

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



The Sedan Chair

The Wilson has an 18th-century Sedan chair, acquired as a gift in 1955 from Mrs Treseder-Griffin and her sister, great great granddaughters of the original owner, William Snooke 1730-1799.



The sedan chair as displayed in the 18th century gallery at The Wilson.

William Snooke lived at Bourton-on-the Water, and wrote four volumes of diaries. In them he mentions, 'Mrs Beddows first event out since her lying-in. She had our sedan chair.' 14th February 1768, and again on 19th September 1768, 'Visited Mr and Mrs Raymonde. Mrs Snooke came home in the sedan.'

This particular chair was privately owned, as opposed to those available for public hire. It is made of black leather, with green damask cushions and curtains. The carrying poles are missing, but all the internal fittings are original, including the adjustable seat. It was probably made in London, or could have been copied from a London chair by a local coach maker.

The sedan chair was introduced into England in the 1630s, and was used throughout Europe by the 18th century. Most of those used in the United Kingdom were of British manufacture, the majority being made in London.

Sedan chairs were a very popular means of transport, providing shelter in all weathers, and safety from the many horse-drawn vehicles which clogged the streets. Chairs for public hire had to be licensed by the local authority, and in

Cheltenham the Town Commissioners, appointed in 1786, were responsible for issuing the licences.

Locally, chairmen were obliged to wear a uniform consisting of a long blue coat, black breeches, white stockings, buckled shoes and a black hat. Their official scarlet badge was worn on the coat, and every owner of a chair had his individual name and number painted on it.

The fare for a ride depended on the distance travelled, starting at 6d (2 1/2 pence) for 250 yards, increasing after midnight to one shilling (5p). Journeys were usually limited to 2 miles. If a chairman was kept waiting for a long time, he might demand a higher fare. Should there be a dispute between a chairman and the hirer, it could be resolved by the local Magistrates. In bad weather, chairs could be carried into a building, and even upstairs, when the usual 10 foot poles were exchanged for two just 7 feet in length.

In Cheltenham, there were probably no more than ten chairs at first, but as the resident population increased, due to the popularity of the Spa town, so the number of sedans grew. In an 1830 letter from one William Barton, working in Cheltenham at that time, he writes of 'chairs in great request.'

From July 1816 there were fixed stands, like taxi ranks, at Cambray Street, Winchcombe Street, New Street, and at Colonnade Road, which no longer exists. At one time, no chair might stand within 60 yards of another, presumably to avoid disputes. The work was seasonal as chairs were mostly used in bad weather, so many of the chairmen found alternative employment in the summer months.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
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Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>

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