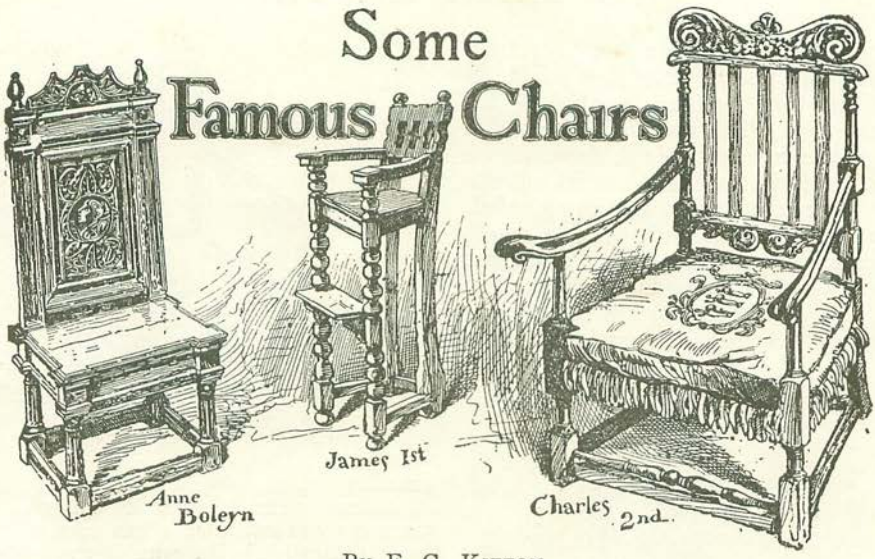
# Some Famous Chairs




By F. G. Kitton.

THACKERAY contended that the coats of distinguished men may possess as marked an individuality as their characters and their lineaments. Could not this theory be consistently applied to the favourite chairs of celebrated people? For the personal associations connected with these articles of furniture are apparently so tangible and real, that it does not require a great effort of imagination to picture the respective owners seated thereon, in characteristic attitudes assumed for labour, ease, or comfort. "Never ask me into your room of chairs: I should see all the men sitting in them!" said a well-known novelist to a gentleman of antiquarian tastes, who had made a hobby of collecting what he aptly termed "suggestive furniture."

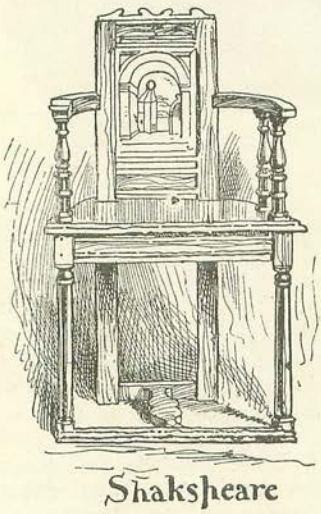
This gentleman was the late Mr. George Godwin, F.S.A., for some time editor of the *Builder*, who succeeded in obtaining many such relics of departed greatness; for he considered that it would not be difficult to show the importance attaching to suggestive memorials of those who have taught or delighted the world, and that amongst such memorials the chair habitually used must hold a high place. A few years ago, shortly after Mr. Godwin's death, the famous chairs were brought to the hammer, when the present writer availed himself of an opportunity that might never recur of sketching the most interesting items in this unrivalled collection before it was dispersed. Several of the chairs here described formerly belonged to Mr. Godwin.

The first of the three Royal chairs, as delineated above, belonged to Anne Boleyn, and came out of Hever Castle about fifty years ago, when it was sold by the then owner, who, with consummate bad taste, while renovating this establishment with modern furniture, rejected that which was antique and beautiful. This chair is of oak, with the back panel richly carved; the legs are fluted Doric columns, and the front of the very low seat is ornamented with a coarse sort of marquetry, or *tarsiatura*. It is believed to be of French manufacture, probably of the time of Henri II. or Francis I.; and we may suppose it possible that the unfortunate Anne often sat on this substantial seat while King Hal made love to her.

The next drawing represents the veritable chair used by James VI. of Scotland (afterwards James I. of England) during his infancy, while under the care of the Earl of Mar, in Stirling Castle. It is of contemporary workmanship, solidly built of oak, the front posts affording a good example of Jacobean ball-turning. Sixty years ago, when in Lady Frances Erskine's possession, it was in a state of rapid decay, so probably its present condition is even more akin to dust.

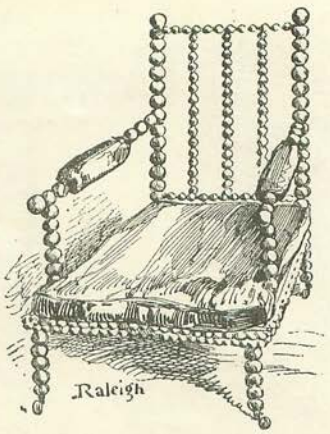
The third Royal chair is known as Charles II.'s, it having provided sitting accommodation for the King in the Council Chamber at Great Yarmouth in 1662. This handsome specimen of contemporary furniture is also of oak, partly carved, having a crimson cushioned seat embroidered with the arms of Yarmouth, at which place it was purchased by Mr. Godwin in 1883.

The gem of this collection is undoubtedly Shakespeare's chair, the same in which he is believed to have written many of his immortal plays. The mere statement that such was the case would not, however, be sufficient to inspire confidence in its authenticity, but there is its pedigree, fully recorded, let in under glass behind. It is a small, stiff, square, oak arm-chair, with a somewhat crude carving of a church on the back, and having (when I sketched it) a slender chain drawn across the front, to warn off all who




might presume to sit on such a seat. Its history, in handwriting of the time of Garrick, is as follows :—

"When Garrick was intending to celebrate the Memory of his ever-to-be-remembered Author Shakespeare, in praise of his superlative Genius, He heard that Paul Whitehead, the poet laureate, had a chair in which he, S., sat when he wrote most of his inimitable Plays. He requested the favour of me to call upon Whitehead, and ask his permission that he, G., might be indulged with the Loan of the said Chair on the occasion, from which He thought He should be enabled to make his Oration with more peculiar animation. I without Hesitation undertook the business, and waited upon him at his house upon Twickenham Common, and addressed Him in as mild and as modest terms as in my power, when He abruptly and absolutely, with a considerable degree of Ire, refused it, saying that Garrick was a Mountebank, and was by no means a fit person to be trusted with so valuable a Gem, upon which I retired greatly confused and discomfited. Soon after, however, Mr. Whitehead died, and his furniture, &c., coming to the Hammer to be sold, I asked Mr. Ben Bradbury, a neighbouring resident, to purchase It for me, with which he complied, made the

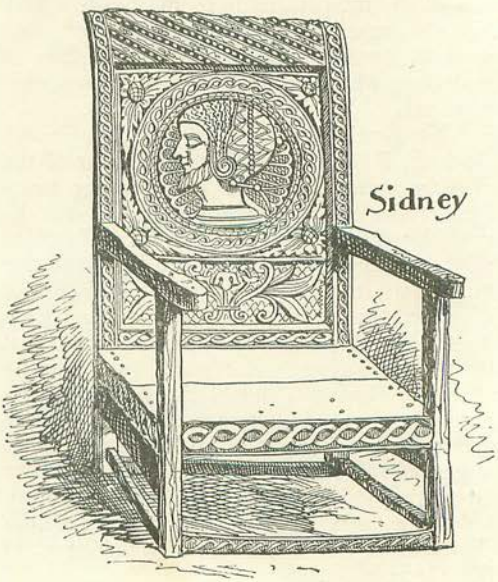



purchase, and afterwards made me a present of it, without permitting me to know to what amount it was sold, and it has ever since been in my possession in the genuine state in which it was bought, and shall so remain, barring accidents, for the Residue of my Life.

"J. B."

The chair said to have belonged to Sir Walter Raleigh (but believed by experts to be of a much later date) is important and stately; the frame is of turned ball-work, from which the gilt is gradually disappearing, and the seat and arms are covered with dark green cushions. It was brought from Orley Court, near Bideford, Sir Walter's country mansion; and tradition says that the room, called the Haunted Chamber, in which it was found, had not been opened for a century.

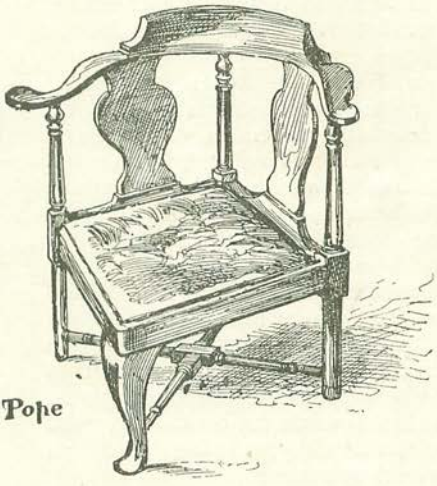
The drawing of Sir Philip Sidney's chair



is taken from Hone's "Year Book," where it is described as an old, finely-carved chair, in the possession of a gentleman to whom it was presented by the owner of Penshurst, Kent, the venerable seat of the Sidney family, and the birthplace of Sir Philip. From tradition at Penshurst, it was the chair in which he customarily sat, and perhaps wrote his celebrated "Arcadia," here referred to as "the best pastoral romance, and one of the most popular books of its age." The carved design on the back, with a somewhat Egyptian-like type of head in the centre, is very elaborate and curious, and is about the date of Henry VII.


Alexander Pope is here represented by two chairs of very distinct types. One of these strongly resembles Shakespeare's, but the effect is much superior, the back being richly carved. This interesting oak seat was was presented to the South Kensington Museum, in 1872, by Lady Hawes, widow of Sir Benjamin Hawes, who was a descendant of William Hawes, the apothecary in attend-

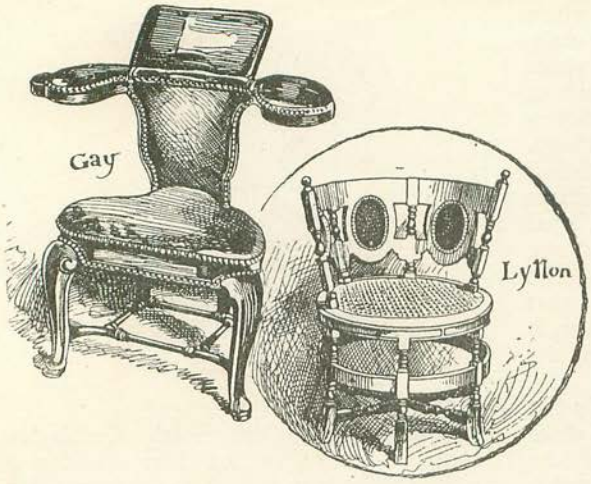
Pope




constantly used by Pope, and was exhibited, with other relics of Pope, at Twickenham, in July, 1888, on the occasion of the bi-centenary celebration of the poet's birth. It was given to a servant who had long lived in the poet's family, and now belongs to Lord Braybrooke. The other chair formerly belonging to Pope is more inviting, if less ornate—an oak corner chair of the period of William and Mary, covered in dark leather. Dr. Diamond, F.S.A., a former possessor, believed it to be really genuine, and, indeed, was willing to make an affidavit that it was Pope's chair.

Oliver Goldsmith's chair is, as might be expected, a very simple affair, of a type known as a "Wycombe," constructed of beech, and afterwards stained a dark green colour. It ance upon Goldsmith during his last illness. After his death, Goldsmith's furniture and other effects were sold by public auction, under the management of Mr. Hawes, who probably thus availed himself of that opportunity of acquiring such a pleasing souvenir of him who, as Garrick said, "wrote like an angel, but talk'd like poor Poll."

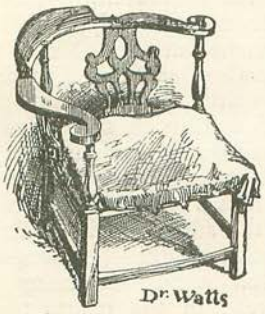
It would have been appropriate to have introduced here a representation of the chair of Goldsmith's admiring friend, Dr. Johnson. A seat that undoubtedly belonged to the burly doctor stood, for many years, an honoured relic in the quaint room of St. John's Gate, Clerkenwell; but recent investigation resulted in the discovery that, much to the writer's chagrin, it had been removed, and his attempt to trace its present destina-




tion unhappily failed. Although it has probably fallen into appreciative hands, it is much to be regretted that such a cherished object should thus disappear from public view.

The chair of Gay, the poet, is curious and probably unique. Apart from its associations, it is a remarkable specimen of ingenious adaptation of means to an end, forming not merely a seat, but also a desk for writing. Under the arms are drawers for holding writing implements, each turning on a pivot and having a candlestick attached. Under the seat is another similar receptacle, behind which is a secret drawer ingeniously fastened by a small bolt, not perceivable until the larger drawer is removed. The chair, it is necessary to explain, is used by sitting across it with the face towards the back. It passed to Gay's relations by marriage, and was eventually sold by auction.

Bulwer Lytton's quaint cane-bottomed chair is circular in form, the frame of walnut wood,




and the date apparently Jacobean. In it, at Craven Cottage, Fulham, the distinguished author wrote many of his earlier works. One can turn about in it, and give oneself comfort however fidgety one may be. It was presented by Lord Lytton to Mr. T. A. Baylis, who considered it one of the very best relics of his "very dear friend."

A comfortable corner chair of oak, with open-work back and leather seat, is that of Dr. Isaac Watts, "the excellent divine and harmonious hymnologist," and was brought from Abney Park, Hackney, where he resided with the family of Sir Thomas Abney for some thirty or forty years. It subsequently found its way into the Godwin Gallery.

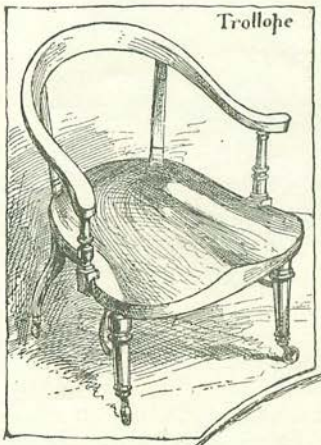
An arm-chair in mahogany frame, with crimson morocco leather seat and back, was the favourite seat of Samuel Warren, author of "Ten Thousand a Year,"

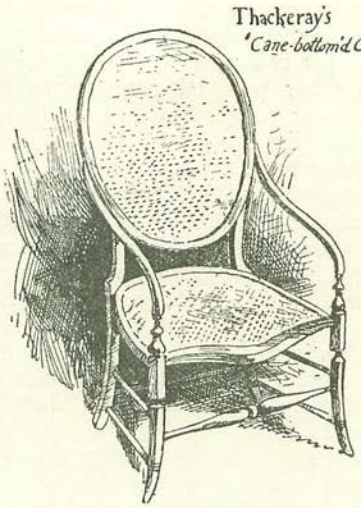

etc., and was purchased by Mr. Godwin at the sale of the novelist's effects in 1878. The little oak writing-chair by its side, with cane seat and back, belonged to Shirley Brooks, sometime editor of *Punch*, and was given to the enthusiastic collector by Mrs. Brooks herself.

Anthony Trollope's library chair of American pine, given to Mr. Godwin by the novelist's family, has been rightly described as "a hard, uninstructive chair, without an idea in it." This character does not apply to the favourite seat of his illustrious contemporary, Charles Dickens — that simple, but comfortable, arm-chair which the author of "Pickwick" used in his study at Gad's Hill Place. Its aspect has been made generally familiar by means of Mr. Luke Fildes' spirited drawing, entitled "The

Empty Chair," published in the *Graphic* shortly after the novelist's death. This famous chair was on view at the Victorian Exhibition held in the New Gallery in 1891-2, having been lent by Miss Dickens.

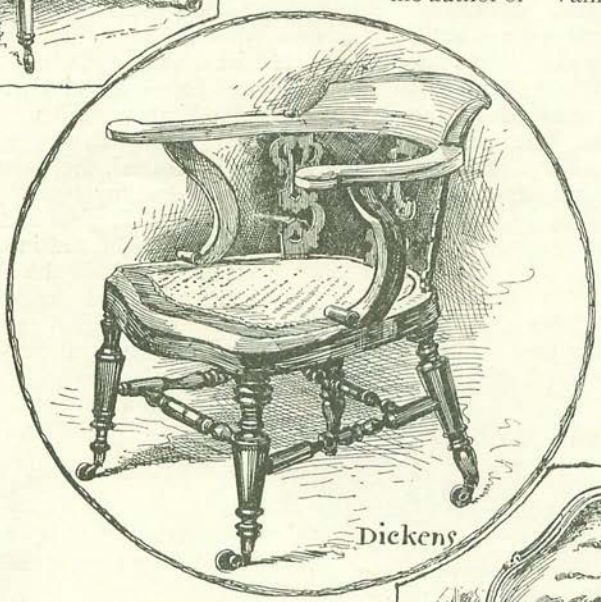
The large easy chair wherein it is said Thackeray used to write (or, rather, rest) is peculiar in having five legs, three of which are at the back. It has an ebonized frame,




upholstered in crimson satin damask—and "looks not unlike a good-sized bath," large enough, one would imagine, to afford satisfactory accommodation for the bulky form of him whom Carlyle humorously alluded to as a "Cornish giant." Thackeray's chair was purchased by Mr. Godwin from a well-known firm in Bond Street, and it has been explained that, previous to this, the novelist had either given it away or exchanged it, probably on the occasion of his removal to Kensington Palace Gardens. At the Victorian Exhibition was shown a still more interesting seat, which also belonged to the author of "Vanity Fair," namely, the cane-bottomed chair of his ballad. It is a lightly-constructed arm-chair, with caned seat and back, and was purchased at the sale of Thackeray's property, in 1864, by Sir W. A. Fraser, Bart., who lent it for exhibition.

An unpretentious bamboo easy chair was the favourite seat of the world-renowned Sarah Siddons when studying her theatrical

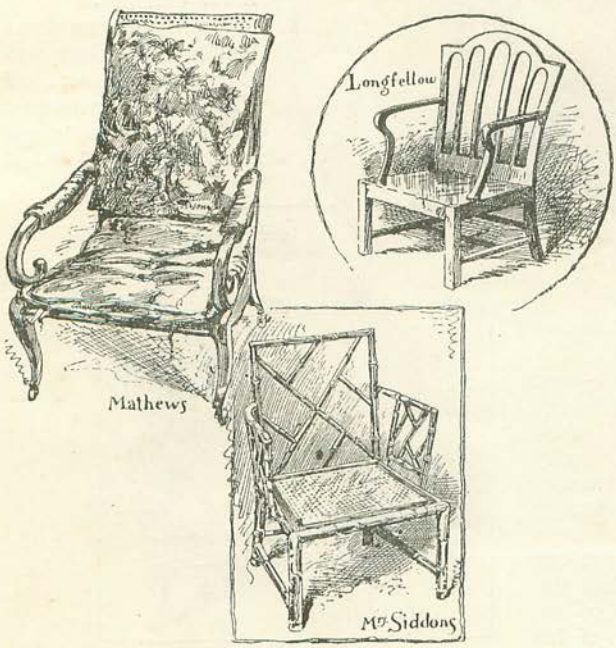


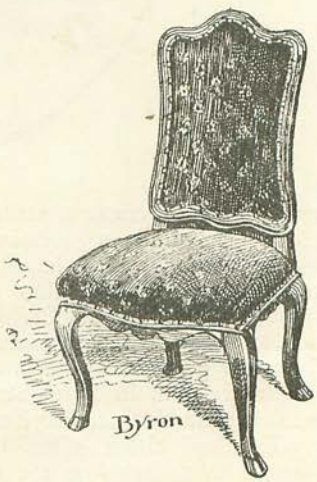

characters at home, and is the identical one specially taken on many occasions to the theatre for her use upon the stage. It was left, with other personal property, to Miss Wilkinson, her companion and confidential friend, who lived with the distinguished actress during the last years of her life. From this lady it passed to Dr. T. Stevenson, F.S.A., who gave it to Mr. Godwin. The latter gentleman also possessed the easy chair of the elder Charles Mathews, which he purchased at the sale of the actor's effects in 1878.

Longfellow's chair is a squat imitation of a Sheraton design, and probably manufactured in America, where it is still cherished by the family.

Garrick's chair is technically called a "lug" chair, by reason of the side pieces or "lugs" projecting from the back, which must effectually screen the head from transverse draughts. This cosy receptacle is well padded throughout, and covered with gay tapestry. A striking peculiarity is the movable ottoman below, which draws in and out, forming a resting-place for the famous actor's gouty extremities. A brass plate at the back is thus inscribed: "This Chair belonged to David Garrick, and was purchased by John Hare at the Countess of Essex' Sale at Christie's, on March 7th, 1883." Mr. Hare afterwards presented it to the Green Room Club.

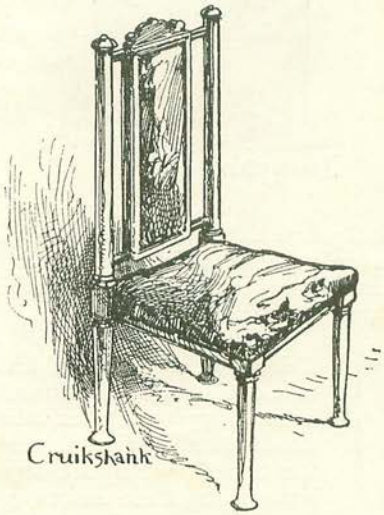

There is a story connected with Lord Byron's handsome Louis XIV. chair, covered in crimson Utrecht velvet. In 1835, his intimate friend, Scrope Davies, an associate of the Byron coterie of elegant men, and a wit, had made his home in an apartment that was previously a hayloft, situated in one of the squares in Ostend, the approach to this unconventional dwelling being by means of a ladder. Scrope Davies had filled two rooms, fashioned in the loft, with relics from all the distinguished men he had known, and was visited by many eminent people as they passed through Ostend to pay their respects to King Leopold at Brussels. The father



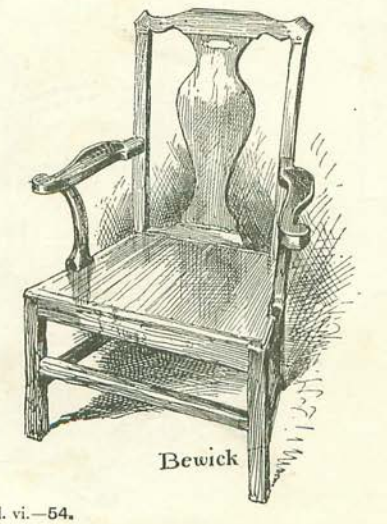



of the lady who tells the story of Davies knew how to appreciate that remarkable man, who, in return, invited him to the loft, where he found a curious collection of objects. He was subsequently able to do Davies "a good turn," and this sympathy led to the gentleman one day carrying down the ladder this same high-backed chair with cloven feet, which Byron himself had given him. It originally came from his lordship's ancestral mansion, where he used it in his library.

The first of the chairs of three great artists is a small writing chair with crimson leather seat and back (somewhat tattered), which once



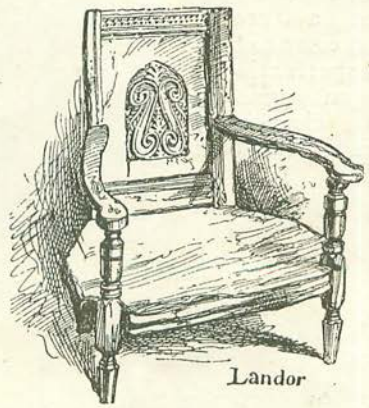

belonged to George Cruikshank. The next is a much more substantial seat, formerly owned by Thomas Bewick, the restorer of the art of wood-engraving in England, but who is better known, perhaps, as the author and illustrator of Bewick's "British Birds" and "Quadrupeds." The present writer purchased this valuable relic at the Bewick Sale held at Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1884, and, in order to maintain its identity, a silver plate has since



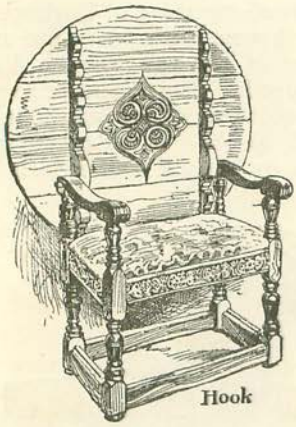


been inserted recording this fact, together with the intimation that Bewick had for many years been accustomed to sit in this very chair. A mournful interest is associated with Sir Edwin Landseer's easy chair, for in it (as it stood by his bedside) the great animal painter breathed his last.

A rough oaken chair, fit for a giant to rest on, is that of Walter Savage Landor, poet and miscellaneous writer. It is of

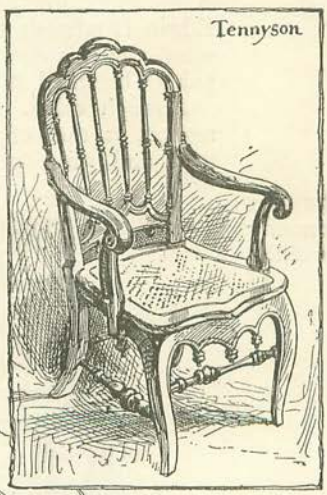


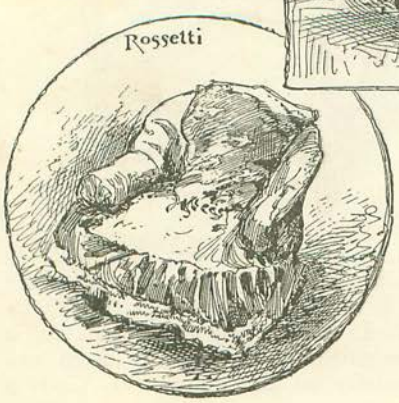

James I.'s date, and was included in the Godwin collection. So was Theodore Hook's, a very peculiar one of the Cromwell period, which may be used as a table, the circular back turning down and resting solidly on the arms. Mr. Godwin


Hook

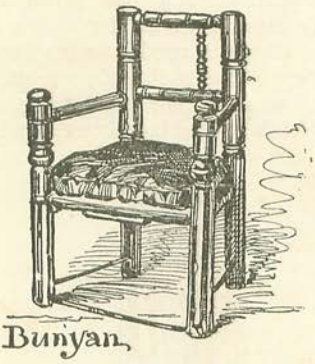
obtained it from Hook's house at Fulham, where he once saw him in it, and heard the punster make some of his wild jokes when seated on "his double-purposed throne."

The late Lord Tennyson's cane-bottomed study chair is a modern French type, and probably may still be seen by privileged persons in the deceased Laureate's study at Haslemere, where I sketched it a few years ago, as it stood near his writing-table. The favourite seat of the painter-poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is a comfortable but sorry-looking piece of furniture, and requires a brown holland cover to hide its imperfections, while an aggressive modern chair-back, disporting sky-blue swallows on a ground of old-gold material, is spread over the back.

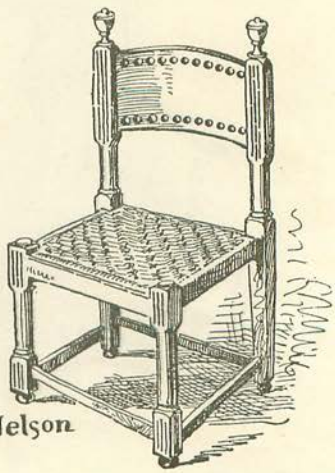

Tennyson


Rossetti

John Bunyan's primitive-looking arm-chair, with cushioned seat, is still preserved in the vestry of Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, and is one of the few personal relics extant of the author of "The Pilgrim's Progress." It originally had three turned spindles in the back, only one of which remains; and the legs are braced together with iron to prevent premature collapse.

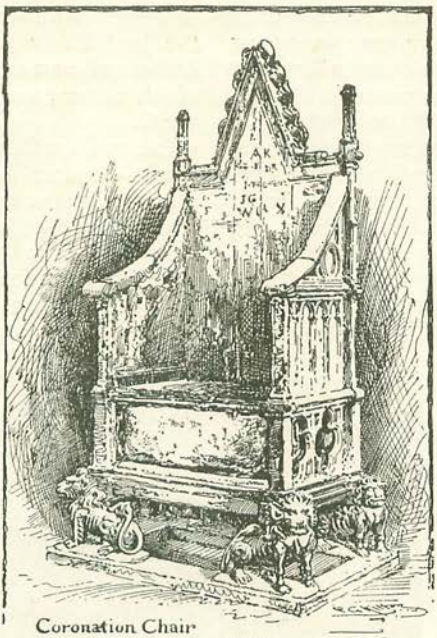

Bunyan

The cabin chair of Lord Nelson is a valuable historical relic of England's famous admiral. It is a simply contrived affair, the wooden frame painted green, and the turned and square legs and posts having three incised parallel lines on each of the front flat surfaces; the back consists of a thin bowing top with two rows of perforations, while the seat is of rush, neatly woven. A paper


Nelson

inscription on the back states that the chair was "formerly the property of Horatio Viscount Nelson, and was presented by Lord Stafford to the Norfolk and Norwich Museum," than which a more fitting resting-place could not be found.

This series of remarkable chairs would not be complete without mention of the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey. The seat of this ancient and historic chair rests upon the celebrated stone which, according to Buchanan, formerly stood in Argyllshire, and was transferred to Scone by King Kenneth, who inclosed it in a wooden chair. The monkish tradition states it to be the veritable stone which formed Jacob's pillow! In the more credible legend of Scotland it is described as the ancient inauguration stone of the Kings of Ireland, brought from the sister isle by Fergus, the son of Eric, who led the Dalriads to the shores of Argyllshire. The stone was removed to Westminster from Scone by Edward I., and there it remains, "the ancientest respected monument in the world." The history of its removal from Scone admits of no doubt, for a record exists of the expenses attending its transference; and this is the best evidence of the reverence which attached to this rude seat of the ancient Kings of Scotland, "who, standing on it in the sight of assembled thousands, had sworn to reverence the laws and to do justice to the people."



Coronation Chair