

A CHESTER CABINET MAKER'S SPECIFICATION BOOK

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The survival of the details of the work of a provincial cabinet maker is a rare occurrence. The book described in this article is a foolscap sized ledger which gives detailed specifications and costings of furniture made by a cabinet maker or cabinet makers working in Chester during the period 1821 to 1849. Some of the specifications are accompanied by attractive small drawings of the pieces of furniture. My attention was drawn to the book by Ian Dunn, the County Archivist for Cheshire, who had found it amongst the Arderne family papers which are deposited at the Cheshire Record Office. The Ardernes were the hereditary Chief Foresters of the Delamere Forest, and their estates centred on Tarporley in mid-Cheshire.¹ The book had survived because, around 1900, the blank pages towards the end of the ledger had been used to record details of crop rotation in certain fields, probably by a tenant farmer on the Arderne Estates. I believe that cabinet makers' specification books are rare and this book immediately invites comparison with the extensive records of Gillows of Lancaster, now housed in the Westminster Public Libraries.² It is likely that similar specification books survive and it may be worth furniture historians making enquiries at their local Archive Offices to see if they hold examples.

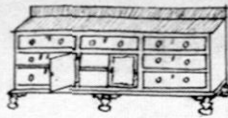
The exact identity of the ownership of the book is uncertain. Towards the late 1830s the handwriting progressively deteriorates, but in 1841 a much firmer, and presumably younger, handwriting replaces it. I suspect that the book had been passed on from father to son. These cabinet makers were definitely working in Chester and they record the delivery of furniture to various locations, such as Whitefriars, Abbey Street, and Bridge Street within the City. They also supplied people living in nearby villages such as 'Mr Morress' of Upton, Mr Briarley of Tattenhall and the Rector of Bunbury. There is the mention of a Mr Humphries of Cholmondeley, and the supply of a blind to Cholmondeley Castle. This last entry may give the clue to the authors of the specification book, as a search of the Marquess of Cholmondeley's records may reveal the payment for this blind.³ The ledger shows that the firm were not only cabinet makers, but also upholsterers, and amongst the sketch drawings are details to show hangings for beds. Contemporary trade directories show that only about six people were recorded as working as both upholsterers and cabinet makers in Chester at this period. The most likely candidates are the Gardners, an old established firm of cabinet makers and upholsterers, who were working in the Crypt Building in Eastgate Street, and who were taken over by Brown and Lamont in 1862.⁴

The entries in the book cover 180 pages and give detailed descriptions and costings of approaching three hundred pieces of furniture. The most surprising thing is the remarkably wide range of furniture that was being made, ranging from straw-stuffed palliasses and folding beds to fashionable draw leaf tables. The furniture ranged in price from a simple spindle backed chair costing 5s. to a six leaf table at £25 10s. There is great emphasis on the cost of buying in the lengths of sawn timber. The book is prefaced with a printed price list for 'Prices for Sawing', Chester, April 1821.

1822	(11) Prices of Stained Chairs	
March.	Greacen Back Chair with cane	
	seat turn'd feet and spindles	
	stain'd black - this - flat	
	with twisted or straight reed at	
See Page 64	Greacen Back Chair with cane seat	
	hollow back & legs rounded with	
	twisted & turn'd top rail at	
	Greacen Back Chair with cane	
	seat and turn'd feet & spindles	
	stain'd black with turn'd top rail	
	at	
	Leases Patron Chair with cane	
	seat turn'd feet & spindles	
	stain'd black at	
	Greacen back Chair with cane	
	seat and turn'd top rail stain'd	
	black at	
	Greacen Back Chair with cane	
	seat broad top rail & 5 Uprights stain'd	
	black at	
	Greacen Back Chair with cane	
	seat & broad top rail turn'd	
	feet & spindles stain'd black at	
	Greacen Back Chair with cane	
	seat and hollow seat twisted in	
	the locks & top rail stain'd	
	black at	
	Greacen back Chair with rush seat	
	turn'd french feet stain'd black	
	at	
	Gothick backs with cane seats and	
	sweep backs turn'd in bolts stain'd	
	black at	

stain'd black 24/6
To Red wood 25/0
Cane in the room
of a cane seat 40
top price

1. Annotated designs for the backs of various stained chairs, 1822



Dantrick Oak Dresser 7' x 1'-10"
 2' 6" top with 7 drawers & cut 1'-10" top
 2-2 live under middle drawer with 2 wheels
 in cut. A Back Board 6" top on Turned
 Feet Top plain with Astragal edge

24' of Oak in Top and 1/2"	1	4	"
11' of 1" Oak in 7 drawer fronts & 1/2"	"	11	"
20' of 1/2" Oak in drawer sides & Back cut	"	3	4
22' of 1/2" Oak in drawer bottoms	"	3	6
4' of 1" Oak in Base 1' 1/2" in cut Door 1/2"	"	5	"
2 1/2' of Oak in Cupboard doors	"	2	1
4' of 3/4" Oak in Back Board 3/4"	"	3	4
5 1/2' of 1" Oak in Cupboard shelf	"	10	1/2
8' of 1" Oak in upright partition	"	2	"
5 1/2' of 1" Oak in drawers & runners	"	1	1/2
14 1/2' of 1/2" Oak in partitions Oak & runners 6' 1/2"	"	3	5 1/2
18' of 1/2" Oak in Dresser Back	"	3	"
6 1/2' of 1" Oak in Turned under top	"	1	7 1/2
12' of 1" Oak in Bottom of Dresser	"	3	"
5 Turned feet 3/4" 14-2" Oak knobs 3/4"	"	8	6
7 Iron locks at 18" 1 Drop Cupboard 1/2"	"	5	10
Washbasin 1/2" 1 Drop hinges 1/2"	"	1	3
Walls & screws: Glue & Sand paper	"	2	"
Making & polishing	3	5	"
		7	10 2
		1	18 10
		9	9 "

2. Sketch and specification for an oak dresser

Careful analysis of the book will provide considerable evidence as to how a cabinet maker organised his business. The detailed costings show the exact profit mark up for the cabinet maker. In most cases this was about 20% on each piece of furniture made, but it could be less on smaller pieces. In most instances it appears that all the furniture was made in their own workshops, and references are made to various craftsmen such as Denson, Gorton, Owens, Holms and Jones who were working for the firm. In the later pages of the book the exact amount of time spent by a workman in making a piece of furniture is recorded. Thus a mahogany rocking chair made in May 1849 took one workman two and a quarter days on making and stuffing and another three days to upholster. This worked out as follows:

Cost of making rocking chair	£3 11s. 1d.
Profit	16s. 11d.
Sale price	£4 8s. 0d.

From this sort of information it should be possible to work out the daily rate of pay to the workmen. Sometimes the daily rates of pay are given. A deal painted wardrobe took O. Holms eighteen and a quarter days and P. Owens sixteen and a half days to make. Holms was paid 3s. a day and Owens 3s. 6d. a day.

From the dated entries it is possible to study the changing fashions that were influencing provincial cabinet makers. There are no references given to any specific books of designs, but the customer may on occasions have provided the details for a particular order. In one instance there are details of R. Denson making a mahogany wardrobe 'as described by Mr J. Hill of Cholmondeley'. There are a considerable number of entries for the years 1821 to 1824 and it is likely that the cabinet maker was entering up, in neat, specifications from earlier books or notes. Many early entries are concerned with chairs and fashionable veneered furniture, and it is interesting to note a commission for 'Trafalgar' chairs in 1833. In 1822 a page is given to drawings of the varieties of chair backs that could be made for the customer (Fig. 1). These were mainly of the 'Greacen' (Grecian) type with cane seats but also included 'Leeses Patron' chair and a 'Gothick' back. Prices for a 'Greacen' chair was 24s. 6d., if stained black and 25s. in rosewood. The mention of spindle back chairs seems to confirm that these were being made in Chester in the 1820s. Other chairs included two forms of night chair, one of mahogany and one of cherrywood, a child's chair which stood on a table and a chair made from ash 'with crutches as for Doctor Rowlands', which must have been for a disabled person. There is also a drawing for the framework in cherrywood of a lounging chair, which would have been upholstered.

In the 1840s many of the orders were for deal furniture painted in imitation bamboo and marble. In 1839 there is a mention of a 'sett of French Bedsteads', made from birch, with the posts turned and painted 'bamboo'. Some of the furniture described is clearly very fashionable, but other pieces, such as dressers and mule chests (which are described as 'lobby' chests), are typical of the traditional furniture of the Chester area.

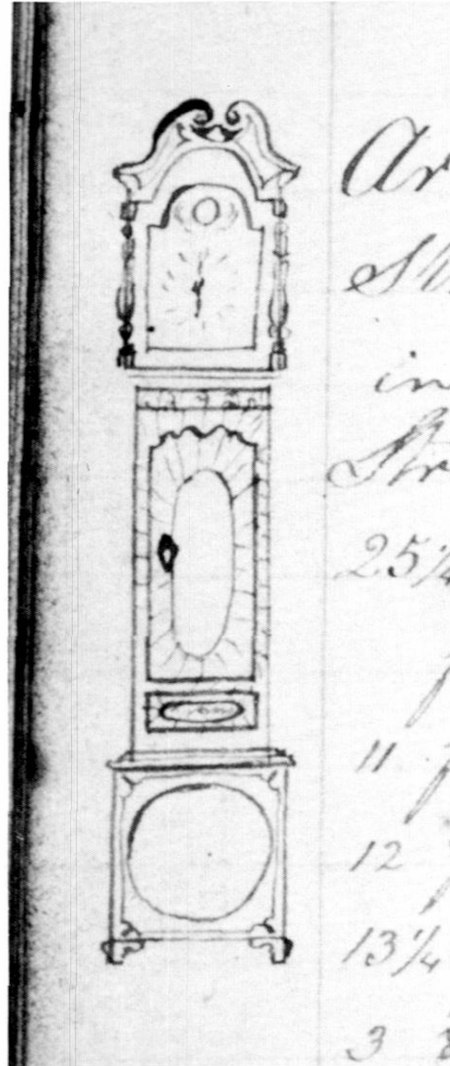
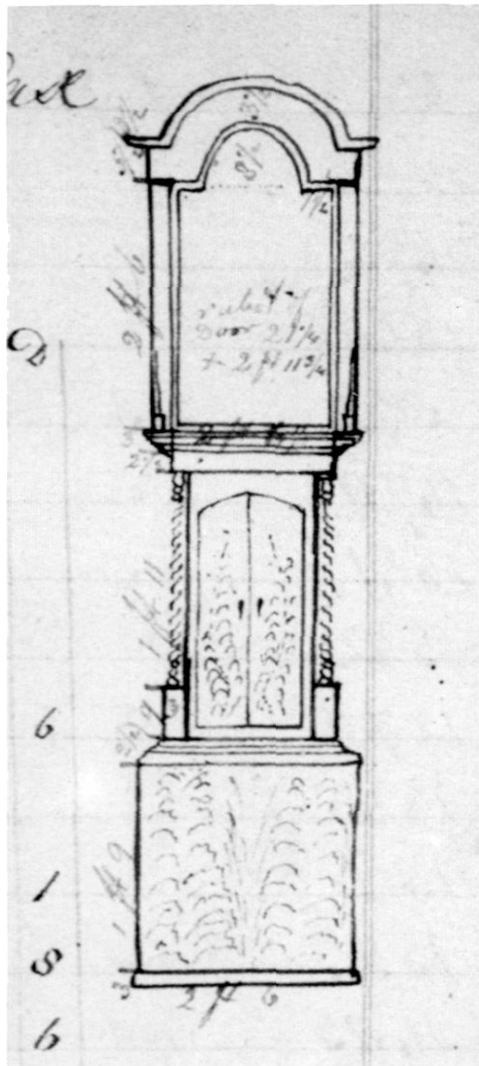
There are two drawings of clock cases. Neither case is typical of the local Chester style of clock case. This may be because the drawings date from the late 1820s, when clock case making started to be limited to a few specialist makers. One of the cases is for an 'arch head' clock which would have taken a fourteen-inch lunar phase painted dial (Fig. 7). The case

and hood are described as having 'straight culums (*sic*) reeded with curl in door', but the drawing clearly shows turned columns. Turned columns do not occur on the hoods of Chester clocks until later, but straight reeded columns are typical of Chester clocks of this period. The use of ovals of curl mahogany on the door and the trunk base of the clock is normally associated with Warrington and Manchester cabinet making, but this drawing may suggest this type of veneering was occasionally carried out at Chester. The movement for the clock cost £4 10s. and the cost of the complete clock appears to have been £10 7s. 3d. The second clock case is shown with barley sugar columns at the sides of the trunk and a split double door (Fig. 6). Both these features are unknown on Chester clocks, and I know of no longcase with split double doors. It took twenty days to make this clock case at four shillings a day and this clock would have been much more expensive than the other clock, as without any profit or a movement it was costed at £8 18s. 2d.

Commissions for sofas figure prominently amongst the work undertaken. Sofas were supplied either covered in horsehair or in canvas, which could be upholstered in a selected fabric (Fig. 5). 'Cotton print cover for sofa (at 1s. first cost) & two bolsters for sofa including the hair & making extra £1 13s. if cover be lined to be 7s. extra'. A horsehair double scroll ended sofa cost £3 19s. in August 1822, while canvas covered sofas cost slightly less. Bookcases show considerable variations, though the designs were not ambitious and were based on simple rectangular forms with glazed doors (Fig. 4). These were made in either mahogany or deal. For wardrobes or clothes presses open sliding drawers or trays of mahogany were incorporated in an order for Mr Davies in 1829.

For the local furniture historian the two drawings of dresser bases are of particular interest. There is no evidence in the drawings of plate racks being added to these dressers. A simple dresser base of 1833 was made of deal, having three top drawers, two centre drawers, and two cupboards on the left and right. This form of dresser was very popular in west Cheshire and North Wales during the latter part of the 18th century until about 1850, but not in east Cheshire and Shropshire where open based dressers were favoured. The other dresser, of 'Dantzig Oak' was made for Mr Morress of Upton for £9 9s. It had bracket feet, three top drawers, two central cupboard doors and two drawers on each side (Fig. 2). This again is a typical form of local dresser, still seen today in many Cheshire farmhouses.

The range of furniture was very wide and some of the pieces might not be classed as furniture by furniture historians. In 1834 there is an entry on how to 'set up' a watercloset. This was made largely from African mahogany and cost £3 5s. 8d. in materials and labour. They were also making counters for shops and blinds for shop windows. Most interesting is the incomplete drawing of a box mangle. The metalwork on box mangles is normally prominently marked with the maker's name which is usually either Bradford of Warrington and Manchester, or J. Pickens of Birmingham. The makers' name plates give the impression that these massive box mangles were mass produced by a limited number of manufacturers and that they were sent to all parts of the British Isles. This entry shows that this could not be further from the truth. Local cabinet makers were making up box mangles, and only the specialist ironwork was being supplied from further afield. It took 'Davies' sixteen days at 3s. 6d. a day to make the mangle. The net cost of the mangle was £7 4s. 7d. and the profit charged was £1 8s. The Grosvenor Museum in Chester has an excellent example of a box mangle of this type which came from a local farmhouse. Possibly it may be an example of the work of these cabinet makers.



This specification book provides interesting insights into the types of wood used by local cabinet makers. The box, the 'lower bottom', and rollers of the box mangle were made of maple. On certain other furniture a very wide range of mahogany was used. A dressing glass frame made for Doctor Freeman is noted as being of 'Affrican' (*sic*) mahogany, Honduras mahogany is mentioned for veneering, and Spanish mahogany was used for Mr Humphries table as well as for cheese trays or coasters. The cheaper bay mahogany was used for functional and utilitarian furniture. A drawing shows a 'Dickensian' looking counting house desk (Fig. 3) which cost £3 1s. 7d. to make. An example of the use of veneering on cedar was a circular Loo table on a round turned pillar for the Rev. J. Martin of Bunbury. This cost £6 6s. Veneer on cedar was also used for a 'buffett', which the drawing clearly shows to be a corner cupboard. Cherrywood was used for cots, birch was used for a 'common half headed couch', which was a 'chaise longue', and beech was used for fire screens.

REFERENCES

1. The Cheshire Record Office is situated in Duke Street, Chester. The reference to the specification book is DAR/J/15.
2. The Gillows ledgers have been extensively studied by Susan Stuart and I must thank her for her comments on this specification book. For the use of the Gillows Ledgers see Susan E Stuart "'E B to G R". A Satinwood Work and Drawing Table by Gillows?', *Antique Collecting*, Vol. 19, November 1984, pp. 27-31.
3. The Cholmondeley Ledgers are deposited at the Cheshire Record Office. They have not been searched by the writer to see if a correlation can be made.
4. The writer has prepared an article on traditional Cheshire furniture to be published in the *The Antique Dealer and Collectors Guide* early in 1987.