

A LABELLED WHITEHAVEN CABINET

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I am grateful to Charles Lumb & Sons of Harrogate for allowing me to examine a handsome cabinet recently acquired for stock (Fig. 1). The piece has a printed paper trade label pasted inside the central drawer recording that it was made by W & M King of Whitehaven (Fig. 3). William King subscribed to Thomas Sheraton's *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book*, issued in parts between 1791 and 1793, and, interestingly, the overall design of this cabinet is based on a Lady's Dressing Commode engraved on plate 20 (Fig. 2). The correspondence is not exact, because Sheraton deliberately illustrated ambitiously styled furniture, leaving tradesmen or patrons to simplify and edit out unwanted decorative details. There can, however, be little doubt that the Kings' were inspired by Sheraton's elegant design. The commode is not fitted for dressing and so was probably intended for a drawing room; it has a fixed top, a 'fast' plinth and replacement handles.¹ The fine mahogany veneers have been carefully matched to create a balanced effect, while other refinements include cross-banding, cockbeads, well-cut mouldings and panels outlined by stringing. The secondary woods, as expected, are oak and pine.

To anyone familiar with present day Whitehaven, a modest sea-port and market town on the Cumberland coast, this commode may seem surprisingly stylish and accomplished. However, Whitehaven was formerly an important centre for shipping, commerce, and the coal trade, being described in 1793 as 'about one-third bigger than the city of Carlisle, but containing three times the number of inhabitants . . . supplying a very extensive neighbourhood'.² However, when Queen Victoria ascended the throne the place was seriously in decline. The *Universal British Directory* (1793), records fifteen furniture makers in the town, a number which had risen to twenty-five when Jollie's *Cumberland Guide and Directory* appeared in 1811 (nine firms appear in both lists). Confirmation of its status as a regional centre for the furniture trade is provided by the fortunate survival of a twelve-page booklet³ titled *The Prices Agreed to Between the Masters and Journeymen Cabinet Makers in Whitehaven*, dated 17 October 1810 (Fig. 4). This publication contains schedules of labour costs for making forty-four items of furniture in common production, with various optional extras. Workmen were paid piece-work rates, not a daily wage and, starting with Leeds in 1791, the masters and journeymen in many important regional towns followed the example of London in issuing price books which were intended to improve labour relations.⁴

The Whitehaven book, which includes cabinet work, tables, beds, clockcases, chairs, etc., is the slimmest publication of its kind so far traced, although printed lists were preceded by even briefer manuscript agreements (Gillows of Lancaster, c. 1746; York, 1764).⁵ It provides the customary tabulated information ending with a 'Table of Banding', but there are no illustrations; however, the presence of certain north country terms imparts a regional flavour: 'Buffet' (a two-stage cupboard), 'Stand Table' (a small tripod table), and 'Long Posted Bedstead' for example. Several references to the use of birch and the practice of 'rounding the edge of each drawer' may offer insights into local craft traditions.

William King is first recorded in 1793 as a cabinet maker (Sheraton's list) and glass mfr (in the *UBD*); by 1805–08 he and Michael King were in partnership as looking-glass manufacturers, carvers, gilders, and cabinet makers at an address in King Street,⁶ but by 1811 he had moved to Lowther Street and was again trading on his own account. Only one other piece of furniture by King is known — an impressive two-stage cabinet (now in Australia) inlaid '1851'.⁷ Since W & M King were apparently the only Whitehaven firm to identify their work their informative label repays study:

W. & M. KING
LOOKING GLASS MANUFACTURERS,
CARVERS, GILDERS, & CABINET MAKERS,
WHITEHAVEN,

MANUFACTURE, and Sell Looking Glasses in rich burnished Gold, Metal, Mahogany and Japann'd Frames, Gerandoles, Chandeliers, Brackets, &c. to the most elegant and fashionable Patterns.

Pictures neatly Framed and Glazed, Coach Glasses, Crown Glass in Crates or Squares, and Flint Glass cut and plain.

Cabinet Work and Chairs of all Sorts in the present Taste, finished in a superior Manner, Sashes made of Mahogany or any other Wood and Glazed with Plate or Crown Glass.

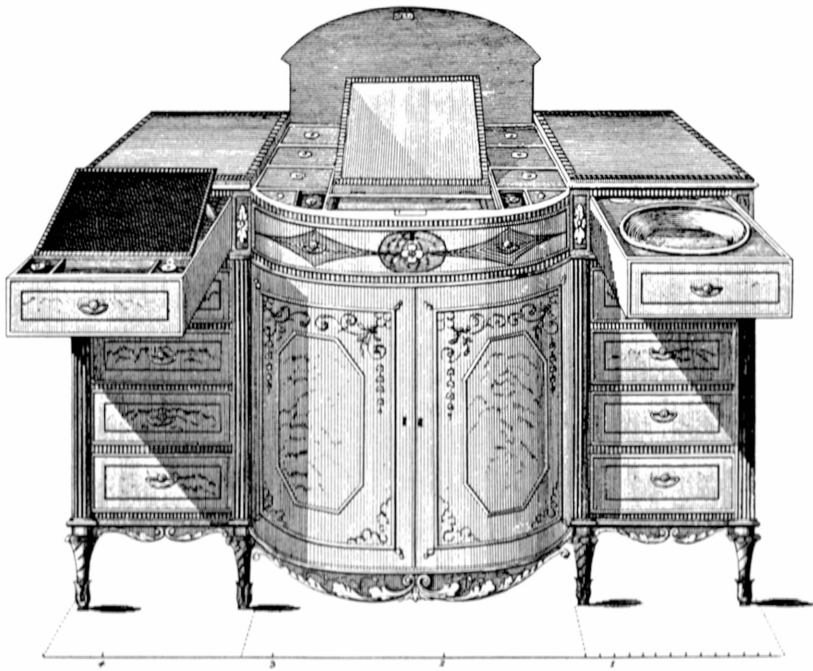
Ships Compasses, Quadrants, and Spectacles, accurately made and repaired.

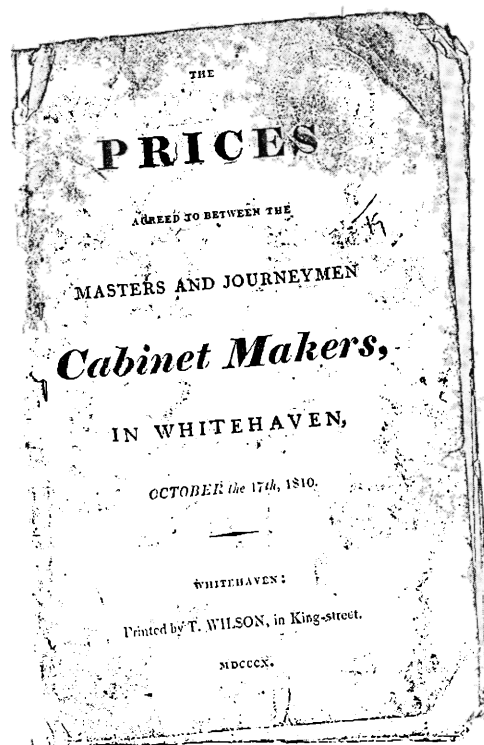
Lamps with Reflectors for Halls, Lobbies, and Light Houses on an Improved Plan.

The text gives a good idea of the Kings' business in which glass, instruments, and marine equipment figured largely, although the present commode shows they were also capable of making very respectable furniture.

REFERENCES

1. The original drawer handles were knobs of some kind.
2. *U.B.D.*, IV, p. 747
3. The only known copy is in the Jackson collection given to Carlisle Public Library in 1891. I am grateful to Alan Welton of Cumbria County Library for assistance and permission to reproduce the title-page.
4. An account and check list of price books appeared in *Furniture History*, XVIII (1982).
5. *Regional Furniture*, II (1988) and *Furniture History*, XXI (1985).
6. *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, 1986, p. 515.
7. Information from Harry Fancy, curator of Whitehaven Museum.





1. Mahogany commode by W & M King,
 Whitehaven, c. 1805-10
 Courtesy Charles Lumb & Sons, Ltd
2. Design for a Lady's Dressing Commode from
 Thomas Sheraton's *Drawing-Book* (1793), pl. 20.
3. Label inside the central drawer
 Courtesy Charles Lumb & Sons, Ltd
4. Title-page of the *Whitehaven Cabinet
 Makers' Book of Prices* (1810)
 Courtesy Cumbria County Library