ton for iron, 4d for a barrel, barley and all other white grain at 3d per quarter.



5 Windsor chair. *Victoria and Albert Museum, W.II-1969*



6 Windsor chair, one of a pair recently discovered in a church in Newark.
The author

The final few lines offer an intriguing insight into what design of chair he was making, as it noted that a great many ‘Gentlemen, Gardeners’ have been furnished with his chairs and they were thought of as better than those that came from London. The two words ‘Gentlemen, Gardeners’ can be interpreted several ways, but the fact that he mentioned gardeners convincingly points to his product being used outside the house rather than in; what we understand to be ‘Forrest’ chairs. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that Newton could make a similar design of chair for indoor use, being more refined, lighter in construction and even incorporating a little decoration.

It may be that we will never know exactly the pattern of chair that Newton produced as no chair has yet been recorded with this maker’s stamp, so all a furniture historian can do in these circumstances is to search for suitable chairs with a provenance to the Lincolnshire/Nottinghamshire border. It is fitting, therefore, that I bring to your attention some recent discoveries and leave the reader to decide on their relevance to Newton. It has long been a habit of mine to search churches for furniture as they can be an excellent source of local items. This led me to being in a Newark church a couple of years ago, where I was inspecting some typical ecclesiastical Victorian items when the churchwarden asked what I was doing. On explaining the reason for my search, I was told about two chairs that were locked away below ground with the church’s silver plate. After a few days, when permission had been granted, I was shown down some stone steps and through locked steel doors to where the silver was



7 Detail of figure 6.
The author

kept; in the corner of that crypt there were two chairs in a distressed and unusable state. I recognised them immediately as being similar to a ‘Forrest’ or Windsor chair in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 5).⁶ I pointed out to the warden that these were extremely valuable to a furniture historian and really ought to be conserved for others to study and enjoy. I acquired these chairs after some negotiation and in due course they were sent to a local conservator (Figure 6).

The chair is a large comb back chair with eight long and six short spindles along with shaped blades as underarm supports. The seat is fashioned out of a slab of timber approximately 2½ inches thick, being deeply carved and heavily chamfered, and around the outside is a scratch moulding on the edge of the upper surface (Figure 7). This scratch moulding is repeated around the back comb; a waisted middle section is present on the turned legs which are let through the seat and wedged. Every component is made from ash and there are numerous signs of layers of paint on the under surfaces. There can be no doubt they were made by a professional chairmaker; their simple understated elegance combined with robust construction built around a massive seat would have made a striking presence for garden use.

The discovery of these chairs prompted me to revisit my research into chairs in the Wren Library in Lincoln Cathedral which I had recorded several years before (Figure 8). The similarities to the Newark chairs are obvious. The overall dimensions are slightly smaller but the superbly crafted strong seat (Figure 9) is again present along with the turned legs with the waisted middle section which were let through the seat. These chairs had added decoration, with the middle two spindles being replaced by a plain back splat, but the two outside back spindles were splayed in the same manner as the Newark chairs. There is even a scratch moulding on the back comb. There are some constructional details that are different; while the armbows on the Newark chairs are steam bent, the Lincoln chairs are made out of three shaped pieces, joined by a

⁶ V&A W.11-1969.



8 (left) Windsor chair, one of a set in the Wren Library, Lincoln Cathedral.

The author

9 (below) Detail of figure 8. *The author*



pinned lap joint. This allows for the inclusion of the round hand holds at the end of each arm. Nevertheless, it was apparent to me that these chairs had the same stylistic characteristics as the Newark chairs and may have been made in the same workshop, the Newark ones made for outdoor use and the Lincoln ones for indoor use. There is no meaningful record or provenance to go with any of these chairs that might indicate where they were made but their very presence in these two locations, which have been historically joined by river and canal for so long, is telling.

In the advert from 1729, Newton stated that his chairs ‘are esteem’d above those that come from London both for Ease and Fashion’. This tells us that similar chairs were being produced in the capital at the same time and raises the possibility that these are all London chairs. Equally, however, they may be locally made, perhaps by Joseph Newton. At least two other chairs of this type are known, both in private collections (Figures 10 and 11).

Joseph Newton may not have made his fortune by making Windsor chairs, but he did found a dynasty of carpenters. The next five generations of Newtons all included carpenters, either working in Fenton or branching out to Normanton-on-Trent and Wellow as marriage opportunities arose. None called themselves chair makers, staying loyal to carpentry — indeed the last carpenter in Fenton was great-grandson Henry Newton in 1841, then aged over 70.⁷

⁷ The National Archives, Census Returns, 1841, Fenton, Lincolnshire. Also at www.ancestry.com; www.findmypast.co.uk.



10 and 11 Windsor chairs of apparently identical design to figures 5 and 6. *Private collections*

I believe that the Windsor chair making tradition that Lincolnshire is best known for was started in Grantham about the year 1799 by Roger Taylor and carried on by his wife Sophia and their descendants. Workshops run by Amos, Hubbard and Wilson added to the output at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Thomas and James Marsh along with John Brand producing chairs in Sleaford.⁸ I can see no link between Newton's business and this explosion in production seventy years later in the area of Grantham and Sleaford, but this can be easily explained. The chairs being produced were for different clients, used in different contexts and for different markets. While Newton's chairs were made specifically for wealthy clients for use in their gardens, the chairs that were made in such vast numbers at the beginning of the nineteenth century were for indoor use and built for sale into the mass market. However, it is worth pointing out that the Grantham canal was opened in 1797 and there is no doubt that this was a catalyst for the production of chairs in the town, as the waterway gave access to the River Trent, Humber and all the canals in the North Midlands and South Yorkshire. So the transport by water of the chairs appears to be the only connection between the two traditions.

⁸ For these makers see Cotton (1990), pp. 109–43. See also the author's website on www.flickr.com, chair nos 115, 164 and 192.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Robert Williams for bringing Joseph Newton to my attention; Chris Goodwin (who originally hails from Grantham and is a direct descendant of the Grantham windsor chairmakers Roger and Sophia Taylor) for his valuable contribution of the genealogy; Tim Garland for his conservation work on the Newark chairs and his observations on the Lincoln Cathedral Library Chairs.

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