



Beech woods are a defining characteristic of this part of the Chilterns landscape and, aside from their natural beauty, they are a legacy of the area's social and economic heritage.

Before the late 1700s, the main Bucks employers were papermaking and agriculture. Local timber provided fuelwood to London. The capital moved to using coal and papermaking became mechanised: in the early 1800s the woodland instead fed a new local industry – chairmaking.

During the 19th century chairmaking rapidly developed from its traditional woodcraft beginnings into a major industry for High Wycombe and the surrounding villages. There was an abundance of beech (the 'Buckinghamshire weed'), cherry, ash and elm, as well as good transport links to London and Oxford. The railway ensured that chairs from the area rapidly found a nationwide market.

INTRODUCTION

Each stage of chairmaking required different tools, skills and premises. Chairmaking evolved from small workshops to large factories but the workshops never completely disappeared.

Many pubs had workshops or chair yards on their premises. Some publicans and their families were actively involved in the trade.

What will become evident from this tour is that although High Wycombe was the centre for the chair trade, there were many outlying Chiltern village workshops and factories situated in quite remote locations.

A number of routes can be followed. Please refer to the map. If you are starting from High Wycombe, the Beech Tree at Hazlemere **1** is a good starting point.

ROUTE

PUBS

1 THE BEECH TREE, HAZLEMERE

HP13 5AJ, 01494 258351
<https://thebeechtreehazlemere.com/>

This pub at Terriers Green was a great favourite for 'St Monday' celebrations. Bodgers and chairmakers from High Wycombe were notorious for absenteeism on Mondays, instead they spent the day here drinking, playing games and contests, even having their own 'fr-y-up' in the pub garden. The landlady of the Beech Tree would find a queue of men waiting for the pub to open – which it did at 6am – and they would still be there at 11pm closing time!

2 THE SQUIREL, PENN STREET

HP7 0PX, 01494 711291
<https://www.thesquirelpub.co.uk/>

This pub was first licensed in 1832 and was run by Joseph Langston in 1871, then by William Eggleton by 1881. Both also ran a bakery here. William died in 1895 and the licence transferred to James Wright in 1904. The pub was still run by the Wright family in 1939. Being opposite Penn Woods (chair bodgers) and almost adjacent to the Hit or Miss (chairmakers) one imagines that the Squirel would have been very busy at times. The old stables were utilised as a chair workshop, Miles & Co, a four-man enterprise c.1924-1939.

3 THE HIT OR MISS, PENN STREET

HP7 0FA, 01494 713109
<https://www.thehitormiss.co.uk/>

The well-known local furniture firm Dancer & Hearne originated here. William Hearne, a chairmaker, married the landlord's daughter, Eliza Taylor, and took over the pub

4 THE PLOUGH, THE HILL, WINCHMORE HILL

HP7 0PA, 01494 259757
<https://theploughhamersham.co.uk/>

Originally 'The Old Plough', this has been a public house since at least 1830. Four generations of the Pursesys (a local family with strong ties to the chairmaking industry) ran the pub for almost 80 years, starting with George Pursey in 1870. George set up the family's first chairmaking workshop – a turning shop, timber yard and sawpit behind the pub. By 1881 the Pursesys had a second workshop down the road on The Hill (on the left, now the site of Orchard Cottages). Shortly after WW1, it was sold to Rose & Co (another local chairmaker) and George's grandsons George and Sydney Pursey set up the Cherry Tree Chairworks on the opposite side of The Hill, where the Securon factory is now. This was the largest of the chairmaking enterprises run by the Pursey family, employing 20 people in the 1930s. Walk down The Hill to view the sites of the two Pursey factories and traditional workers' cottages.

Note: now a restaurant.

5 THE HAMPDEN ARMS, GREAT HAMPDEN

HP16 9RQ, 01494 488255
<http://www.thehampdenarms.co.uk/>

Free Turner held the first licence for this beerhouse from 1870. In common with many publicans he also had wood-related occupations: sawyer, woodman, wood bailiff – unsurprising given the location. Timber auctions took place here and bodgers certainly worked in the woods nearby. Owen Dean, a local bodger, lived in a cottage here. (Cross the road from the pub car park, turn left and take the first turning on the right. His cottage is the last building at the end of the track.) After Free Turner's death in 1914, the licence was taken over by the Earl of Buckinghamshire (of Hampden House), who intended to improve it as a 'model public house'.

6 THE PLOUGH, CADSDEN

HP27 0NB, 01844 343302
<https://ploughatcadsden.co.uk/>

Famous for its annual cherry pie feast, this pub at Cadsden (or Cadsdean) was where the local bodgers would come regularly to 'celebrate' (!) the local tradition of 'St Monday' – spending the day in the pub drinking rather than working, if they had some money spare. The pub was known locally as 'Sots' Hole' due to the drunken behaviour of the chair turners. The pub was first licensed in 1842. Richard White was publican with his lacemaker wife Mary in 1861; by 1871 the publican was James Smith, who additionally farmed 3 acres in 1881. By 1891 it was run by George Langston and then Frank Beasley in 1901.

7 THE PINK & LILY, PARSLOW'S HILLOCK

HP27 0RJ, 01494 489857
<https://pink-lily.com/>

This pub's first licence was in 1830 and in 1840 it was run by Richard Lilley, a gardener, and his wife Sophia, a lacemaker. Sophia took over the pub after Richard's death in 1855. After Sophia's death in 1871, the pub was run by William Turner, a hurdlemaker who may have been the brother of Free Turner, landlord at the Hampden Arms. It changed hands several times before WW1 and was visited by poet Rupert Brooke and other well-known contemporary cultural figures. It was also the 'drinking hole' of the bodgers who lived in the Hillock Cottages in the lane below. Turn right from the car park entrance and then turn right down Lily Bottom Lane to see the row of cottages.

8 THE BOOT, BLEDLOW RIDGE

HP14 4AW, 01494 481499
<https://www.thebootbledlowridge.co.uk/>

The Britnell family held the licence for The Boot from the early 1840s until 1949. In 1881 the landlord Jonah Britnell was a chair turner and his two sons were chairmakers. His wife and daughter were lacemakers.

9 LE DE SPENCERS ARMS, DOWNLEY COMMON

HP13 5YQ, 01494 535317
<https://www.ledespcncers.co.uk/>

The inhabitants of Downley were heavily involved in the 19th-century furniture trade, with factories in the village as well as easy access to High Wycombe firms. In 1862 the licence transferred from Jesse Bristow to his chairmaker son Thomas. Around 1890 Samuel Blick became landlord and in 1893 Henry Britnell, chairmaker, took over. (His father was Jonah Britnell, landlord of The Boot, where Henry grew up.)

CHAIR BODGERS PUB TOUR



The Pink & Lily, Parslow's Hillock
Lacey Green and Loosley Row History Group

KEY

- Bodgers pub
- Former pub now closed
- Suggested Route

VILLAGE CHAIR FACTORIES

The industry was not confined to local pubs, nor to the large factories in the town. There were also many village chairmaking workshops and factories in the Chilterns. Many of these were situated in quite remote villages such as Speen, Frieth, Turville, Radnage, Winchmore Hill, Downley, Lane End and Naphill.

Typical of a small business was the Hatch family's chair factory (Hollandsdean) at Whielden Gate near Winchmore Hill which operated from at least 1851 to 1939; it employed 30 to 40 men and was one of the first to introduce machine tools. The buildings were sold at the start of WW2 and destroyed by fire in the 1950s.

Another example was that of 'Stary' Saunders; he ran a tumble-down wooden workshop in Bottom Alley, Holmer Green from c.1920s to the late 1960s. Here was installed a power driven 'semi-automatic lathe' capable of producing several thousand turned components per week with just two men. Machines such as this slowly contributed to the demise of the chair bodgers.

From the late 19th century Dancer & Hearne, by this time a large firm of chairmakers based in the tiny village of Penn Street, also operated a medium-sized village factory in Holmer Green.



Chair Bodgers Pub Tour

Explore this unique English craft heritage of the Chilterns



Dancer & Hearne staff, Penn Street (1896)
Stuart King Archive



George Pursey (1831–1911) in the doorway outside The Plough, Winchmore Hill c. 1880
Stuart King Archive



Hampden Arms, Great Hampden
Stuart King Archive

BODGERS

'Chair bodger' is an informal local name for a 'chair leg turner'. (There are a number of opinions as to the origin of the term 'bodger', but no one knows for certain where it came from.) They produced the 'round' parts of the chair (legs, back spindles and stretchers) by turning 'green' (unseasoned) wood on primitive pole lathes, mostly in the woods, but sometimes in small home workshops.



Alex Dean turning a chair leg on a pole lathe
Andy Dean/Wycombe Museum

Most bodgers worked in small groups of two or three; they were family men with a cottage and a garden. Brothers Alec and Owen Dean were typical (see 5 The Hampden Arms); they set up a working camp in a local beech wood for 12 months to 'work-up' the trees purchased at a local auction into chair parts. This process was repeated annually. Owen was one of the last three working chair bodgers, all of whom retired c.1959. Sam Rockall from Turville Heath and Silas Saunders (landlord of the Crooked Billet) from Stoke Row were the other two.



Bodgers' Camp
Andy Dean/Wycombe Museum

WINDSOR CHAIRS

The use of the term 'Windsor' remains a mystery with a number of competing explanations. It is likely that the origin lies in the early route of delivery to London via the river Thames at Windsor, although the chairs were mostly made many miles from that town.



Bottomer adzing a chair seat
Stuart King (from a photo in SWOP/Wycombe Museum)

BOTTOMERS

It is the solid elm seat that holds the whole Windsor chair together. A Windsor chair seat is special because it is hand shaped for comfort. A very sharp tool called an adze was used to do this. The square section of elm wood was held flat on the ground while the craftsman, a 'bottomer', swung the adze between his legs to remove large shavings. Chair seats were referred to as 'bottoms'. There was one bottomer known as 'No Toes Neville' who sadly spent too much time in the Red Cow pub at lunchtime drinking beer. His unsteady work with the sharp bladed adze one afternoon earned him his nickname.

BENCHMEN

Benchmen were skilled craftsmen who worked using a hand vice attached to a work bench. Some worked in factories, others in a shed at the bottom of their garden. Banisters (splats), cresting rails, lathe back Windsor up-stands (for the back of the chair) and scroll arms were just a few of the shaping jobs the men worked on. A variety of tools were kept close by, such as spoke shaves, draw knives, stock scrapers, scratch stocks, rasps, bowsaws and tenon saws. Benchmen were often paid by piece-work, at a fixed price per 100.

CONSTRUCTING A WINDSOR CHAIR

'Windsor chair' refers to the construction, rather than its design or style. It is essentially 'a stool with a back added'. The parts – legs, back and any arms – were made, usually by separate craftsmen, from unseasoned (green) wood and inserted by a 'framer' into slots in the seat.

BODGERS

Chair legs (and other supports) were turned by bodgers. A two-man cross cut saw was used to cut a measured length of timber, which would then be split into billets with a beetle mallet and wedge. The billets were trimmed with a hand axe, then shaped further with a draw knife at a shave horse. A foot-operated pole lathe was then used to turn the billets into chair legs. The turned legs were stacked to dry out before being sold in bulk to the factories.



Jack Goodchild fitting the bow to a Windsor chair in his workshop at Naphill, late 1940s
SWOP/Wycombe Museum MHW12489

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