

# FURNITURE BY LOCAL MAKERS AT DONCASTER MANSION HOUSE

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Regional furniture studies should embrace research on fashionable provincial firms as well as the vernacular tradition. However, anyone investigating this up-market range is faced with difficulties because, firstly, few local makers identified their products with a label or name stamp and secondly most pieces of provincial quality lack any provenance which seriously limits their academic interest. Luckily, country house owners sometimes ordered 'neat' furniture, for their second-best rooms, from cabinet makers in the nearest large town so, if documentation survives, opportunities may occur to establish authorship and date. Broughton Hall,<sup>1</sup> near Skipton and Burton Constable,<sup>2</sup> near Hull are prime examples of such patterns of patronage. If the subject of fashionable provincial furniture is to advance every chance must be seized to publish relevant material.

Only three Mansion Houses were ever erected: in York (1725–32), London (1739–52) and Doncaster (1745–48). They provided rooms for the use of the Lord Mayor, but were primarily intended as a social centre and venue for splendid banquets, entertainments and balls. All were buildings of considerable pretension. The York Mansion House is notable for fine series of eight full-length portraits in the State Room,<sup>3</sup> but sadly the original repertoire of furniture disappeared years ago and the earliest surviving inventory only dates from 1887. However, the Chamberlain's Accounts record that York cabinet makers and upholsterers were employed to equip William Etty's elegant new building: George Reynoldson secured the main commission while Richard Farrer, Thomas Forster, Thomas Wilcock, Richard Wood and others made lesser contributions.<sup>4</sup>

The archive for building and furnishing the Mansion House, London, is impressively complete. George Dance, the architect, also provided several spirited rococo designs for light fittings and brackets, some of which survive *in situ*. An article on furniture at the Mansion House appeared in the *Connoisseur*, 1952, but the whole subject is being re-researched in meticulous detail prior to a major refurbishing project. It is clear that John Gilbert was responsible for much carved and gilt work, but other furniture makers including William Kippin, Paul Saunders, Charles Grange, John Phillips, William Chesson, Thomas Cooke and John Willis were also involved. A full report will eventually illuminate successive furnishing schemes since it was essential that such a prominent building be periodically upgraded to conform to new criteria of taste and modern standards of comfort.

In 1744 the Corporation of Doncaster appointed a committee 'to get plans for a Mansion House . . . drawn by such persons as they think fit'. In due course the youthful James Paine was entrusted with the project and, after its completion he published, in 1751, a lavish volume of the designs which greatly enhanced his professional reputation. Externally the architecture is Palladian in character but the interiors are enlivened with rococo plaster-work by Perritt and Rose of York. The ground floor contained 'Rooms for the Entertainment of Gentlemen' while a magnificent Imperial staircase led to the richly styled Grand



1. One of six sconces,  
carved painted and  
gilt pine supplied by  
Christopher  
Richardson in 1755  
for £7 each, candle  
arms missing,  
ht 168 cm

*Doncaster  
Mansion House*

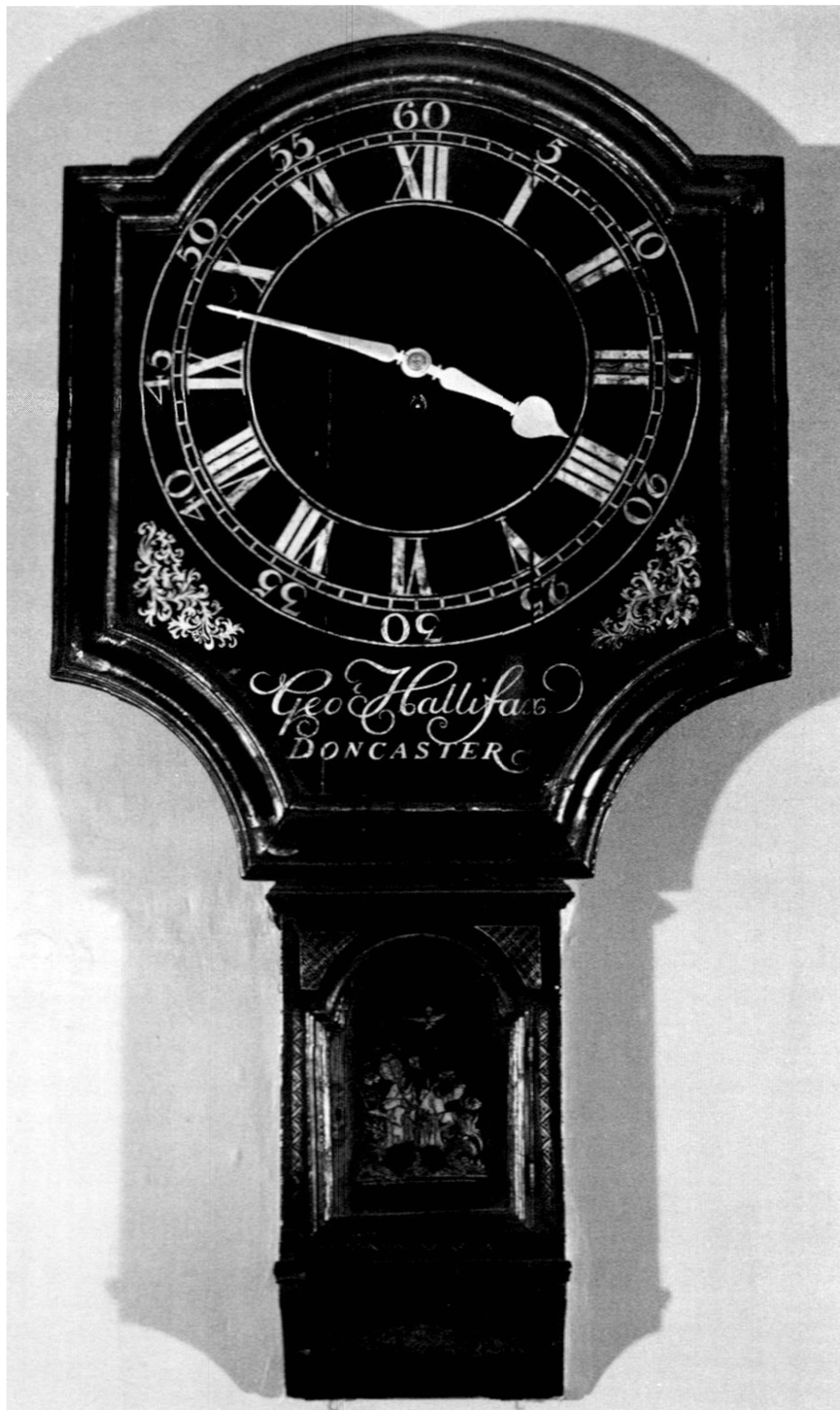


2. Card table, one of six, mahogany, c.1755, spandrel brackets not original, lg. 92cm  
*Doncaster Mansion House*

Banqueting Room and a Ladies Drawing Room. There were also various private apartments and the usual domestic offices.<sup>5</sup>

In September 1748 James Paine submitted his final account and the following month the Corporation resolved that he be consulted about 'what furniture is thought proper by him and Mr Copley for the Mansion House and for an estimate for same'.<sup>6</sup> Copley of Netherhall was a local squire. That November a committee was appointed to give directions for purchasing and making: 'For the Great Room—: deal benches covered with crimson or scarlet damask; 2 large stove grates. For the drawing room—: walnuttree chairs with Spanish leather bottoms. Low rooms—: elm chairs. The vestibule—: four glass chandeliers'.<sup>7</sup> The furnishing programme thereafter proceeded rather slowly.

James Paine, like most architects, showed an interest in the furnishing of rooms which he designed. He subscribed to Chippendale's *Director* (1754) and half a dozen fluent drawings of his, executed c.1750–52, for beds, side tables and frames, survive at Nostell Priory,<sup>8</sup> near Wakefield, while another small group from the same years is preserved at Felbrigg, Norfolk.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Paine may have designed the splendid set of six carved, painted and gilt sconces ordered for the Grand Room which still remain in the



3. Dial clock by George Halifax, probably supplied in 1770 for £7 7s., japanned oak case, eight-day movement, ht 155cm

*Doncaster Mansion House*



building, although shorn of their candle-arms (Fig. 1). Most professional architects welcomed a chance to control the design of fixed furnishings which made a significant contribution to the decor of an interior. The sconces are recorded in the Corporation Credit Book under 12 August 1755 'Christopher Richardson, Carver for 6 Sconces &c Joiners Work for the Mansion House £42'.<sup>10</sup> The mirror plates were apparently supplied by Francis Poole who was paid on 20 September 1753 for '12 glasses which was put in to 6 frames £18 18s'.<sup>11</sup> Richardson was a reputable carver and frame-maker who had worked previously at nearby Cusworth Hall and, once again under the direction of James Paine, performed carving at Worksop Manor during the rebuilding of 1763–67.

From 1756 annual inventories of the Mansion House furniture were kept, but the only other extant items from the original furnishing scheme are a set of six mahogany card tables first recorded in the 1756 schedule<sup>12</sup> and from an early date equally divided between the Ladies Drawing Room and the Gentlemen's Dining Room (Fig. 2). They are a plain version of a smart design having straight chamfered and moulded legs, fly rails and a small frieze drawer. No relevant payment has yet been traced in the accounts; there are, however, references to a Mr Richards making a large bookcase in 1754 'to keep the Statutes and other Books belonging to the Corporation' and in 1756 he supplied 'four dining Tables and three sideboard Tables'.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that these card tables ordered for public rooms exhibit none of the costly enrichments normally found on those commissioned by private patrons. In June 1770 the Council 'Ordered that George Hallifax make a dial clock the same as Mr Broadheads at the price of seven guineas, to be put up in the Kitchen of the Mansion House'.<sup>14</sup> Hallifax was a Doncaster clockmaker and this timepiece, one of three closely similar examples signed by the same man, still on the premises, is of a fairly standard design (Fig. 3).

Between 1801 and 1806 the local architect William Lindley enlarged the Mansion House by adding an attic storey and, at the rear, building a spacious new banqueting hall. William Lilley of Doncaster, who provided furniture for the extension, was born about 1753, is listed as a cabinet maker in 1793 and was buried at St George's on 10 June 1816. This is his only recorded commission. In November 1804 Lilley received 'For Mahogany Chairs to the Mansion House &c in 1801 £66 14s'.<sup>15</sup> The set, now numbering twenty-seven, is of an orthodox Sheraton pattern without slavishly following any published design and fluently executed (Fig. 4). The rear seat rail of each bears the maker's stamp 'W. LILLEY' and, most unusually, an incised date 1801 as well which suggests he was very proud to gain such an illustrious contract. An itemised bill in the archive shows that Lilley secured another order<sup>16</sup>

1806 The Corporation of Doncaster

Aug 30th

To Willm Lilley Dr

For 3 large mahogany Side Board Tables for the new Dining Room  
in the Mansion House as by Estimate

47 5 0

Extra mahogany and wainscot for mahogany brackits for Do

1 11 6

Cros banded and strung

12 0

---

£49 8 6

These large curved sideboard tables, decorated with simple strings, fit together to create a horseshoe and, like the chairs, are conservatively styled (Fig. 6). They are in fact precisely the sort of respectable furniture which a leading Doncaster cabinet maker might be expected



4. Mahogany dining chair, one of twenty-seven to survive from a set made by William Lilley in 1801 at a cost of £66 14s.; inset detail of name stamp

*Doncaster Mansion House*



5. Ceremonial armchair, mahogany, carved with the town arms; made by Stokes and Stacey in 1779 at a cost of £3 13s. 6d. for the use of the Mayor at Rossington manor court, ht 110cm

*Doncaster Mansion House*



6. Segment of a horse-shoe shaped sideboard table made in three sections by William Lilley in 1806 at a cost of £49 8s. 6d. for the new dining room: mahogany outlined with strings and a cross-banded border. *Doncaster Mansion House*

to produce. There are also two eight-foot long straight side tables made *en suite*, for which no payment has yet been traced. Clearly the whole group was ordered from Lilley for the new dining room. In 1812 William Heigham, one of his competitors, was paid £9 13s. 8d. for a chest of drawers and some mahogany waiters.<sup>17</sup>

There are two other important pieces of furniture with local connections at the Mansion House although neither was commissioned for the building. The earliest, a ceremonial mayoral chair from the Court House at Rossington in the Manor of Doncaster (Fig. 5), is documented by the original bill<sup>18</sup>

		To Stokes & Stacey	
To a Bill	Deliv'd		30 0 4
1779	A Mahog Cabriole chair with a Rampt Lyon Carvd on		
May 31st	back & Ribb'd on Top	3 13 6	
	A Man Carring Do to Rosinton	1 6	
Aug 12th	Putting a New head on a Walnut Chair	2 6	
Sep 30th	Repairing a Mahog Card Table	1 0	
	Used a new Joint to Do	6	
	Repairing a Walnut Chair	9	
Nov 19th	Two Handles for a Baze door	3 9	
	A Man Putting Do on Door	3	

This ambitious armchair is carved with the town arms: a lion rampant holding a banner inscribed 'DON', the heraldic ornament being combined with a little display of husk



7. Armchair, bog oak, decorated with the town arms and made by G. Collinson of  
Doncaster for the Great Exhibition in 1851  
*Doncaster Mansion House*

festoons. A circular tablet at the top is lettered 'John|Whitaker|Esqr|MAYOR'.<sup>19</sup> The design is surprisingly modern since ceremonial chairs tended to be stylistically archaic. It resembles in fact a set of drawing room chairs Chippendale made for the saloon at Nostell Priory, probably the nearest centre of fashionable excellence and it is perhaps not altogether fanciful to imagine that Stokes & Stacey or some member of the Corporation were familiar with these models which, if proven, would tell us something about the transmission of London designs to provincial tradesmen. Regretfully, nothing else is known of the partners although they were presumably local men.

The second significant item, yet another chair bearing the town arms, was made for the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 and is an unforgettable example of extravagantly picturesque Victorian furniture (Fig. 7). The text accompanying an engraving in the *Art Journal* 'special' issue<sup>20</sup> tells the story of its genesis: 'The CHAIR engraved below is made by Mr G. COLLINSON, of Doncaster. Independent of its merits as an example of rustic furniture, there is a little history attaching to it, which enhances its interest. About three years since, two oak trees, measuring together two hundred feet of timber, were found below the floor of the river Dun out-fall drain, then being dug at Arksey, near Doncaster, by Mr W. Chadwick, of that place, for whom, we believe, the chair has been manufactured. It is presumed, by those acquainted with the locality where these trees were found, that they must have been buried in the soil upwards of two thousand years.' The chair is a piece of exhibition furniture *par excellence* being highly rated not only for the naturalistic ornament but because bog oak was notoriously hard to carve. It was presented to Doncaster Corporation in commemoration of the accession of Edward VII in 1901 by William Chadwick of Arksey Hall.

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12. AB 8/3/2.
13. AB 8/3/2.
14. *Calendar to the Records*, op. cit., p. 241.
15. AB 6/1/9/1.
16. AB 6/1/9/1.
17. AB 6/1/7/5.
18. Photocopy of bill kindly supplied by Malcolm Dolby.
19. John Whitaker was Mayor in 1778-79.
20. *Art Journal* (special number), p. 310.