Distinguishing Philip Clissett's ladderback chairs from "The Clissett" as made by Edward Gardiner

To the casual eye, Philip Clissett's ladderback chairs appear to be identical to those made by Edward Gardiner (Ernest Gimson's chairmaker) and called "The Clissett" (with the design often attributed to Gimson himself). This attribution, and the puzzle of identical chairs apparently made by Gordon Russell Ltd and by Dryad Handicrafts, will have to be the subject of another article. The purpose here is to concentrate on distinguishing Clissett's chairs from Gardiner's.

Most of the features described here are easy to see and to distinguish between makers. Not all of them will necessarily be observable in every chair, and some may have been obliterated through wear, damage, repair or refinishing.

For a quick diagnosis, check for a maker's stamp (1 below), followed by finial shape (7), front arm support joint (2), and scribe marks (8).

1. Maker's stamp

Almost too obvious to mention, but Edward Gardiner stamped at least some of his chairs. According to Annette Carruthers (*Ernest Gimson and the Cotswold Group of Craftsmen*), he did so from about 1948 until his death in 1958 (though the New Walk Museum in Leicester has a stamped Gardiner chair which is dated 1938). The stamp reads ED. GARDINER and, if present, it should be on the inside of one of the back legs. If you've got this, then no need to go any further. Similarly, if the chair is stamped for Neville or Lawrence Neal (who continued to produce "The Clissett" after Gardiner's death) then you've identified the maker.

Philip Clissett did not normally stamp his ladderback chairs, though one or two examples have been seen with his initials stamped on the underside of the arms. Worth checking even though you are most unlikely to find this.

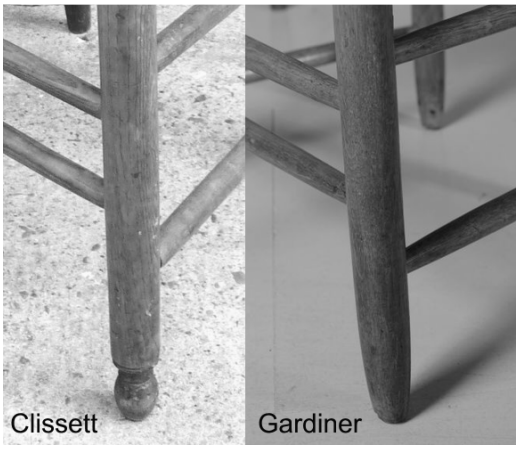
If a chair is unstamped then, if you don't have good provenance back to the maker, the features described below may help. However, you should be aware that there were many approximate copies of the general Clissett design other than the one made by Edward Gardiner. Many of these had square-cut back legs, which immediately discounts them.

2. Arm support joint (armchairs only)

Where the arms are jointed onto the front supports, Clissett made a "blind" mortice. In consequence, you can't see the joint when you look at the arm from above. In contrast, Gardiner made a "through" mortice, so you can see a cross-section of the support in the top surface of the arm.

While this is a very easy feature to see, there may be confusion where an arm has been replaced. Sometimes, when an arm support tenon has broken, the arm may be fixed with a screw or similar fixing, so obscuring the type of mortice.

I have also seen a couple of examples of a chair that looked superficially like one of these ladderbacks, but much more heavily built. The front arm joint is blind, but the chair is not by Clissett (and probably not by Gardiner). It has no pegging anywhere in its structure, lacks the ball turning under the arm, seems to be in oak, and may have matching edge protectors fitted to the seat.



3. Front feet (side chairs only)
Clissett turned small rounded feet on the front legs of his side chairs – this appears to be a consistent feature. Gardiner left the feet on his side chairs plain, and similar to his armchairs. Remember that feet are sometimes cut off a chair to reduce the height, so this may not be a perfect diagnostic indicator.

4. Front leg top turning (side chairs only)
Side chairs, like armchairs, may vary in the number of slats in both Clissett's and Gardiner's chairs. But the top of the front legs are always decorated. On Gardiner's chairs this is a simple groove, whereas Clissett finished his with a more complex stepped motif. Some care needs to be exercised with this feature, as wear on Clissett's chairs may result in the loss of much of the stepping, but the difference between the two makers should still be apparent.

5. Pegging
(a) Size of pegs
Gardiner's pegs are 3-4mm square. Clissett's are much larger, being about 5-6mm square. Having said that, neither maker's pegs are necessarily square, and may be rectangular in section, or even diamond-shaped.

(b)Pegging of slats
Gardiner pegged the top slats of his chairs from the *front*, usually with the peg set towards the inside of the chair. In complete contrast, Clissett pegged from *behind*. Sometimes, other slats on Clissett's chairs are also pegged, also from behind. Gardiner's slats, including the pegged top one, may also be fixed from behind with fine metal pins. A chair by Lawrence Neal, who still makes Gardner's version of "The Clissett", has no pegs or pins in the slats.

(c) Pegging of arms
Clissett pegged through the back uprights from the outside of the chair to secure the rear tenon of the arm into its mortice. Gardiner didn't do this (as far as I know), preferring instead to use a fine metal pin. This seems to be a consistent difference between the two makers.

At the front of the arm, *both* makers pegged the arm to the support from the *inside* of the chair. Gardiner did this consistently, as far as I am aware. Clissett generally did so, but some chairs have been seen with this joint pegged from the *outside*. This inconsistency of Clissett's is also seen in his spindleback chairs. Most of these are pegged from the outside (in contrast to the ladderbacks), but a few are pegged from the inside.

(d) Pegging of stretchers
Clissett did not usually peg the stretchers on his chairs, though I have seen an example with pegs securing a single rear stretcher on a spindleback chair. With respect to Gardiner, I have seen chairs that are most probably his (e.g. at Leicester Museum) with pegs securing the lower stretchers all round, other chairs with pins in the same positions, and others still with no pegs or pins in the stretchers.

6. Shape of the back slats
While the back slats by these two makers follow a generally similar shape, they *are* different. Clissett smoothed the top edge of each slat over towards the back, to form a blade-like edge along almost all of that edge – the very ends may become flat just before they are morticed into the uprights. While Gardiner did the same to the higher central area of each slat, he left the lower top edges mostly flat, with a relatively sharp transition from the vertical to the horizontal. This means that, in a photograph, Clissett's slats tends to look much more contoured than those made by Gardiner. In the photograph shown here, both chairs are seen from the front. This feature is usually quite a marked difference between the two makers, but I have seen Gardiner chairs (possibly early ones) where the slats tended towards Clissett's, with relatively short flat areas, particularly on the upper slats.

These distinguishing features of the slats were originally pointed out to me by Paul Shutler.

7. Shape of the finials
These are usually easy to distinguish and, alongside the front arm mortice and the scribe marks, are probably the most reliable way to distinguish Clissett's chairs. His finials are rather variable, sometimes even from side to side on the same chair, but are essentially triangular in overall shape (the illustration shows some of the variability). Gardiner's might be best described as bun shaped, with a small nipple. Essentially, he reduced the diameter much more before starting to turn the final, nipple-section of the turning. In both cases, the nipple may be shortened through damage, especially the smaller Gardiner type.

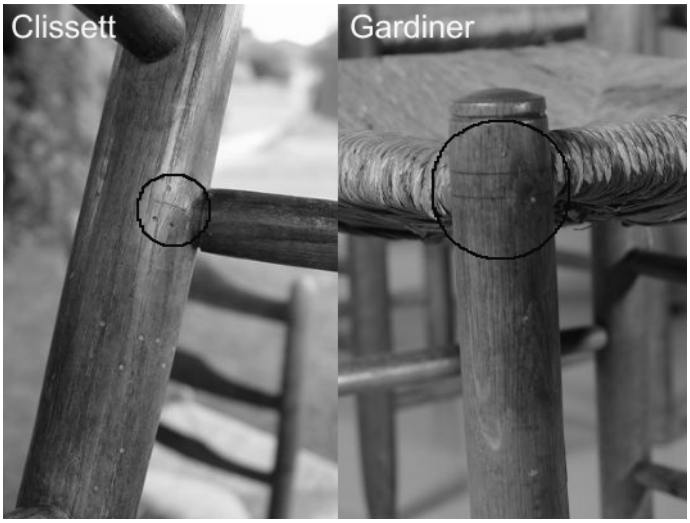
Gardiner's finial seems to me to be essentially borrowed from Gimson-

designs for other chairs.

These distinguishing features were originally pointed out to me by Paul Shutler but, I subsequently discovered, had been recorded by David Griffith in the mid-1950s (Griffith, D.W.J. 1954. The Cotswold Tradition in a Contemporary Workshop. Dissertation: Shoreditch Training College, Coopers Hill, Englefield Green, Surrey).

8. Scribe marks

On Edward Gardiner's chairs, fine ring markings can often be seen marking where slats, stretchers and seat rails are morticed into the legs of the chair. These were made by holding a scribing tool against the leg while it rotated in the lathe. Similar marks are not visible on Clissett's chairs, which is a good enough difference to help distinguish them. These ring scribe marks are often most clearly seen on Gardiner's chairs at the slats and seat rails; for some reason, they are often less visible at the stretchers. However, be aware that some of Gardiner's chairs are completely without scribe marks.



Clissett did mark up his chairs though in a much less obvious way. Every chair I have inspected, either stamped by Clissett (spindlebacks and other chairs) or of good provenance (e.g. unstamped ladderbacks owned by Clissett family members) has had these marks. Looking on the inside of the legs, each Clissett-made chair has short scribe marks where the side stretchers are mortised into the legs – the exception is the front right leg which always lacks a mark. This seems to be a very good method of distinguishing Clissett's ladderbacks. You can sometimes also see short scribe marks where the arms are morticed into the back legs.

Finding the Clissett scribe marks can sometimes be difficult. They are often quite faint, and may be partly obscured by dirt or varnish. Using a torch can help.

9. Green wood and riven parts

According to David Griffiths, Edward Gardiner often used seasoned wood, in contrast to Clissett's use of green timber. Gardiner clearly did use green wood on occasion, as some of his chairs show distinct ovalling of the back uprights (diagnostic of the timber drying out after turning). His use of seasoned timber means, however, that a chair that doesn't exhibit ovalling will be made by him.

Gardiner also used a circular saw to cut up logs into pieces for turning, while Clissett used a lathing axe to split the logs by hand. The backs of Clissett's slats and the undersides of the arms usually show clear evidence of having been riven in this way. There should be an obvious distinction between the rough finish of Clissett's work in these areas, and a smoother finish achieved by a saw. In practice, however, the difference is not always easy to spot – perhaps Gardiner did use a lathing axe in some of his earlier work.

It may come as a surprise to some, that much of the work done for Gimson used power tools, as it is often assumed that Gimson didn't use machinery. But it is known that his workshops were equipped with circular saws (Greensted, M. 1980. *Gimson and the Barnsleys*, p166).

10. Stretchers
On Clissett's chairs, the stretchers are simple dowels. They may be quite worn at the front, and may have some unevenness, but the basic pattern is always clear, they are rods of equal diameter along their entire length. It's possible, if a joint is coming apart, that you will be able to see the step at the beginning of the tenon.

Some or all of Gardiner's stretchers are almost always thicker at the centre than at the ends, giving them a very slight slope along their length; sometimes, there is a relatively sharp reduction in width towards the ends, as in the illustration. I have seen examples where only the front stretchers are to this pattern, with the rest being plain dowels.

11. Timber
Clissett's ladderbacks seem to have always been made from ash. The occasional use of other timbers, e.g. cherry or walnut, for parts of a chair, as in some of his spindlebacks, is unknown. His practice with spindlebacks was to use these other timbers for the arms and the top rail, and we could not discount the possibility of a ladderback turning up with similar features.

Gardiner also worked principally in ash, but also advertised oak as an alternative at a small additional cost. According to Norma Marshall (*The Countryman*, Spring 1956) he also kept yew for chairmaking, and an example is in the Cheltenham Museum though doubts have been raised about the maker (Carruthers & Greensted, *Good Citizen's Furniture: the Arts and Crafts Collection at* Cheltenham, p 89).

12. General finish and appearance
This is an area where it is difficult to be specific, and details are only included for the sake of completeness.

Paul Shutler has pointed out to me that the staining/varnishing of Clissett's chairs is usually not well done, and I've now seen this many times. It's easy to see by turning a chair over and noticing the drips of varnish on the undersides of the stretchers. But chairs get cleaned up and refinished, so this isn't the best guide.

Gardiner's chairs tend to be better finished. On the other hand they always seem, to my eye at least, a heavier item with rather less poise than Clissett's chairs. This rather indefinable quality may arise from the slight unevenness often seen in Clissett's chairs resulting from the use of green wood. Some, at least, of Gardiner's chairs have thicker legs than Clissett's which tends to make them look heavier.

The backs of Clissett's chairs have a more or less continuous curve, whereas Gardiner's have a much simpler angle at the junction with the seat (I'm grateful to Mike Abbott for pointing this out). These differences are due to the design of the bending frame used by the two makers. It's

possible, too, that you will see more evidence of tool marks on Clissett's work. Nothing was sanded off – the work was made and finished entirely with bladed tools.

Using this guide

It will always be worth studying the photographs of Philip Clissett's chairs at www.philipclissett.co.uk before trying to attribute a chair to Clissett or Gardiner. When applying this guide, check each point in turn, then assess the balance of evidence when you're done. Mostly, this is all a matter of practice, though it undoubtedly helps if you can see an example of each maker side by side. The simplest diagnostics are finial shape, the front arm mortice on armchairs, and scribe marks. The curve of the back legs (once you have your eye in) is impossible to mistake.