

Crittall Chairs – 20TH Century Classics

One of my regular customers called me recently to assess a pair of chairs, one an armchair, the other for dining. Constructed from natural & ebonised walnut with blue –green leather drop-in seats I immediately took a fancy to them. The capping to the crest rail is ebonised walnut with burr being used for the central back rail. The arms, legs, & front rails are detailed with quirks & the overall quality & design suggested that these were no ordinary chairs. The customer fortunately had also acquired the matching dining table & had two additional chairs made up in a similar style. I learnt that all these pieces had been designed by a man better known in the past for the design & manufacture of metal window frames, namely Crittall. Fortunately my estimate was accepted & I collected the two chairs looking forward not only to working on them but spending some time on research.

The work entailed removing surface marking, re-gluing the loose frame, re-upholstering both seats, re-covering using the original leather & some cosmetic finishing. Both drop in seats were stripped, seat frame joints made good with new tenons, original horsehair washed & re-used. The leather top covers were conditioned with hide food & calico strips stitched around the rather short edges to aid re-stretching over the newly re-upholstered seats. Careful work & much calico pulling eventually allowed me to stretch the leather back into place. There did not appear to be any finish to the wood & the now very dry surface on both frames had suffered from considerable water marking. I cautiously tried to remove these with various concoctions all to no avail! Finally I found that by carefully wetting each component with water & then gently drying with a hot air gun had the desired effect. Cosmetic finishing was carried out with acrylic paints. The appearance of the chairs demanded a `natural` look so Danish oil was applied. Finally a coating of my own make of wax polish completed the work.

Having returned the chairs I set about my research. The journey was most interesting & led me to the East Anglian maker, one Ernest Beckwith & the designer W.F.Crittall. For 45 years these men worked together to produce a remarkable collection of well designed & beautifully made furniture for the use of the Crittall family & to furnish the companies many offices.

Ernest Beckwith 1872 – 1952

Ernest Beckwith was born into a well-established Essex family & was apprenticed to a carver & cabinetmaker at 13. He became thoroughly skilled in all aspects of woodworking before setting up his first workshop in 1893. In 1899 Beckwith purchased premises in Coggleshall where he would remain for the next 80 years.

The business consisted of repairing furniture bought from what then was known as `rag & bone men`. The pieces, usually post 1830 were not considered `antique` so much altering, improving & converting went on. In addition utilitarian furniture such as bookcases, stools & tables was a valuable source of income.

The late 19th & early 20th centuries was a great period of ecclesiastical building & refurbishment & Beckwith`s firm found themselves specializing in this type of work. His skilled workforce undertook screens, pulpits, and paneling & in particular lyches gates. The latter were required as memorials to the many fallen in the First World War. The dominant style of the late 19th century, certainly for ecclesiastical woodwork was the Gothic & Beckwith`s ability to create patterns of tracery or crocketed pinnacles [leaf shaped projections] was as strong as any medieval craftsman. He was equally at home with carved chairs in the 18th century Chippendale style. Source material came from pattern books of historical designs & much of his work was in the medieval style inspired by A. C. Pugin`s Gothic Ornaments. Beckwith`s working methods rarely involved working drawings; a rough sketch was adequate for most commissions.

In 1904 Beckwith undertook the restoration of a fine 15th century merchants house, Paycockes in Coggleshall. It was here that he came into contact with W.F.Crittall with whom he would work. Paycockes led onto numerous commissions including the Guildhall at Thaxted, Leez Priory & Gestingthorpe Hall. The Hall was the seat of the Oates Family & the nearby church lych gate became a memorial to the late Captain Oates of the ill-fated Scott Antarctic expedition of 1912. Beckwith as still in great demand for ecclesiastical work with the chancel screen at St. Mary`s, Saffron Walden regarded as a major triumph. The screen with finely carved detail was a large undertaking & included linen fold paneling, vaulting patterns & bosses, & running borders of vines & stylized foliage. Generally Beckwith`s work came from East Anglia although in the 1930`s he undertook work for St. John`s Wood Church in London. In 1936 he was commissioned to carve a desk & canopied throne for the Provost`s Stall in Chelmsford Cathedral.

Ernest Beckwith continued to produce high quality woodwork up to his death in 1952 at the age of 80. His son Edward [1907-1971] took on the business, which unfortunately did not flourish. Today the Beckwith legacy continues with Edward's son Andrew who works as a cabinetmaker in Coggeshall.

W.F. Crittall 1887-1956

The firm of Crittall will always have a worldwide association with the design & manufacture of metal window frames. The business, started by Francis Henry Crittall in 1849 was originally an ironmongers situated in Braintree, Essex. Despite local competition the business flourished & Francis was soon able to employ tinsmiths, blacksmiths & woodworkers. As part of their general metal work Crittall was asked to provide metal-framed windows for a barn. Steadily the number of windows increased prompting the firm to standardize & specialize in metal window frames.

In 1907 Walter Francis Crittall [W.F.] was born to Francis Henry. Later WF became known as `Pink` apparently due to his Communist sympathies. Educated at Uppingham, then Art School in London & then joined the firm dealing with catalogue layout & frame design. Subsequently Pink's design work led to a major breakthrough in 1909, which is still the basis for steel window design today. In 1912 pink was elected to the Crittall board & the firm continued to prosper. The firm enjoyed excellent labour relations due to a most enlightened & moral attitude towards its workforce. A fittings factory was established to employ disabled ex-servicemen & employees enjoyed a shortened working week, a training scheme, fully equipped sports ground & medical facilities.

A hamlet called Silver End was discovered by Pink in 1925 near Braintree, Essex. Purchased by the firm it was developed to offer accommodation to the workforce. W.F was determined to improve living standards & provided modern drainage, electric light & hot & cold water on tap. By 1930 over 500 new homes had been built at Silver End including one occupied by W.F until 1934 when he moved to New Farm, Great Dunmow, Essex. This new home was designed by WF who was also actively involved in the Design & Industries Movement [D.I.A]. Established in 1915, the D.I.A. was founded by members of the Art & Crafts Movement Exhibition Society. Its aim was to promote design in industry by organizing exhibitions, publishing magazines, & books .New Farm bore all the hallmarks of the new architectural style embraced by the movement in the late 1920's & early 1930's known as Modernism.

In addition to designing his own furniture with Ernest Beckwith making the pieces, WF was also a talented painter. His creativity was evident in every aspect of this home; the garden was laid out to his design whilst interiors reflected his passion for Japanese & Chinese decoration. WF died in 1956 & although some furniture remained with the Crittall family much was sold together with the contents of New Farm in 1987.