

1. Introduction

During the summer of 1890, the Arts & Crafts designer Ernest Gimson took time off from his prestigious Oxford Street office to spend a few weeks in Philip Clissett's workshop in Herefordshire¹. Gimson, described variously as “the greatest of the English architect-designers”² and “arguably the best English furniture maker of the period”,³ had been inspired by the rush-seated ladderback chairs furnishing London's Art Workers Guild (Figure 1.1), and wanted to learn directly from their maker. Those few weeks encouraged Gimson to set up his own chairmaking workshop, and to produce his own designs. A direct descendant of that workshop is still operating today.

Gimson was not the first Arts & Crafts designer to visit Clissett, and he would not be the last. The following years saw a succession of visits by names well-known today, eager to meet the man, and see him produce complete chairs with his own hands from nothing more than a log and a bundle of reeds.

To the followers of the Arts & Crafts movement in the late 19th century, Clissett seems to be a living embodiment of what the movement was all about; a skilled and happy craftsman who produced simple yet elegant furniture from local materials, using the most basic of tools. Today, his importance is broader. Undoubtedly, the eighty or so chairs at the Art Workers Guild, still in use today, have been seen by generations of crafts-people; they are a significant inspiration and a link with the past. But Clissett's earlier work is identifiable because he marked it with his initials – he was one of the few makers from the West Midlands to do this. His output has therefore helped characterise one strand of 19th century regional furniture.

The key to Clissett's significance is his long working life and his connection with chair-making in earlier times. Born in the Regency times of George III, he saw no less than six monarchs on the throne, and lived to ride in a motor car and wonder at aeroplanes. He outlived three wives and all his children. His family involvement in chair-making dated to at least the mid-18th century, and he brought their simple methods into the 20th century with little or no modernisation. He had resisted the industrialisation of his craft in a way that was, perhaps, only possible in a quiet rural area like Herefordshire. This resistance to change, the simple fact of his longevity, and his late renaissance under the Arts & Crafts movement are a unique combination.

Philip Clissett left no written records - no diaries, no letters, no business or household accounts. He did not advertise in trade directories, he left no last will and testament, and his grave is unmarked. His life is mostly evident only from the official records: the annals of births, marriages, deaths and censuses and, of course, in the many chairs that have survived for a century or more. A few sparse details are hidden in newspaper archives and similar places. Despite his apparent importance to the Arts & Crafts movement, nothing seems to have been written about Clissett during his lifetime, and it was several decades before anyone thought to record memories of his life and work. We are fortunate, indeed, to be able to put a face to the man and to see inside his workshop, thanks to the survival of some remarkable photographs.

Researching the Clissett family is aided by the fact that the name is extremely rare. At the same time, research is hampered by the great variety of ways in which it was recorded, with variations including Clisset, Clissot, Clessett, Clicit, Clissitt, Clissell, Clissom, Clissen, and so on. Sometimes, it was recorded as the much

more common name of Clissold. The name is commonly thought, within the modern-day Clissett family, to be French in origin;⁴ Clisset certainly occurs in France, but is very rare there as well. The standard dictionary of English surnames contains no reference to Clissett or any of its variants.⁵

The account of the Clissett family given here begins in rural Worcestershire in the late 17th century, with the earliest known ancestors with an unbroken line to the present-day. A family of Clissetts is known from the second half of the 16th century in Hereford, with a branch relocating to London. While it has not been possible to connect the Hereford family with those in Worcestershire, family links seem likely.

What follows is, by no means, the first attempt to write Philip Clissett's story.⁶ But the numerous accounts (excepting one⁷) don't tell us where their authors obtained their information and, when their details differ, we have no means of assessing why they do. This version is based as far as possible on verifiable sources, and should help resolve at least some of the anomalies found elsewhere.

Abbreviations

BT: Bishops Transcript
HRO: Hereford Records Office
IGI: International Genealogical Index
PR: Parish Register
WRO: Worcester Records Office

References

- ¹ Camino, M. (1980). *Gimson and the Barnsleys*. Evans Brothers, London.
- ² Pevsner, N. (1936). *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. Faber and Faber, London.
- ³ Stansky, P. (1985). *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts*. Princeton University Press New Jersey.
- ⁴ <http://en.geneanet.org/>, accessed 9 Mar 2013
- ⁵ Reaney, P.H. & Wilson, R.M. (1997). *A Dictionary of English Surnames*. 3rd Edition (rev.). OUP, Oxford.
- ⁶ See <http://www.philipclissett.co.uk/bibliography.html>
- ⁷ Cotton, B.D. (1990). *The English Regional Chair*. Antique Collectors Club, Woodbridge.



Figure 1.1. The Meeting Hall of the Art Workers Guild, London, with ladderback chairs made by the Clissett workshop. [Photograph: C. Locher, courtesy of the Art Workers Guild]

2. An early Clissett chairmaker c1760-1800

The earliest definite trace of Philip Clissett's ancestry is at Earls Croome, a tiny Worcestershire parish two miles to the east of Upton-upon-Severn. During the 1690s and 1700s, Roger Clissett and Mary Glover married in the parish church¹, then produced at least seven children – the critical one for this story is Samuel, born in 1704.² How Roger supported his family isn't known – he died a pauper in 1716.³

Samuel married at Worcester Cathedral in 1734 as "Samuel Clisot of Earls Croome".⁴ He married by licence, giving us a little more detail than most marriage records of the time. On the bond relating to his licence, his status is recorded as "Yeoman" which suggests a middle-class small-scale land-owner⁵.

Amongst his marriage documents lies a small mystery. On the marriage licence documents, his prospective wife is named very clearly as Ann Piper. But in the marriage register of Worcester Cathedral, she has a different name - Elizabeth Turner. The licence documents were sworn, and likely to be correct. Registers, on the other hand, were supposed to be written up immediately, but often contain errors suggesting they were written up after the fact. This may well be a coincidental suggestion of the turner's craft, but it is intriguing.

Samuel Clissett and his wife Ann lived in or near Upton-upon-Severn, and produced three sons William, Samuel (II) and Moses.^{6,7,8} Nothing more is known of the parents, but the middle son is of interest and is Philip Clissett's direct ancestor and is the earliest proven chair-maker in the Clissett family.

Born in 1737,⁷ Samuel II probably learnt his trade in the years 1751-58 (assuming he followed the usual seven-year apprenticeship). He married in Upton-upon-Severn in 1760⁹ and, around 1765, he moved to the nearby parish of Longdon where he married again in 1770.¹⁰ By 1777, the family was living in Birtsmorton¹¹ where Samuel held the post of Parish Clerk from 1780 to at least 1804.¹² It is not known exactly when he died but it is likely to have been around 1805, at which point the parish records become very patchy.

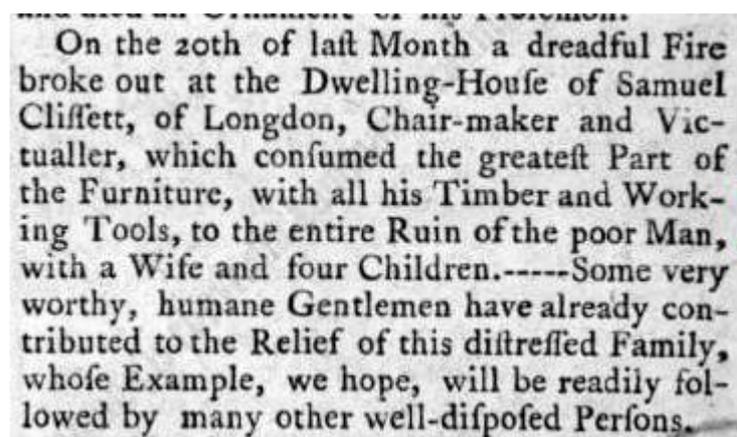


Figure 2.1. The earliest known record of a Clissett chairmaker.¹³

The earliest record of Samuel's occupation as a chairmaker (Figure 2.1) is a newspaper report of 1770.¹³ On the 20th October of that year, Samuel's house suffered a devastating fire that consumed "the greatest Part of the Furniture, with all his Timber and Working Tools, to the entire Ruin of the poor Man..." We also learn that, in addition to his chairmaking trade, Samuel was also a victualler.

Samuel's occupation is confirmed by an apprenticeship indenture dated 1777 (Figure 2.2);¹¹ he received five pounds from Longdon parish to take on John Taylor for seven years and teach him "the Art of a Turner and Chair Maker". The indenture appears to have been filled in by Samuel himself; his handwriting and signature appear frequently in the Birtsmorton parish register. He was clearly a literate man, in contrast to his father who could not write. He had four sons. At least two are known to have become chairmakers, presumably taught by their father.

References

- ¹ Earls Croome PR: Marriages, 31 Mar 1692
- ² Earls Croome PR: Baptisms, 3 Apr 1704
- ³ Earls Croome PR: Burials, 20 Apr 1716
- ⁴ Worcester Cathedral PR: Marriages, 21 Sep 1734
- ⁵ Allegation and bond relating to the proposed marriage of Samuel Clisot to Elizabeth Piper, 1734; microfilm, Worcester History Centre
- ⁶ Hanley Castle PR: Baptisms, 2 Aug 1735
- ⁷ Hanley Castle PR: Baptisms, 24 Apr 1737 – note that the Clissett entries in this PR are as "Clissom" but have been mistranscribed as "Clifton" in various indexes including the IGI (apparently mistaking the long-s for an *f*, given also that Clifton is a common name in the locality).
- ⁸ Upton-upon-Severn PR: Baptisms, 4 Apr 1743
- ⁹ Upton-upon-Severn PR: Marriages, 26 Oct 1760
- ¹⁰ Longdon PR: Marriages, 27 Dec 1770
- ¹¹ WRO: 850Longdon28(4)
- ¹² Birtsmorton PR
- ¹³ *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, No 3198, 15 Nov 1770

3. A second generation of chairmakers c1790-1850

The first of Samuel Clissett's chairmaking sons, Samuel III, was baptised in Longdon in 1766¹ (See Figure 3.1 to follow the family relationships discussed in this Chapter) The only clear record of his occupation as a turner and chairmaker is in his wife's will dating to 1828, made when they were living in Upton-upon-Severn.² It seems likely that Samuel is also the "chacemaker" recorded in Upton in about 1795³ (this seems likely to have been a typographical error for "charemaker" but, interpreted literally, could indicate a "chaisemaker" – a maker of light carriages). Nothing more is known about Samuel's life and work, other than his death and burial in Upton in 1837⁴ (see Appendix 1 for details of the careers of chairmakers discussed in Chapters 2 and 3).

Samuel III's half-brother, Moses, was born in 1774⁵ (his baptism at Holy Cross, Pershore, is likely to have been at his mother's home parish; the family appears to have been living at Birtsmorton at the time). Moses married Mary Warner at Birtsmorton in 1795,⁶ presumably after he finished his apprenticeship. They produced seven children including two boys, Cyrus⁷ and Philip.⁸ The earliest record of Moses' occupation as a chairmaker is in the Birtsmorton parish register on the occasion of Philip's baptism in 1817. He was still following the same trade in 1820,⁹ 1841¹⁰ and 1851;¹¹ by this last date he was in his mid-seventies and recorded in the census as a "Pauper Chairmaker". By then, he and his wife were living in Eastnor with their youngest daughter's family. Moses died in 1855.¹²

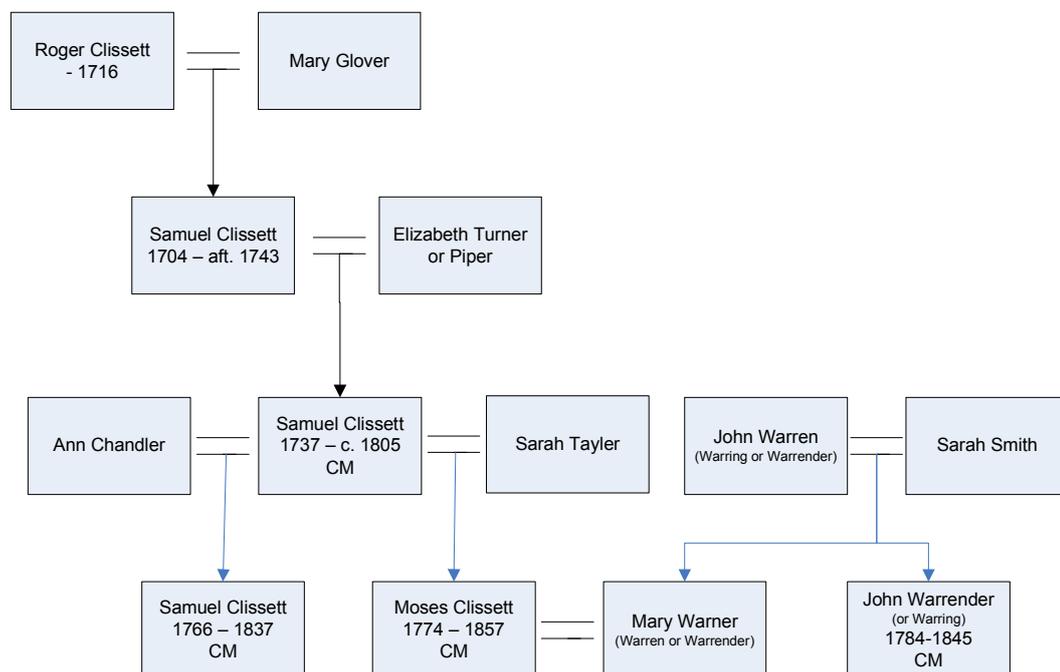


Figure 3.1. Clissett and Warrender chairmakers (CM) before 1800; descent and relationships.

Moses's wife, Mary Warner (surname as recorded at their marriage) was baptized as Mary Warren.¹³ Her sister, Ann, married John Clissett,¹⁴ a cousin of Moses who also lived in Birtsmorton (John became Parish Clerk after Samuel II died¹⁵). Their younger sister, Hannah, was baptized as Warrender.¹⁶ This suggests that their brother, John, baptized as John Warring at Berrow in 1784,¹⁷ was actually John Warrender (or Warander), a recorded chairmaker.¹⁸ He produced chairs which were similar to and sometimes identical to those later produced by Philip Clissett,

but stamped with his own initials “IW”. Evidence for this probable family link (if correct, he would be Philip Clissett’s uncle) is strengthened by later family links forged between Warrender’s immediate family and Philip’s extended family in Bosbury – one of his daughters married Philip’s brother-in-law, William Cole, also a chairmaker.¹⁹ In addition, though hardly conclusive, three of his children were named for his sisters, Mary,²⁰ Ann,²¹ and Hannah.²² Furthermore, when the youngest Warner sister married at Deerhurst in 1803, John Warner and Mary Clissett (her brother and sister) were witnesses.²³ While readers may have doubts about the surname transitions described above, they should be reassured that these are common. In the parishes close to Birtsmorton, Warrant transforms to Warren, Warriner, Warrant, Warner, Warrender and Warren, all within the same family. These are, most likely, simple mis-hearings and/or mistranscriptions in the parish registers.

John Warrender married Elizabeth Buckle in Tewkesbury in 1810,²⁴ and settled north of the Malverns at Bransford where he was to remain for the rest of his life. His occupation was recorded as Artificer (i.e. craftsman) in 1814,²⁵ then as Chairmaker several times between 1816 and 1841.^{26,27} He had one son, also John,²⁸ who followed his father and became a chairmaker.²⁷ The son died in 1842,²⁹ and the father in 1845.³⁰

That Philip Clissett should have this background of family involvement in chairmaking stretching back to perhaps the 1750s or earlier, is hardly surprising, but it is significant information. Before 1987, it was not known how he acquired his craft, though there was some speculation that he came from a family of

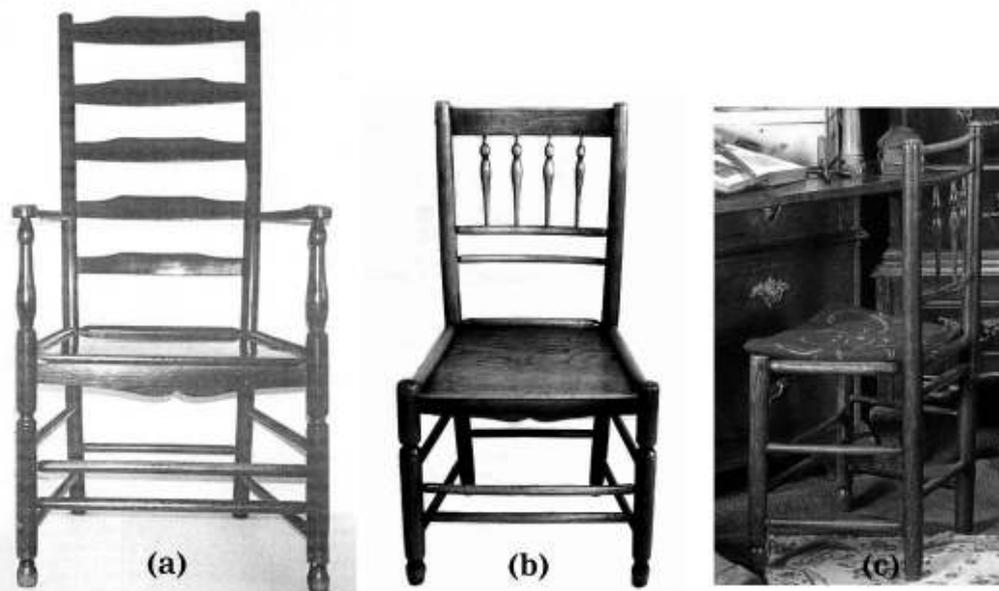


Figure 3.2. Three chairs by John Warrender (1784-1845) [Photographs (a)³⁵ courtesy of the Regional Furniture Society, (c) courtesy of Dreweatt Neate Auctioneers.]

chairmakers.^{31,32,33} Subsequently, it was suggested that his father was a chairmaker,³⁴ with evidence first being provided in 1990.¹⁸

With this new information about the extent of family involvement, we can appreciate that Philip would have been steeped in a long chairmaking tradition (Figure 3.1). We can only speculate about chairs made by the earlier Clissetts – no chairs bearing suitable identifying marks have been recorded – but, as John Warrender stamped his chairs we have some indication of similarities and

differences (Figure 3.2). Only one model of chair by Warrender (b) is well known,¹⁸ and is identical to a style produced by Philip. Of the other two, one (a) has been suggested as a possible source for the development of the well-known Clissett ladderback.³⁵ With the probable Clissett-Warrender connection, this now seems more likely than previous suggestions concerning Kerry of Evesham,¹⁸ although there is clearly a regional link.

The new detail about the Warrender chairmakers provides help in dating their output. IW stamped chairs can be dated no later than 1845 when the elder John Warrender died. They are unlikely to have been made before about 1805-6, the earliest that the elder Warrender is likely to have completed his apprenticeship.

References

- ¹ Longdon PR: Baptisms, 2 Jun 1766
- ² Birmingham City Archives; probate copy of the will of Ann Clissett, wife of Samuel Clissett, of Upton-upon-Severn, co. Worc. MS 3197/Acc1920-006/284425 29 May, 1828
- ³ *Universal British Directory*, 1791-98
- ⁴ *National Burial Index*
- ⁵ Holy Cross, Pershore PR: Baptisms, 18 May 1774
- ⁶ Birtsmorton BT: Baptisms, 24 Dec 1795
- ⁷ Census: 1851
- ⁸ Birtsmorton PR: Baptisms, 26 Jan 1817
- ⁹ Birtsmorton PR: Baptisms, 5 Mar 1820
- ¹⁰ Census: 1841
- ¹¹ Census: 1851
- ¹² GRO Index; Ledbury, Sep 1855, 6a 29
- ¹³ Birtsmorton PR: Baptisms, 28 Feb 1774
- ¹⁴ Birtsmorton BT: Marriages, 30 Jan 1791
- ¹⁵ Birtsmorton PR: Burials, 3 Aug 1843
- ¹⁶ Birtsmorton PR: Baptisms, 10 Oct 1779
- ¹⁷ Berrow PR: Baptisms, 25 Apr 1784
- ¹⁸ Cotton, B.D. (1990). *The English Regional Chair*. Antique Collectors Club, Woodbridge.
- ¹⁹ Bosbury PR: Marriages, 24 Feb 1848
- ²⁰ Leigh with Bransford PR: Baptisms, 24 Aug 1823
- ²¹ Leigh with Bransford PR: Baptisms, 18 Oct 1818
- ²² Leigh with Bransford PR: Baptisms, 7 Jul 1814
- ²³ Deerhurst PR: Marriages, 2 May 1803
- ²⁴ Tewkesbury PR: Marriages, 20 Nov 1810
- ²⁵ Leigh with Bransford PR: Baptisms, 7 Jul 1814
- ²⁶ Leigh with Bransford PR: Baptisms, 10 Mar 1816, 18 Mar 1821, 24 Aug 1823, 13 Feb 1825
- ²⁷ Census: 1841
- ²⁸ Leigh with Bransford PR: Baptisms, 10 Mar 1816
- ²⁹ Leigh with Bransford PR: Burials, 19 Feb 1842
- ³⁰ Leigh with Bransford PR: Burials, 28 Aug 1845
- ³¹ Wight, M. (1968). The maker of wooden chairs. *Country Quest*, Dec 1968, pp 18-20.
- ³² Wight, M. (1971). A Country Chair-maker. *The Lady*, 30 September 1971.
- ³³ Sandford, A. (1979). Philip Clisset: The Bosbury Chairmaker. *Herefordshire County Life*, vol 1(9), 34-37
- ³⁴ Bethell, Hal (1987). The Saintly Philip Clissett, *The Countryman*, vol 92, no. 4, pp.79-84.
- ³⁵ Pearce, Barbara (1998). The John Warrender Chair. *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter*, no 29, 12.