

Philip Clissett: an annotated bibliography

Compiled by Terry Rowell (2012)

This bibliography lists publications that are entirely about Philip Clissett, or make a significant contribution to his story. Items are listed in order of publication.

Balfour, Maxwell (1898). Portrait of Philip Clissett. *The Quarto*, 4th Series, 82.

The publication of Balfour's lithograph in a prestigious arts journal, with no explanation of the significance of the subject, suggests that Clissett had become well known. Versions of the print are held by the British Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Morris, G.L. & Wood E. (1899). The architecture of the Passmore Edwards Settlement. *The Studio*, 16(71), 11-18.

While no mention is made of Clissett, photographs of the interior of this building (now known as Mary Ward House) show a large number of ladderback chairs identical in pattern to those made by him. While some aspects of the photographs suggest the chairs were made by Clissett, it does not seem possible to verify this.

MacColl, D.S. (1903). The Arts and Crafts Exhibition. *Architectural Review*, 13, 187-189.

This article and Balfour's print appear to be the only material concerning Clissett published during his lifetime, though it doesn't mention him by name. MacColl makes reference to the meeting between the architect James MacLaren and Philip Clissett at which he, himself, was present. No other record of this meeting is known – neither MacLaren nor MacColl left diaries. It was written many years after the meeting took place, and may have suffered for that.

Anon (1913a). A Bosbury Veteran: Probably South Herefordshire's Oldest Voter. *Hereford Journal*, 25 January 1913.

Anon (1913b). Mr Philip Clissett. *Hereford Times*, 1 February 1913.

Anon (1913c). The Late Mr Philip Clissett. *Hereford Journal*, 1 February 1913.

Brief obituaries to Philip Clissett, who died on 17 January 1913. The *Hereford Times* refers to his skills as a chair-maker, with his work having been "exhibited in London on numerous occasions". In contrast, the *Hereford Journal* makes only passing reference to his occupation, but in their second offering he was "a clever maker of the old-fashioned rush-bottom chair".

Lethaby, W.R., Powell, A.H. & Griggs, F.L. (1924). *Ernest Gimson, His Life and Work*. Shakespeare Head Press, Stratford-upon-Avon.

A brief account of Clissett's craft in the context of his encounter with Gimson. MacLaren's role is not referred to (he was long dead), and the chairs in the Art Workers' Guild are considered to be Clissett's traditional product.

Gimson found that an old man called Clissett at Bosbury, near Ledbury, continued to make chairs in a traditional way: comfortable tall-backed things, parts were turned in a simple pole-lathe, others were shaped with a spoke-shave, and the seats were of rushes. These chairs had I think first been brought to London at the meeting-room of the Art Workers' Guild. They were strong, light, shapely and entirely right.

Lethaby, W.R. (1930). *House Painting and Furnishing. Dryad Leaflet No 4. The Dryad Handicrafts*, Leicester.

Although Clissett is not mentioned by name, the sole illustration in this brief publication is a drawing of a three-rung ladder-back chair "made in a Herefordshire village" of the exact type that Clissett made for the Art Workers' Guild. Lethaby influenced the late Arts & Crafts movement, and Ernest Gimson in particular. Here, he is using Clissett's chair to demonstrate

that “Service is always real and right, while show is full of dangers. Every scrap of “ornament” should clearly justify itself”.

Thomas, W.B. (1931). *Country Life*. *The Spectator*, 18 July 1931, page 14.

Refers to Gimson travelling to the West Country to learn chair-making from the “famous Clisset family, who produced a beautiful and traditional pattern of chair”. Interesting mainly because it is an early article in a periodical.

Massé, H.J.L.J. (1935). *The Art-Workers’ Guild*. Shakespeare Head Press, Oxford.

Massé was Assistant Secretary to the Art Workers’ Guild from 1889 (Greensted, 1980). This account of the first fifty years of the Art Workers’ Guild records that the chairs from Bosbury were purchased just after it moved from the Century Club to Barnards Inn, Holborn. These chairs cost ten shillings and sixpence each...

These chairs have done good work for the Guild and its tenants; and Paul Clissold (*sic*), the maker, and his son after him, supplied similar hand-made chairs for years to many members of the Guild and to their discerning friends.

Note that, in addition to the mistake over the name, it was Clissett’s grandsons rather than his son who continued the chairmaking business. Massé did, however, have the advantage of first-hand experience of the Guild from the period when the chairs were apparently purchased.

Voss-Bark, Conrad (1943). The Lost Art of the Ash Turner. *Country Life*, 26 February 1943.

Bateman, T.R. (1943). The Art of the Ash-turner. *Country Life*, 19 March 1943.

Woodroffe, Paul (1943). An Old Chair-Maker. *Country Life*, 9 July 1943

[Also, Vol XCIV, page 76 – which I haven’t seen]

Voss-Bark’s article provides a drawing of the Clissett-MacLaren chair that had already found its way into the Hereford Museum within thirty years of the death of its maker. An attempt is made to give some details of how the chair was made, but it is clear that the author has little idea how it was achieved.

His article prompted correspondence from the architect T.R. Bateman, who pointed out the link with Gimson, and that Gimson’s chair designs were still being produced by Edward Gardiner. The Arts & Crafts designer, Paul Woodroffe also corresponded, submitting a copy of the Balfour drawing of Clissett (which was reproduced with his letter), and pointing out that Clissett had made the chairs for the meeting hall of the Art Workers’ Guild.

Morgan, F.C. (1946). Philip Clissett, a Bosbury Chair-maker. *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists’ Field Club*, **32**, 16-18.

Morgan, F.C. (1949). Philip Clissett. *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists’ Field Club*, **32**, 251.

The first of these two items is the fullest account of how Philip Clissett made his chairs, giving a detailed description of a pole lathe, and a few biographical details and anecdotes, including the meeting with MacLaren. The author, a well-known local historian, does not give his sources, but is likely to have obtained his information by word of mouth, possibly from family members. His second very short piece is referred to as “additional information” but is mostly repeated information from the first publication. It introduces some errors (e.g. the maiden-name of Clissett’s first wife; the month of his death; the price of ladder-back chairs). This time, Morgan gave his source, the husband of Clissett’s grand-daughter’s niece by marriage, probably far away enough in terms of both time and relationship to account for the errors.

Morgan’s account forms the basis for most subsequent articles about Clissett.

Griffith, D.W.J. (1954 unpub.). The Cotswold Tradition in a Contemporary Workshop. Dissertation: Shoreditch Training College, Coopers Hill, Englefield Green, Surrey.

Possibly the most important account of Clissett's workshop methods. Griffith interviewed two of Clissett's descendants who had both worked with him. Comparisons are made with the workshop practices of Edward Gardiner. There are gaps in Griffith's descriptions, but his text and drawings are very clear. Interestingly, he does not seem to have been aware of Morgan's articles.

Derrick, F. (1954). Folk Art - 12. The craftsman in the workshop. *The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder*, 17 Sep 1954.

Refers to Clissett as "so personally unimportant that there appears to be some doubt as to his christian name" and, as far as Ernest Gimson was concerned, "less an individual than a representative of a very ancient and honourable tradition". Otherwise, the article recycles the content of earlier publications, and includes the story of Derrick's more or less accidental purchase of a ladderback chair made by Clissett.

Wight, M. (1962). A Long-lived Chair-maker. *Country Life*, 1 November 1962, p1086.

This letter, accompanied by a photograph of Clissett that had recently come to light, is based entirely on Morgan's earlier articles (above). It does, however, introduce the (possibly erroneous) idea that the new (ladderback) chairs sold for much better prices than Clissett's old styles. Wight refers to the meeting with an architect, without mentioning MacLaren, sowing the seeds for later confusion.

Wight, M. (1968). The maker of wooden chairs. *Country Quest*, Dec 1968, pp 18-20.

Although based largely on Morgan's articles, Wight here introduces a little new information, though much of it can be shown to be inaccurate. There is confusion, for example, over Clissett's grandsons who worked with him in Bosbury in the early 1900s, and his brother who lived in Castlemorton in the 1840s. Here, too, the confusion between MacLaren and Gimson is compounded when Wight speculates that it was Gimson who made designs for Clissett. The link is made from Clissett, through Gimson and Gardiner, to Neville Neale.

Lambourne, L. (1969). *Ernest Gimson* (Exhibition Catalogue). Leicester Museum, Leicester.

Reproduces Edward Gardiner's account, written in 1956 to Edward Barnsley, of how Gimson encouraged him to start making chairs. It contains several reports of Gimson's descriptions of Clissett's working methods, with the account of rushing being of particular interest.

Price, Vera (1970). Here and There. Woebley Old People Remember a Famous Victorian Chairmaker. *Leominster & Bromyard News*, 30 September 1970

The central story of Clissett, as told here, is taken from Wight's *Country Quest* article, though with minor unexplained modifications (Clissett's grandsons are now his brothers). But it is the news item itself which is of most interest. Here we learn that while one descendant of Philip Clissett valued his chairs enough to donate them to the Hereford Museum, another valued them so little that they simply "got rid of them".

Wight, M. (1971). A Country Chair-maker. *The Lady*, 30 September 1971.

Largely a repetition of Wight's own article from 1968, with a few changes. MacLaren is brought back into the story, and Clissett's grandsons are now his sons. There is also mention of Clissett's chairs being exhibited at an Art Workers' Guild exhibition in London in 1888. As there was no such exhibition, this could be assumed to be the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society exhibition of 1888 – though work by Clissett is not listed in that year's catalogue, or any other. Possibly, Wight is referring to the year in which the Art Workers' Guild first bought chairs from Clissett for their meeting room.

Pearce, Barbara (1975). Philip Clissett, chairmaker. *Berrows Worcester Journal*, 6 February 1975.

Describes rising interest in Clissett's work from the antiques trade during the first half of the 1970s.

Carruthers, Annette (1978). *Ernest Gimson and the Cotswold Group of Craftsmen. Publication No 14*. Leicester Museums, Leicester.

Reproduces the 1956 account by Edward Gardiner, originally published in Lambourne (1969) and described above.

Watkins, Alfred (1979). Woodcraft; the disappearing heritage. *Herefordshire County Life*, **1 (9)**, 19-25.

Watkins is well-known for his book on ley lines, *The Old Straight Track*. This account of wood craft in Herefordshire was originally written in 1931, four years before his death. His reference to Clissett is brief: "a few (chairs) were made in Bosbury up to the war by the Clissop family", demonstrating how little local interest there was in Clissett's work at that time, less than two decades after his death.

Sandford, A. (1979). Philip Clisset: The Bosbury Chairmaker. *Herefordshire County Life*, **Vol 1(9)**, 34-37.

Anne Sandford was curator of the Hereford Museum. Her article appears to be almost entirely an amalgamation of Morgan and Wight's articles. Although she refers to MacLaren's design role, Sandford also claims that Gimson made designs for Clissett. As far as is known, there is no evidence to support this; the idea presumably derived from Wight's earlier speculation. Sandford also introduced the idea of Clissett as a teacher, and refers to the existence in Herefordshire of several sets of chairs made by Clissett as wedding presents.

Cleaver, I.G. (1979). Philip Clissett, Herefordshire Chairmaker. *Woodworker*, July 1979.

Cleaver's article appears to be based almost entirely on Morgan, probably with reference to some of the other derivative articles.

Camino, Mary (1980). *Gimson and the Barnsleys*. Evans Brothers, London.

This book is significant for drawing attention to MacColl's account of the meeting between Clissett and MacLaren. It also contains copies of what are probably the earliest photographs of Clissett's ladderbacks – exhibits at the Kenton & Co exhibition, 1891.

Pearce, Barbara (1983). Philip Clissett described by his grandson. *The Rostrum Fine Art Supplement (Russell Baldwin & Bright Auctioneers, Hereford)*, January 1983.

This article is based on an interview with Harold Clissett (1896-1979); I am grateful to Harold's daughter, Jean Sullivan, for this information, as the article does not reveal Harold's identity. Only a few details are new or different from earlier accounts, e.g. chair parts are steamed (Morgan and his followers did not mention steaming) in an iron "framer" rather than simply shaped in a wooden "brake". There are a few personal details, and a reference to Clissett's chairs being sent to America. Pearce attributes the famous ladderback to Gimson, and does not mention MacLaren at all. An earlier article, based on this interview, appeared in *Berrow's Worcester Journal* during the 1970s; this article has not been located yet.

Stamp, G. (1984). A Hundred Years of the Art Worker's Guild. In: *Beauty's Awakening: the centenary exhibition of the Art Workers' Guild*, pp 6-11. Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton.

Refers to the chairs in the Art Workers Guild as "based on a design by Gimson", perhaps following Wight and Sandford as outlined above. This article is available from the Art Workers' Guild website which, elsewhere, attributes the design to MacLaren. Taking the two items together suggests that MacLaren based the design on one of Gimson's, which would be entirely incorrect if only for reasons of chronology.

Bethell, Hal (1987). The Saintly Philip Clissett, *The Countryman*, vol. 92, no. 4, pp.79-84

This dramatised account of Clissett's life and the meeting with MacLaren contains a few new details about Clissett's life, such as a spell as a Parish Constable. In common with all other accounts following on from Morgan, Bethell does not give the sources of his information.

Cotton, Bernard D. (1990). *The English Regional Chair*. Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk.

Cotton's account is the most detailed to date of Clissett and his chairs. He is placed firmly in a family of chairmakers, and in a regional tradition of chairmaking. His symbolic importance to the Arts & Crafts movement is fully recognised. Doubts are raised over his contribution to the design of the well-known ladderback chair, with the Evesham chairmaker John Kerry being cited as a more likely originator. This is the first fully-referenced account of Clissett, though it does have to rely on Morgan's unreferenced article for many details.

Carruthers, Annette (1994). Good Citizen's Furniture: the Arts and Crafts collection at Cheltenham. Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum in association with L. Humphries, London

A short account of Clissett to accompany the museum catalogue entry for a Clissett-MacLaren chair. It classes this chair as "highly influential", partly because its prominence at the Art Workers' Guild meant that it has been seen by almost everybody involved in art and design from the late 1880s onwards. It has not proven possible to verify some points, such as the sale of Clissett's chairs at Heals store, and the idea that the new chairs fetched much higher prices than Clissett's previous designs (an idea that seems to have arisen with Wight, and come down through Sandford's article).

Urquhart, Christopher (1998). The Philip Clissett Legacy. *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter*, No 29, 13.

Urquhart undertook the restoration of the Art Workers' Guilds chairs, and provides details of how they were constructed, based on his experience. While confirming and supplementing much of Morgan's account, it does contradict it in some details.

Pearce, Barbara (1998). The John Warander Chair. *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter*, No 29, 12.

In contrast to Cotton's proposal that the Clissett-MacLaren chair was based on Kerry's ladderback, Pearce suggests that John Warander's ladderback could be a progenitor. Warander (or Warrender) was based at Bransford, about ten miles from Bosbury

Drury, Michael (2000). *Wandering Architects: In Pursuit of an Arts and Crafts Ideal*. Shaun Tyas, Donington, Lincs.

Contains a full transcript of Alfred Powell's description of his visit, with Randall Wells, to Clissett's workshop on 19 June 1903. Though very brief, it is the only contemporary first hand description of Clissett that I am aware of (other than Balfour's drawing).

Rowell, T.A. (2010). Philip Clissett and James MacLaren. *The James MacLaren Society Journal*, 8, 26-32.

Brief account of Clissett and the impact of his brush with the Arts & Crafts movement.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Dr Bernard (Bill) Cotton for drawing my attention to David Griffith's dissertation, and providing a copy; and to David's widow, Margaret, for sending me a copy of his supplementary chapter written in about 1990.