

# OWEN FITZPATRICK, A BIRKENHEAD CABINET MAKER 'IN ORDINARY'

John Boram

The workshop books, annotated drawings on the back of glass paper, and other papers of Owen Fitzpatrick provide a subtle insight into provincial traditions of bespoke cabinet making in Birkenhead, during the second half of the nineteenth century. Documentation not only reveals his involvement as a journeyman cabinet maker and workshop foreman, but those factors which helped to sustain a bespoke cabinet-making tradition. The diversity of furniture, made in the workshops of firms such as Pryce & Delany of Birkenhead, reflected the opportunity and capability to supply a varied customer base made up of domestic, commercial, and institutional clients from the locality. These opportunities arose during a period of unprecedented population growth and economic development, from the middle of the nineteenth century, when the settlement of Birkenhead was reshaped.

By 1856, Owen Fitzpatrick had become a member of the Liverpool Branch of the Journeyman Cabinetmakers, Carvers, and Woodturners Friendly Society. He had been born in Ireland in 1831, and was working as a cabinet maker in Birkenhead by 1855. Throughout his working life, he lived in various terraced houses in Pitt Street and Brunswick Street, within the St Paul's district of Tranmere. Initially, he worked for cabinet makers such as D. Corkhills of Grange Lane, Birkenhead. The early entries in his 'Time' Book during the 1850s reflect his status as a journeyman cabinet maker. Time spent each week on individual jobs (construction of new furniture, repairs, packing, taking to Ferry, and delivery work) was recorded in terms of days, quarter days, and eighths of a day. The week normally consisted of six working days. By the 1860s, all entries were made in terms of hours spent to complete individual items of furniture.

As a response to the employment of cabinet makers on a casual or 'jobbing' basis during the 1850s, journeymen such as Owen prepared themselves for the harsh uncertainties of the mid-nineteenth century by subscribing to the 'Out of work fund' of the Liverpool Cabinet Makers' Association and membership of the Liverpool branch of the Journeymen Cabinetmakers, Carvers and Woodturners Friendly Society. By 1870, Owen was working in the cabinet makers' workshop of Pryce & Delany at the corner of Conway Street and Argyle Street, Birkenhead. Pryce & Delany advertised themselves as cabinet makers, household furnishers, upholsterers, undertakers, and ships' furnishers (Fig. 1). An alternative supplier of ships' furniture and furnishings in Liverpool was Gillow & Co. at 102 Bold Street, West. The partnership between Mr Edward Pryce and Mr John B. Delany had been dissolved by 1880, and Owen Fitzpatrick was working as a foreman in charge of the cabinet makers' workshop of J. B. Delany 'Cabinet maker, & Upholsterer, House & Ship Furnisher' in Conway Street (Fig. 2.) The workshops were at Claughton Road, and timber yards at Dacre Street.

Two of Owen Fitzpatrick's sons, Thomas, and Owen (junior) worked with him from 1878 onwards. The 1881 census records Thomas as a cabinet maker aged twenty-three, and Owen (junior) as an apprentice cabinet maker aged nineteen years. By 1882, up to nine



1. Pryce & Delany billhead, 1876. The 'cabinet manufactory' is illustrated on the right-hand side of the showrooms which front Conway Street

**Memorandum.**

From **J. B. DELANY,**  
**CABINET MAKER, & UPHOLSTERER,**  
**HOUSE & SHIP FURNISHER,**  
**Golden Eagle Cabinet, Carpet, & Upholstery Works,**  
**CONWAY STREET, BIRKENHEAD.**

188

*Wm H. H. H.*

**Furniture Removed and Warehoused. Estimates Free. Workshops & Timber Yard-Claughton Road & Dacre Street.**

*Mr Fitz*  
*20/- per week in future*  
*Blackshaw's wages is to be*  
*as above.*

2. Memorandum from John Delany to Mr Fitzpatrick, 1882 referring to the weekly wages for Mr Blackshaw, one of the cabinet makers

cabinet makers were employed in the workshops of J. B. Delany. Mr John Condliff from Liverpool, journeyman woodcarver, occasionally worked on orders requiring his specialist skills. The firm of J. B. Delany continued until 1898, although the involvement of the Fitzpatrick family is uncertain after 1888. A younger son, Francis David Fitzpatrick, born in 1875, eventually became a cabinet maker, and worked with his brothers at 14, Fairfield Road, Tranmere, in the early twentieth century. The trade card of the 'Fitzpatrick Bros' advertised themselves as 'Cabinet makers, Upholsterers and French Polishers. Furniture made and repaired. Jobbing punctually attended to'. The cabinet maker's tool chest of Francis David Fitzpatrick was recently donated to the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum at Birkenhead.

In most years, the output of bespoke domestic furniture exceeded items made for stock. In 1882 and 1884 production of bespoke domestic furniture exceeded seventy per cent of output:

1878	50%	1884	74%
1879	44%	1885	63%
1880	63%	1886	63%
1881	61%	1887	52%
1882	91.4%	1888	54%
1883	59%		

Seventy-six per cent of domestic furniture made between 1878 and 1888 was made in expensive hardwoods such as mahogany, American walnut, and Danzig oak. Twenty-four per cent of domestic furniture was made in cheaper timbers such as birch, pine, deal, pitch pine, and ash. The relative costs of English and foreign timbers based upon the catalogue of Joseph Owen & Sons, Liverpool (1881) is summarised in the two Tables printed below. English and imported birch was one of the cheapest timbers which was available on Merseyside and suitable for furniture making. Birch was cheaper than ash, American elm, pine or deal, and was widely used in the construction of wardrobes, wash stands, toilet chests of drawers (Fig. 6), the under frames of tables with deal tops, and Windsor chairs. Sycamore and fruitwoods such as apple, crabtree and pear were more expensive than English oak, and most hardwoods imported into Liverpool. As a result they were seldom used. Deal and pine were generally used for kitchen dressers, plate racks, and table tops, in contrast to Welsh traditions where sycamore was used in the nineteenth-century kitchen furniture.

TIMBER PRICES. 1881 CATALOGUE OF JOSEPH OWEN & SONS,  
TIMBER MERCHANTS. 67 ST ANNE STREET, LIVERPOOL

<i>Imported Timbers (1st grade, 1 in. thick planks up to 9½ in. wide)</i>			<i>Max. widths quoted</i>
<i>Price per foot</i>			
Mahogany	6 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(3 grades available)	30 in. +
Walnut and Cedar	5 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(3 grades)	30 in.
American Oak	4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> d.		15 in.
American Elm	4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> d.		15 in.
Whitewood	3 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(3 grades)	30 in.
American Ash	3 <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(5 grades)	24 in.

Pitch Pine Log	3 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(5 grades)	20 in.
Yellow Pine Log	3 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(5 grades)	30 in.
Yellow Pine Deal	3 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(5 grades)	30 in.
Canadian Birch	2 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(5 grades)	24 in.
Spruce	2 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub> d.	(5 grades)	17 in.

Danzig oak, Stettin oak, Riga and Memel wainscot oak, East Indian teak, Maple, Rosewood, and Satinwood were also available, but not priced.

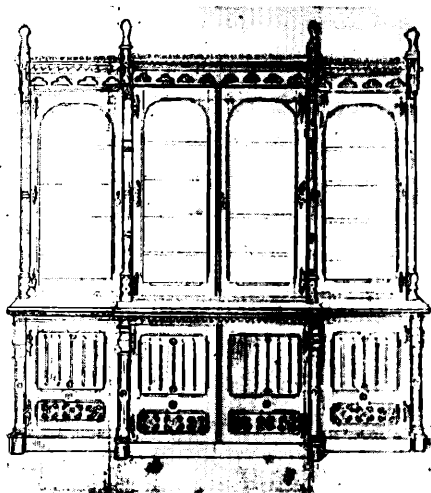
*English Timbers (1st grade, 1 in. thick planks up to 9½ in. wide)*

	<i>Price per foot</i>	<i>Max. width quoted</i>
Walnut	7d. to 10d.	
Apple or Crabtree	6d.	
Pear	6d.	
Hornbeam or Holly	6d.	
Sycamore	4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> d. (3 grades)	10 in.
English Oak	4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> d. (5 grades)	15 in.
Larch	3d. (5 grades)	15 in.
English Ash	3d. (5 grades)	15 in.
Beech	2 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> d.	
Willow	2 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> d.	
Elm	2 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> d.	
Birch	2 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> d.	
Horse Chestnut	2 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> d.	

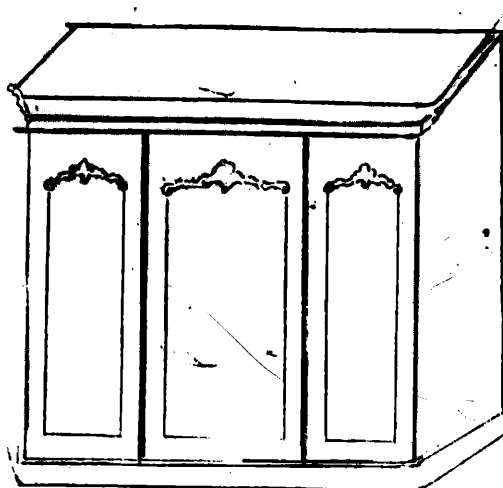
Between 1870 and 1888, the workshops produced domestic furniture to fashionable designs in both cheap and expensive timbers, as well as the most basic and rudimentary domestic items such as plate shelves, step-ladders, wash benches, toilet chest of drawers (Fig. 6), pot cupboards, hanging towel rails, and box frame beds. A brown oak bookcase (Fig. 3), made for Mr Houston in 1880, exhibits the fashionable Gothic characteristics associated with the 1860s designs by Richard Charles. A fashionable 'TRIO WARDROBE' (Fig. 4) could be ordered in a cheap timber such as birch or an expensive timber such as mahogany. The design included a looking glass in the centre door, three drawers, four trays, one shelf, and one rack in each wing. Total labour time was estimated to be about thirty-four days. Basic domestic furniture was made in parallel with fashionable furniture. For example, an open wardrobe (Fig. 5) in deal was made with a shelf, hook rail, three drawers in the base, and painted to simulate oak grain. Total labour time was eight days.

#### KITCHEN FURNITURE

Most kitchen furniture was made in pine or deal. Although the non-aromatic qualities of sycamore make it a particularly useful timber for kitchen work surfaces, its relative expense seems to have inhibited its use. Only on one occasion in 1878 was sycamore used for the top of an eight foot kitchen dresser, with a base of pine. The workshop also made plate shelves



3. Bookcase in brown oak made for Mr Houston in 1880



4. Trio wardrobe

(Fig. 7), ironing tables (4 ft 6 in. by 2 ft wide), as well as a variety of kitchen tables for every conceivable circumstance. Round top tables, up to three feet in diameter, were made with three rhomboid legs and a shelf underneath. The range included 'fall leaf', 'bracket' tables for fixing to the wall, and large rectangular tables, up to seven feet long, for hotel kitchens.

#### INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMERCIAL CLIENTS

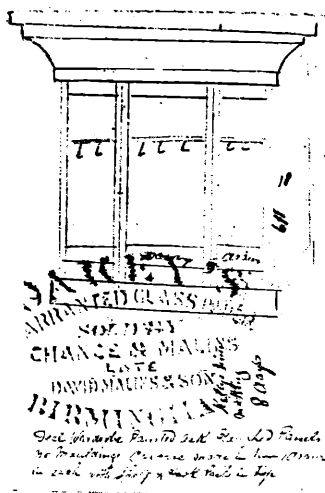
An analysis of over six hundred entries in the order books reveals that furniture made for institutional and commercial clients made up on average sixteen per cent of the annual workshop output. However, the year 1881 was a peak period when forty-five per cent of the annual output (measured in labour time), from J. B. Delany, was for institutional and commercial customers (see table below).

Furniture was supplied for many of the ships built at Laird Brothers Shipyard, Birkenhead, the International Steamship Company, and the firm of Clover & Clayton & Co., shipbuilders of Liverpool. Furniture was also supplied to the Municipal Offices in Hamilton Square, the Upton Convent, the Birkenhead Poor Law Guardians, the Birkenhead Children's Hospital, the Wirral Railway Extension Company, the Canada Works of Messrs Peto & Brassey, the Queen's Arms public house at Oxtown, the Rockferry Hotel, and the Seacombe Hotel.

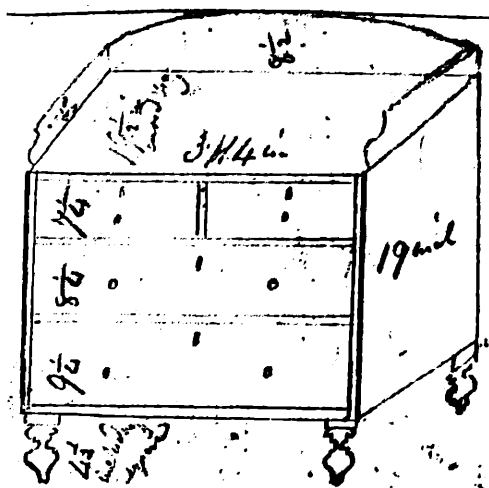
#### SHIPS' FURNITURE

Both Pryce & Delany and later J. B. Delany supplied ships' furniture to many of the steam paddlers, the gunboat the S.S. Mandovi, and the troopship S.S. Clive, built by Laird Brothers', 'iron shipbuilders, engineers and boiler makers'. Most of the furniture was made in hardwoods such as mahogany, teak, satinwood, American walnut, and Danzig oak. The furniture included dining tables and sideboards with guard rails, looking-glass frames, sofa arms, settees, benches, washstands, drinking-glass trays, bottle racks, bookcases, and camp

DISTRIBUTION OF WORKSHOP OUTPUT BETWEEN CLIENT GROUPS													
Annual Labour Time (hours)	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882	1883	1884	1885	1886	1887	1888		
Institutional and Commercial Customers	167.5	188.5	173.5	863	—	139.5	414	329	162	—	295		
% of total output	(6%)	(5%)	(3%)	(21%)	(0%)	(3%)	(9%)	(10%)	(3%)	(0%)	(9%)		
Ships Furniture	—	225.5	1337.5	989.25	622	371	864	18	579.5	225	—		
% of total output	(0%)	(7%)	(21%)	(24%)	(11%)	(8%)	(18%)	(0.6%)	(10%)	(10%)	(0%)		
Domestic Furniture	2584.5	3121	4753.75	2225.5	4815	4363.5	3410	2928.5	4777	2135.5	2912		
% of total output	(94%)	(88%)	(76%)	(55%)	(89%)	(89%)	(73%)	(90%)	(87%)	(90%)	(91%)		
Domestic Furniture Primary: Oak, Mahogany, Walnut	2201.5	2065	3352.25	1406	4087	2790.5	2889	2234.5	3575	1538.5	2631		
% of domestic output	(85%)	(66%)	(71%)	(63%)	(85%)	(64%)	(85%)	(76%)	(75%)	(72%)	(90%)		
Domestic Furniture Primarily: Birch Ash, Pine, Deal	383	1056	1401.5	819.5	728	1572.5	521	694	1202	597	281		
% of domestic output	(15%)	(34%)	(29%)	(37%)	(15%)	(36%)	(15%)	(24%)	(25%)	(28%)	(10%)		
Total Labour Time	2752	3535	6264.75	4077.75	5437	4874	4688	3275.5	5518.5	2360.5	3207		
Number of Cabinet Makers Employed in Workshop	3	5	4	7	9	8	6	5	5	6	4		



5. Painted open wardrobe  
in deal



6. Toilet chest of drawers

stools. Special design features included cross blocking of table pillars and legs to facilitate deck fixing, bracing the underneath of table tops with rims to stabilise timbers during significant changes in humidity, multiple cross stretchers and braced table frames, bolted table frames, braced guard rails and clip plates. Other features included clamped wash basins within wash stands, rounded edges and canted corners on case furniture, sliding doors in bookcases, specialist racks and trays for tumblers, glasses, bottles and decanters, and pine ends to case furniture such as sideboards for fixing to bulkheads. A few examples of 'ships' furniture are described below, emphasising the special design features of this type of furniture (Figs 8 and 10).

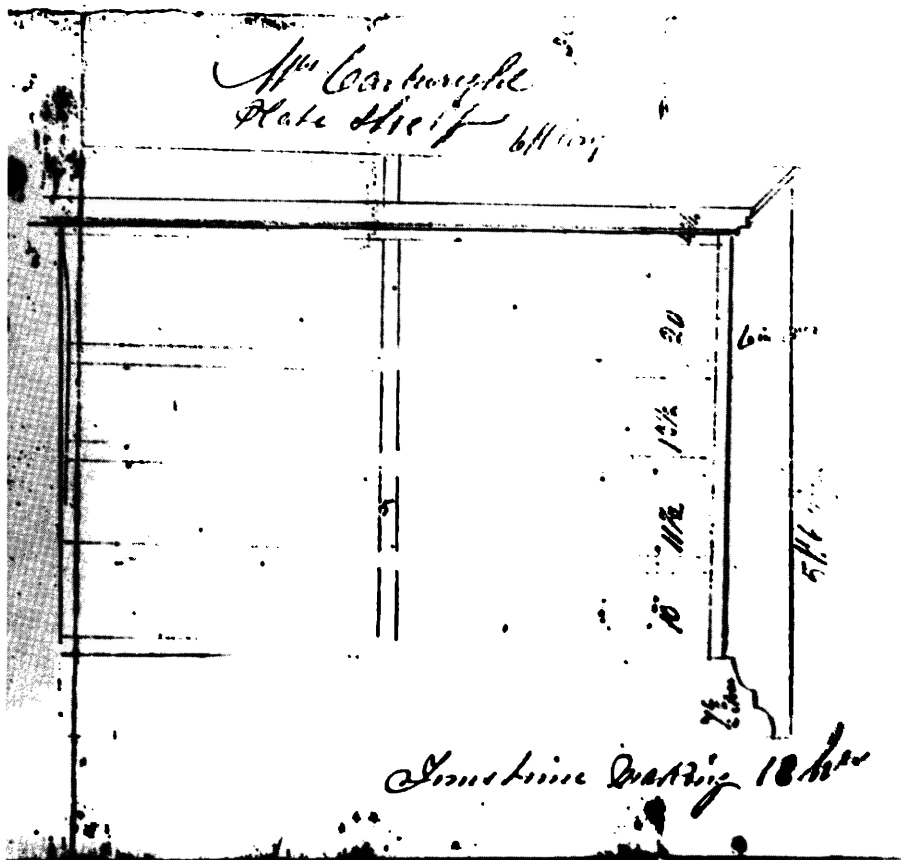
*Settee* (S.S. Sicily). Order for an oak settee, 6 ft 2 in. long, with a moveable back, on 8 turned legs to extend 2 ft at each end, with loose frames. (152 hours work.)

*Sofa Arms* (Ship Eleanor, 21 January 1882). Order for 4 teak wood sofa arms with turned pillars at the front, pilasters at the back, and 3 turned spindles with scratch moulding on the outside of the rails. (41 hours' work.)

*Camp Stools* (Ship Javory, Laird Ship No. 411). Order for 30 camp stools. (200 hours work.) Figure 9.

*Tables* (Ship Cabral 2 May 1884). Order for a light oak table on six turned legs and cross stretchers. Side rails and legs bolted together. Legs stationary or bolted to deck. 3 extra leaves supplied. Length of table when closed 19½ ft, and when open to full extent, 23½ ft, (3 ft 2 in. wide.) 10 guards supplied fitted with elastic web. No divisions or cross rails in guards. 18 clip plates used. (16½ days' work.)

(Ship Clive 'Troopship' 21 April 1883). Order for 2 tables in American walnut. 3 ft by 2 ft 5 in., on 4 turned pillars, and shaped cross-blocks at the bottom. Loose blocks



7. Construction detail for a plate shelf made for Mr Cartwright

Ship Eleanor  
12 Sofa arms close stuffed this pattern  
Sometimes 8 1/2 hrs Sometimes 89 hrs  
Say in all 175 1/2 hrs  
Styrene time 10 1/2 hrs



8. Sofa arms for the ship Eleanor, 1882



supplied for fitting to the deck. Rim under top with quirk bed and small hollow on top. (64 hours' work.)

*Bottle Racks* (Ship Columbo, 20 March 1880). Oak bottle rack for oak sideboard with 4 decanter holes and 9 tumbler holes. (13 hours' work.)

*Drinking Glass Trays* (Ship Minnesota, 7 April 1882). Walnut glass tray 6 ft long by 20 in. wide. Bottom shelf cut for 48 wine glasses. Top on 10 turned pillars cut for 5 decanters and 18 tumblers. (24 hours' work.)

*Sideboards* (Lord Gough Steamship, March 1879). Oak sideboard with pine end against bulkhead, with 2 drawers, 2 doors with raised pilasters, 2 loose shelves and 1 cut shelf for glasses and decanters inside. (150 hours' work.)

(Laird ship Rannoch, 11 February 1882). 2 maple and satinwood sideboards, each 2 ft 6 in. long, 3 ft high and 20 in. wide. 1 door to each, 1 round corner, and 1 end only veneered — the other end against the bulkhead. 2 drawers inside 1 sideboard and a loose shelf in the other sideboard. Teak moulding on plinth and up to top marble slab. (207 hours' or 23 days' work.)

*Wash Stands* (Ship Banshie 28 June 1884). 2 mahogany wash stands on turned legs, 5 ft 6 in. long by 2 ft 4 in. wide. Inside fittings for 2 marble slabs in each. Pedestal cupboard with door, 2 spouts for each pedestal to cover lead pipes. Lift-up top over wash basin which is clamped and framed. (154 hours' or 17 days' work.)

*Benches or Forms* (Ship Banshie, 6 June 1884). 4 mahogany benches or forms, each 7 ft long by 14 in. wide, 18 in. high on 6 turned legs with wood top, round edge, 'got up for polishing'. (72 hours' or 8 days' work.)

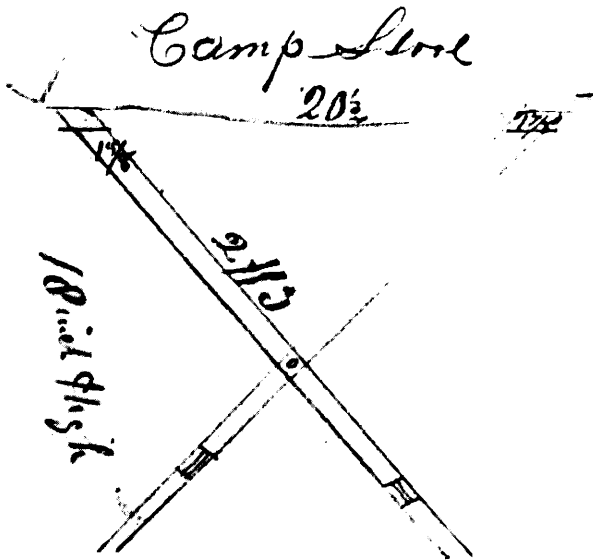
*Wardrobe* (Ship Santo Domingo, 10 February 1884). Mahogany wardrobe for recess, 1 drawer, 1 door for glass. (93 hours' or 10¼ days' work.)

*Bookcases* (Yacht, Messrs, Clover & Clayton, Liverpool, 21 November 1881). 2 walnut bookcases each 3 ft 6 in. long by 6 ft 9 in. high. Sliding doors in top and bottom carcass. 6 loose shelves in top carcass and 4 loose shelves in bottom carcass. An allocation of 12½ days for final fixing of the bookcases on the yacht by Fitzpatrick and his son, Tom, was included in the order books. It was also estimated that 6½ hours of Fitzpatrick's time was required for making templates and measuring.

#### RAILWAY FURNITURE

As part of the rationalisation of the route of the Birkenhead Railway (jointly owned by the G.W.R. and the L.N.W.R.), work commenced in 1876 on a new terminus adjacent to the Woodside ferry landing stage. Shortly after the opening of the railway terminus in March 1878, an order was received on 20 April to supply a pitch-pine kneehole dressing table with two cupboards for Woodside Station. Although pitch pine was used for most of the furniture supplied to the railway companies, the use of this timber for domestic furniture was unusual. Further developments of the railway system in north Wirral took place as part of the suburban development of settlements in the vicinity of Birkenhead. The incorporation of the Wirral Railway Company in 1883, to facilitate a railway extension from

9. Camp stool for a ship



10. Quotation for eight mahogany tables with brass fringes for a ship, 1884

MEMORANDUM.

FROM

J. B. DELANY,

HOUSE AND SHIP FURNISHER.

"GOLDEN EAGLE."

CONWAY STREET,

BIRKENHEAD.

TO

9 April 1884

521

WORKSHOPS AND TIMBER YARDS—CLAUGHTON ROAD, BANK STREET, AND DAGRE STREET

8 Mahogany Tables

6ft 6" x 2ft 9"

turned legs, with brass frames

3 1/2 legs

Birkenhead Docks to Birkenhead Park, resulted in orders for a 16 ft pitch pine drawing table, screen, and various pitch pine cupboards in 1884 and early 1885.

On 6 December 1884, an order was received to make a drawing table for the Wirral Railway Extension Company. The design requirements made reference to a drawing table (Fig. 11.) 16 ft long by 3 ft 9 in. wide, with a Bible front, and supported on 6 square legs. A screen for the end of the drawing table, 7 ft high and 5 ft wide with two wooden panels at the bottom and two glass panels at the top was also required. Fixing of both the drawing table and screen were to be charged as extra. On 20 December 1884, an order was also received from the Wirral Railway Company for a Deal Press, 7 ft 1½ in. long, 2 ft 9 in. wide, and 7 ft high, with three sliding doors, and six shelves in the top carcass; three drawers and ten sliding trays in the lower carcass. Three locks and twenty-six flush or sunk handles were to be used on the drawers and trays. On 31 January 1885, an order was received from the Railway Company for a pitch pine cupboard, 2 ft 10 in. wide, with twenty four pigeon holes. One drawer was to be provided in the top carcass and a panelled door was to fall down to form a desk for writing purposes. Two loose shelves were to be provided in the bottom carcass, with folding doors. (11 days' construction time.) Another order was also received for a pitch pine cupboard with three drawers and three trays in the bottom carcass. In the top carcass, three loose shelves and folding doors were to be provided. (17½ days' construction time.)

#### PUBLIC HOUSE FURNITURE

Public house furniture, made by the workshops, included stuffed bar seats (Fig. 12), a birch frame table with oil baize top 6 ft by 2 ft, for Mr Hughes of the Queen's Arms, Oxtou (16 January 1880), four bar parlour tables with mahogany tops, 6 ft by 1 ft 9 in., on turned birch legs and frame, for Mr Litherland of the Hotel Victoria, Cleveland Street, Birkenhead (5 September 1885). An order was also received on 17 September 1885 for 'three mahogany hand-made round tops for iron stand tables'.

#### PRODUCE EXCHANGE

Orders were received in May 1886 to supply the Produce Exchange with 8 ft and 4 ft oak tables. An order for a pine notice board 8 ft long by 3 ft 6 in. wide was also received. Ready-made ash mouldings were to be mitred round the sides and used down the centre to subdivide the board into two parts. In July 1887, work was started on a sign board 8 ft 9 in. by 8 ft 6 in. high, which was to be made as a stock item.

#### CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

In May 1883 orders were received for a 5 ft oak table, a 12 ft walnut table, and a walnut hat and umbrella stand for the new Birkenhead Children's Hospital in Woodchurch Road.

#### WORKHOUSE FURNITURE

Furniture ordered by the Birkenhead Poor Law Guardians in January 1880 included a 17 ft by 5 ft mahogany table with a leather top and six legs. The work showed a loss of twenty-three hours of working time. In September 1881, a further order was received for a mahogany slope desk with a leather insert in the lid.

## HOTELS

Furnishing of the Seacombe and Rockferry Hotels, in 1881, resulted in orders for various types and sizes of tables, dinner wagons, screens, and box-frame spring mattress beds as listed below.

30	April	1881	Two dinner wagons in American walnut 6 ft 6 in. by 2 ft
7	May	1881	Table with deal top and walnut frame for staining, 5 ft 6 in.
7	May	1881	Twelve spring mattress frames.
17	May	1881	Pine top table with walnut frame, 4 ft 3 in. by 2 ft 6 in.
24	May	1881	Two deal top tables with ash legs, 10 ft by 4 ft
24	May	1881	Fall leaf table to fix to wall, 4 ft 9 in. by 22 in. wide and 3 ft high
30	May	1881	Two deal kitchen tables with taper legs, 6 ft 6 in. by 2 ft 6 in.
30	May	1881	Two oil baize top tables on turned legs. One table 4 ft 6 in. by 2 ft 9 in. and the other 3 ft 9 in. by 2 ft 6 in.
30	May	1881	Three deal tables with taper legs, 5 ft by 2 ft
13	June	1881	Six spring mattress frames, 6 ft 4 in. by 4 ft 6 in.
13	June	1881	Six deal tables for varnishing, 4 ft 3 in. by 2 ft 9 in.
18	June	1881	Four deal screens 4 ft wide by 7 ft 7½ in. high
1	Sept	1881	Spring mattress beds.

## FINISHING

Most of the entries in the order books, relating to pine or deal furniture, include specific references to the finishing techniques to be used. The alternatives were polishing, varnishing, painting, painting to simulate oak grain (Fig. 5), and staining to simulate mahogany. A few references are made in the order books to the finishing of furniture, made primarily in hardwoods. An order for four mahogany bar parlour tables with birch frames and legs, in September 1885, included an allocation of 5s. for polishing, sandpaper, and glue, which represented 12% of the cost price. Costing for polish, glue, glass paper and labour for polishing were generally included in the materials 'cutting list'. In 1878, 49 hours was spent polishing a mahogany bookcase, which was charged at a rate of 8d. per hour. The individual responsible for polishing work was not indicated. The costing for cabinet makers' time on this occasion was 8d. per hour for O'Hare, and 6d. per hour for Tom Fitzpatrick. There is one reference in the order book, in 1883, to the fuming of 18 ft oak dining table.

## WORKSHOP ORGANISATION

The level of organisation in a nineteenth-century provincial workshop is clearly identified in the order books. Each new entry in the order books required an allocation of duties to one or more of the cabinet makers, by Owen Fitzpatrick, together with estimated times (in hours and days) for the preparation and construction stages. Estimated times were based upon a journeyman's skill, speed, and experience. As an apprentice, Owen (junior) was allocated forty hours extra to construct a mahogany sideboard. A typical entry in the order book for 1880 relates to the making of a Gothic-style brown oak bookcase for Mr Houston (Fig. 3). Reference is made to the use of the skills of Mr Condliff, 'the carver'. Time was also allocated for fixing up the bookcase in the showroom in Conway Street.

Occasionally a note was made of the disparity between estimated and actual time spent on making a piece of furniture. In this respect, it is worth noting that although Owen

December 6th 1884

Wirral Railway Extension Company

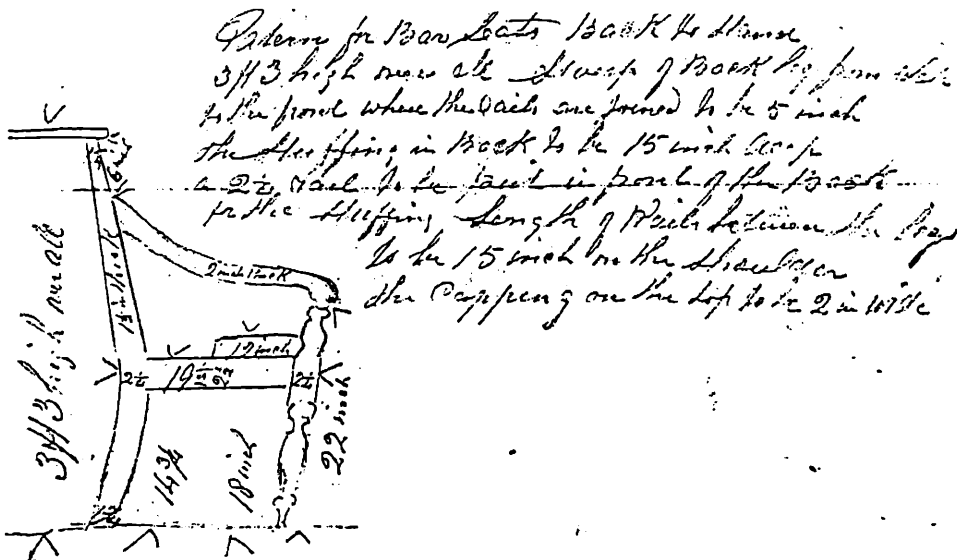
Drawing Table 16ft long by 3ft 9 wide with 2 double  
& glazed joints in top thin  
Supported on 6 square legs with frame together  
with cross bottom rails & 2 long rails one of them  
let into legs for feet to rest on bolted at back  
& front & put together with bed screws No drawers

Self-painted iron framing	16 1/2 lbs	} in all 81 1/2 lbs. or by 9 days
Iron	32	
Cum	33	

Screen for end of drawing table 7ft high 5ft wide with 2 tiered panels  
at bottom & 2 glass panels at top with edge mouldings on one side only  
and painted mould for top & cross frame & double together

Self-painted iron framing	20 1/2 lbs	} in all 25 1/2 lbs
Iron	2	
Cum	3	

11. Drawing table for the Wirral Railway Extension Company, 1884



12. Sketch and specification for bar seating 'backs to stand 3 ft. 3 in. high'

Fitzpatrick (senior) had estimated 22 days for making a bookcase for the International Steamship Company in May 1887, Mr Delany reckoned the time actually spent on the construction was 24½ days (220 hours).

Total wages to cover labour costs was	£6 12s. 0d.
Total cost of labour and materials	£13 7s. 6d.
Price sold at	£16 10s. 0d.

Estimated times were allocated for the following preparatory and construction stages:

- (i) Timber preparation which often involved assistance from local saw mills, such as Alexander Bleakley & Sons of Claughton Street, Birkenhead
- (ii) Measuring and setting out of timber
- (iii) Making templates to assist construction of fixed furniture
- (iv) Labour time for construction
- (v) Final fixing

A sketch drawing was occasionally included in the order book and a cutting list prepared separately, indicating materials to be used and their cost. Working hours were generally nine hours per day.

Differences in the costing of labour time was probably reflected in wage differentials paid to journeyman cabinet makers. In 1878, Thomas Fitzpatrick's time was costed at 6d. an hour, and O'Hare at 8d. an hour. Between 1884 and 1886, the time of Owen Fitzpatrick (senior) was costed at 9d. an hour, Thomas 7½d. an hour, and Owen (junior) at 5½d. an hour. An annotated drawing of a kneehole dressing table has labour time comparisons for the construction of a kneehole dressing table by different cabinetmakers. It was recorded that James Mohin had previously taken an extra day (9 hours) longer than Owen to construct a similar dressing table. When costs had to be trimmed to a minimum, ready-turned table legs were available from such firms as Joseph Owen & Sons, Timber Merchants, of Liverpool. Cost savings in construction were occasionally employed by 'Jerry' making furniture. Jointing techniques were avoided, and nails used in abundance. A pine dresser ordered on 6 November 1880, and two chests of drawers ordered on 2 March 1886, were to be 'Jerry' made. The emphasis on labour cost savings is noted in an order dated 31 December 1886. A reference to the turned rails of a walnut hanging towel rail, states that 'Turning might be done in Liverpool for 1½d. each'. This would have worked out at half the rate quoted in the order book, i.e. 16 rails for 4s., or 3d. each.

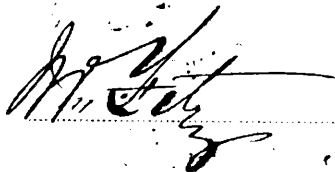
#### CONCLUSIONS

This unique opportunity to study the output and organisation of a cabinet maker's workshop has made it possible to determine some of the factors which contributed to the survival of a provincial bespoke tradition, well into the latter part of the nineteenth century. Pryce & Delany, and later John B. Delany, combined cabinet making with the sale of household furnishings, undertaking, decorating, and ships' furnishings. The turnover generated by such a commercial organisation was probably an essential factor in financing the costs of materials and wages over prolonged construction periods. In the case of stock items, the time displayed in the showrooms would have extended the time-scale. For example, in a peak year of output, such as 1880, 10 orders out of 82 orders involved a construction time in excess of 18 working days or 3 weeks; 7 of the 10 orders were bespoke and 3 orders were for stock items to be sold through the showrooms. The average estimated

## Memorandum.

From  
**PRYCE & DELANY,**  
 Golden Eagle Cabinet, Carpet, & Upholstery Works,  
 CONWAY STREET,  
 BIRKENHEAD.

187



*We have agreed to give Reynolds another  
 chance & engaged him at 30/- as Jobbing man  
 Sept 12/46*

## 13. Memorandum concerning Mr Reynolds

time for completion of orders, in 1880, was 76 hours, and the largest order for a brown oak bookcase involved 628 hours of work. Not more than two cabinet makers were generally involved in the construction stages.

Regional advantages of ready access to a wide range of hardwoods and softwoods of varying prices, imported through the port of Liverpool, provided the opportunities to supply a diversity of client groups. The cheapest domestic furniture was made in birch (Fig. 6), while the special furniture requirements of passenger steam-paddlers and troopships could be met by the availability of teak, mahogany, and American walnut. The mechanisation of saw-mills such as Alexander Bleakley facilitated rapid timber preparation and 'machined cornices'. Availability of these services avoided the necessity for cabinet makers, such as Pryce & Delany, to consider investment in the latest technology available for timber preparation. A further spin-off effect of the highly mechanised saw-mills of 'English and Foreign Timber Merchants', such as Joseph Owen & Sons of Liverpool, was their capacity to supply ready-turned furniture components such as table legs, sofa stumps, drawer stumps and mass-produced Windsor chair parts in birch and elm, for the cheapest domestic furniture.

Although in 1882 up to nine cabinet makers worked in the workshop of J. B. Delany, under the supervision of Owen Fitzpatrick, the allocation of work varied considerably. In that year, the allocation of work for Owen Fitzpatrick was 939 hours (excluding time for measuring and setting out), Thomas Fitzpatrick 716 hours, Owen (junior) 1108 hours, Greenhalgh 1180 hours, O'Hare 598 hours, Smith 566 hours, Blackshaw 285 hours, Boyle 181 hours, and Hunter 158 hours. This uneven distribution of work was common for most years. Few cabinet makers, except for Blackshaw, worked with Owen Fitzpatrick and his two sons for more than five years. None of these hours, for labour time, represent more than half a year's work on the basis of a minimum 45-hour working week. This uneven distribution of work during the 1870s and 1880s indicates that many cabinet makers were only employed on a casual or 'jobbing' basis. A memorandum concerning the re-employment of George Reynolds, cabinet maker, from 33, Rokeby Street, Liverpool, in

September 1876, at thirty shillings, was as a 'jobbing man' (Fig. 13). A memorandum relating to the suspension of two cabinet makers, George Jowett, of 33, Fore Street, Birkenhead, and his colleague, Jones, is indicative of a degree of indifference to their situation.

It would appear to be inconsistent for extra cabinet makers to have been taken on in 1882 unless there were time constraints on production or regular workmen were engaged on more lucrative work in other workshops. Certain cabinet makers may have been employed to handle highly skilled and time-consuming work. For example, in 1882 and 1883, Greenhalgh was engaged specifically to make substantial orders for two large sideboards, an oak hall table and a walnut and thuya wood cabinet (1463 hours labour). Wood carvers such as John Condliiff of 12, Edge Mount, Paddington, Liverpool, appear to have been employed on a sub-contract basis since estimated times for his work were never entered in the order books. 'Cutting lists' occasionally included costs for carving and polishing. Sub-contracting for specialist work, such as wood-carving, was a familiar cabinet makers' practice in the eighteenth century.

Evidence suggests that the employment of journeymen, on a casual jobbing and sub-contract basis, was a common workshop practice in a major provincial centre such as Birkenhead and Liverpool. An analysis of working hours and workshop organisation indicates the limited extent to which journeymen were employed by only one workshop. This mobility of craftsmen contributed to the success and longevity of a bespoke cabinet-making tradition which could respond to the special requirements of certain orders, and handle fluctuations in demand during periods of relative prosperity in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

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