

# FURNITURE MAKERS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ABERDEEN: AN INTRODUCTION

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1. 'View of New Aberdeen' by William Mosman, c1700-71  
*Courtesy Aberdeen City Art Gallery*

In August 1773 Samuel Johnson and James Boswell arrived in Aberdeen on their tour of northern Scotland and the Western Isles. In his account of the visit, 'as Scotland is little known to the greater part of those who may read these observations', Johnson considered it necessary to describe the city 'with the solemnity of geographical description, as if we had been cast upon a newly-discovered coast'<sup>1</sup>. In furniture history terms Aberdeen remains 'a newly-discovered coast'. The Trinity Hall Chairs<sup>2</sup>, the collection of sixteenth to early eighteenth century chairs held by the Seven Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen in their headquarters at Trinity Hall, and the work of the woodcarver John Fendour<sup>3</sup> have been the subject of previous academic study, but little research has been done into the furniture makers who served the domestic needs of Aberdonians. In the eighteenth century, Aberdeen, like Edinburgh, had begun to break out of its old mediaeval plan; new streets were being laid out with new 'flatted dwelling houses' and town houses built on them. An exhibition by Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums in 1980<sup>4</sup> examining the cultural scene in eighteenth century Aberdeen commented on domestic interiors, but the craftsmen who 'plenished' them, unlike their Edinburgh contemporaries, have remained anonymous. This article represents the beginning of a project to record Aberdeen's anonymous furniture makers over the period 1660-1840 and to provide a foundation upon which further study of Aberdeen as a furniture-making centre can be built.

Following Dr. Johnson's example, a brief review of contemporary Aberdeen might be useful to those reading these observations. Aberdeen's development in the second half of the eighteenth century mirrored that of many other towns and cities in Scotland, most notably Edinburgh. More peaceful times and the 'bustle of prosperous trade' and 'shew of increasing opulence'<sup>5</sup> commented on by Dr. Johnson, combined with a rising population – from around 7,000 in 1708 to between 17,000 and 18,000 in 1801 – demanded development beyond the hilly, mediaeval town plan<sup>6</sup>. The restricted site had resulted in an overcrowded centre where the use of timber and turf as building materials made fire a constant hazard. In 1722, after a fire in the Broadgate, Aberdeen's principal street at the time, the Town Council prohibited 'stake and rice' [lath and plaster] chimneys and turf roofs and decreed that houses should henceforth have front elevations of stone or brick, instead of timber<sup>7</sup>. Another 'dismal Accident' in 1741, when there had been great difficulty in putting out the fire in the 'timber lands' [tenements], led to more building regulations, the details of which were sent to wrights and masons 'so that none may pretend ignorance'<sup>8</sup>. Several new streets were laid out in the 1760s and 70s where the Town Council had more success with building control. By the time of Johnson's visit in 1773, his impression is of a city built 'almost wholly with the granite used in the new pavement of the street in London', of 'large and lofty houses' and 'clean and spacious streets'. The Town Council's efforts to improve Aberdeen were consolidated by the passing of the Police Commissioners' Act in 1795, whereby thirteen Commissioners were elected to oversee the systematic naming of streets and numbering of houses, the cleaning and lighting of the streets and the provision of clean water. Johnson's lodgings at the New Inn on the Castlegate faced the first of the new streets to tackle the city's problematic topography. Laid out in 1766, Marischal Street was a 'bridge-street' of the type also used in the building of Edinburgh's New Town and was designed to counter the steep slope from the harbour to the commercial centre<sup>10</sup>. The houses on Marischal Street typified both the neat regularity of Georgian architecture and the style of living favoured by Aberdeen's middle classes. Some were single homes, but many were divided into 'flatted dwelling houses', each floor being a separate dwelling of several rooms, served by a common stair. An advertisement offering 'two small lodgings' to let in the Gallowgate in 1775<sup>11</sup> gives a description of a modest flat;

'These Lodgings are neatly wainscoted, painted, and in every way in good Repair; and have a common back Passage to the Fields. One of them on the first Floor has a Kitchen, Cellar, a large Dining Room, Stance for a Bed Stead in the Boxing, and the Room properly furnished with Presses.'

Also in 1775, the creditors of James Pirie, Wright, offer for sale 'the third House, West-side of Marischal Street, possessed by Sir Archibald Seton and others'.<sup>12</sup> Sir Archibald and the 'others' who lived in these flats would have found rather better accommodation with several 'fire-rooms' [rooms with fireplaces] and a kitchen in every flat, but the 'boxing' or wood-panelling mentioned in the advert for the lodgings in the Gallowgate would have been found in both. Wood-panelling was a feature of Aberdeen interiors in the eighteenth century, from the 'small lodgings' to the Town council's 'Great Room' where Dr. Johnson was made a Freeman of the city. In 1750 Patrick Barron was employed to design a new and extended frontage for the Tolbooth and to finish the interior of the Great Room. The Town Council were specific in their instructions; the new floor was to be laid with 'dales

along the length of the room, which will greatly add to the beauty thereof', the walls were to have 'best firr-boxing' and a 'landskip' was commissioned from William Mosman<sup>13</sup> to hang above the fireplace (Figure 1). The sources for the quantities of wood used in Aberdeen's panelled interiors can be seen in ship movements recorded in the press; cargoes came into Aberdeen from across Northern Europe – from Gothenburg, Danzig and Mandal in Norway – although locally grown fir from estates like Glentamar on Deeside was also advertised sawn into deals.

Patrick Barron, who worked on the Town Council's Great Room, is one of the wrights whose advertisements appeared in the *Aberdeen Journal*. In 1756 he advertises 'a large parcel of new made HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, viz. Folding Tables, both Wainscot and Mahogany, Mahogany Standards, Walnut-tree and Beech Chairs, Mahogany Desks and Women's Drawers'. John Stabler's study of English newspaper advertisements<sup>14</sup> demonstrated the value of contemporary newspaper reports as a source of information on furniture makers and a similar survey proved to be a useful starting-point in Aberdeen. The first issue of the *Aberdeen Journal* was published on January 5<sup>th</sup> 1748. But for a brief period of competition from the *Aberdeen Intelligencer* in the 1750s, it was the only newspaper published in the city in the eighteenth century<sup>15</sup>. In common with contemporary Edinburgh newspapers, the *Aberdeen Journal* devoted most of its space to national and international news gleaned from the London press, with 'Domestic Occurrences' and advertising confined to the back page. From 1748 to 1800, amidst reports of straying cattle, absconding servants and a remarkable number of drowned Aberdonians, the names of over fifty wrights, cabinet makers, upholsterers, carvers and gilders, looking-glass makers and japanners are mentioned. Their advertisements reveal a great deal about what they made, the materials they used and the progress, or otherwise, of their businesses. On August 24<sup>th</sup> 1767 George Bartlet, 'Upholsterer from London' announces that at 'the sixth door down the Venal-Close in the Gallowgate, he makes and sells all kinds of Upholstery-work, in the neatest Manner, newest Fashions and on the best Terms.' The nineteen-year-old Bartlet is starting off in quite a humble location (though his situation is perhaps not as desperate as the spelling of 'Vennel-Close' might suggest), but by April the next year he is 'in the foot of the Broadgate', Aberdeen's principal street. In February 1779 he is to be found 'at the BED AND SOPHA middle of the Broadgate' where 'he still carries on the Upholstery Business in all its different Branches after the most fashionable Manner'. The Broadgate has become Broad Street by the time of his last advertisement in 1799. The progress around the city of upholsterer George Rae, arriving from Edinburgh in 1755, does not suggest that he met with similar success. From 'Deacon Green's House, in Provost Cruikshank's Close, in the Broadgate' he moves to 'Capt. Spark's Fore-house opposite the Shiprow Well' and is last heard from in 1758, down by the harbour, in 'that little house on the Shore Brae, belonging to Patrick Baron, Wright'. David Sheriffs' address from his first advertisement in November 20<sup>th</sup> 1759 till his 'Commodious Shop, Warehouse and Woodyard' are let after his death, remains 'the Foot of the Gallowgate, opposite St. Paul's Chapel'. References to him in 'Domestic Occurrences' in the 1770s show him elected Deacon Convener of the Incorporated Trades and one of the two Trades Counsellors on the Town Council. Clearly a settled and successful businessman, with a new house and 'two neatly finished flats' in Marischal Street to rent in 1775, the advertisements placed by him are among the most detailed. A

roup of new furniture at his wareroom in June 1766 includes 'Ten dozen of Chairs, the neatest and newest Patterns, of Virginia Walnut-tree, Mahogany, Wild Cherry-tree, Scots Walnut-tree and Beech, Elm and Oak'. The range of woods used in chair-making is also illustrated by Alexander Rose, cabinet maker in Ellon, north of Aberdeen. In 1759 he advertises 'Chairs of Elm and Plane Tree, Laburnum [Cytisus Alpinus], Walnut, Elm, Geen [Wild Cherry/Prunus Avium] with Beech'. Wych Elm was also popular for chair-making in Scotland and it is perhaps to it that James Strachan refers here in 1779; 'Mahogany Chairs of different Patterns, Mahogany Elbow Chairs, all stuffed with English Hair and covered with best Hair Cloth, Elm Chairs stuffed with ditto, and of the most beautiful variegated Wood'. This advertisement placed by the gardener at House of Elrick in February 20<sup>th</sup> 1759 demonstrates the variety of woods available to cabinet makers locally:

'A Large Quantity of FIR-TREES, ASH, LABURNUMS, PLANES, ELMS, WALNUT TREE &c. to be put up in small Lots. The Laburnums and Walnut tree are large enough for making Furniture, such as Chairs, Tables &c.'

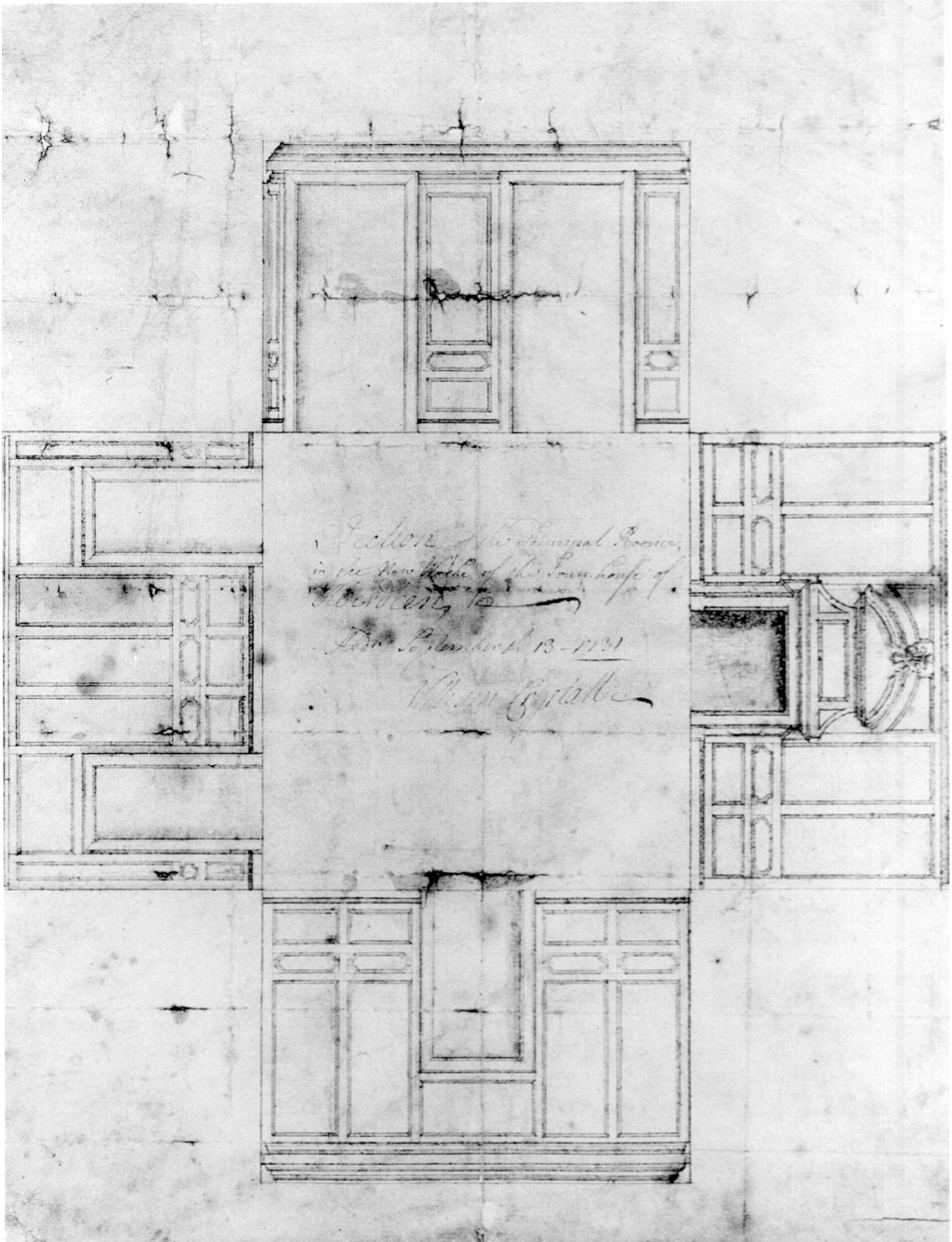
Sheriffs also makes particular mention of design features; in 1774 a roup of new furniture includes 'Book-cases with cupboards, with Gothick and Chinese Doors'; in 1776 he is selling 'Cabinets, with Book-cases, with Chinese and Close panelled Doors'.

Though the first advertisement placed by a furniture maker, on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1750, is by the Edinburgh firm Young & Trotter, offering a 'compleat assortment' of upholstery goods with 'Upholstery Work done in the newest and neatest manner', Edinburgh features less than one might expect. Over this period only one other Edinburgh firm advertises in the *Journal*; on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1796 Henry Farquharson, Carver and Gilder of No. 2 South side of Prince's Street announces that 'a Grand Collection' of paintings, prints, pier glasses, gerindoles and dressing glasses is to be sold 'by Subscription'. Agents have been appointed to sell tickets in Banff, Peterhead and Elgin, as well as Aberdeen. It must be assumed that Farquharson, like the London looking-glass makers who advertised in the Edinburgh press, is selling off 'surplus or inferior stock'<sup>16</sup>. George Rae, in 1755, is unusual in including 'from Edinburgh' in his press notice. When upholsterer Alexander Scott's business is expanding in the late 1780s and early 90s, he is pleased to announce that he has engaged 'several of the best workmen in the CABINET line from Edinburgh'. The other references to Edinburgh also occur in the 1790s and seem to reflect contemporary taste for decorative finishes. Houison & Bishop, carvers and gilders, in 1796 and Patrick Stuart, upholsterer, in 1795, refer to previous experience 'the principal houses' in London and Edinburgh. On November 7<sup>th</sup> 1791 P. Dallaway, japanner and drawing master from Edinburgh, announces that he 'varnishes or paints Tables, Chairs, or any piece of Furniture, in the most elegant Manner'. He also advertises for apprentices. By December 22<sup>nd</sup> he is planning to return to Edinburgh, having turned over his business to Alexander Thomson, painter, 'whom he has thoroughly instructed in it'. Robert Grant, japanner, clock dial maker and tea tray manufacturer from Edinburgh, 'begs Leave to inform the Public' in 1797 that 'he has begun a new manufactory of different articles in the Japanning line, never attempted before in this country'. Grant remains in Aberdeen and is still recorded as a 'japanner' in the Aberdeen Postal Directory in the 1830s. Dallaway, Grant and Houison & Bishop give addresses in the Longacre, perhaps indicating an enclave of specialists in that street. Two other japanners advertise in the





2. The Flesher's chair, dated 1661, mahogany, Trinity Hall, Aberdeen  
*Courtesy Trinity Hall, Aberdeen*



3. 'Section of the Principal Roome in the New Worke of the Town House'  
by William Crystall, 1731  
Courtesy Aberdeen City Archives

*Journal* around this time; Elizabeth Watts in 1788 and John Chree in 1794. Elizabeth Watts, who 'japans and gilds every Article in Tin' and 'japans and paints in Wood, Cabinets, Tables, Chairs, Dressing Boxes and Glass Frames' is also distinguished as the only woman to place an advertisement over the period 1748-1800.

In Aberdeen, as in Edinburgh, it is London that is held up as the arbiter of taste. Magnus Law's advertisement from 1774 illustrates Aberdeen's interest in London fashion, but can have made him few friends among the city's other furniture makers when he offers 'All kinds of CABINET WORK, both plain and inlaid (with different Colours of Wood) and plain work; many curious pieces of which were never executed in this Place; tho' are at present the fashion in London.' Alexander Scott sets up in business as an upholsterer in 1784 and the next year announces that he has just returned with 'Articles selected from the first shops in London'. He makes annual spring visits to London bringing back in 1788 'Paper Hangings of the newest Patterns' and in 1791 'four-post and tent Bedsteads stained in the English Manner' 'having been repeatedly asked' for them. He also brings Broadwood pianofortes and harpsichords to be sold 'at the same price as in London', but as he advertises pianofortes for hire the next year, perhaps the London price has proved too high for Aberdeen. Scott is the first to advertise buying trips to London, but annual visits become a feature in advertisements in the nineteenth century. George Bartlet enters into 'a regular correspondence in London by which he is informed of the change in fashions.' In 1796 he has 'just got from London some new fashioned painted Chairs such as were never seen in Aberdeen'. The buying in of painted furniture from London by Scott and Bartlet suggests either that there was a greater demand for these items than the painters, japanners and gilders mentioned above were able to meet, or that their skills were inferior.

Fashionable ideas may have been welcomed into Aberdeen, but 'unfree' competitors were not. Only one who had been made a 'freeman of his craft' by joining the appropriate Trade Incorporation was able to trade in the city. The rights and privileges of 'freemen' in Aberdeen were protected by the Seven Incorporated Trades. Written references to the Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen date back to the twelfth century when the town was given the status of royal burgh by David I. Dr. William Guild, a minister and the son of a former Deacon of the Hammermen, provided the Trades with their first permanent home when he gave them the old monastery of the Trinity Friars in 1631, to be used as a meeting place and as a 'Hospital for poor and decayed tradesmen'. This first Trinity Hall was used until 1846 when the land was sold to accommodate the new railway. A second Trades' hospital was opened on Union Street, Aberdeen's new principal street, in 1847. Today the traditions of the Seven Incorporated Trades are upheld in a new Trinity Hall built in the 1960s.

In 1565 the wrights of Aberdeen complained to the 'ye provost, baillies, and counsell' of the town that they could 'skantlie get be thair labour thair necessary sustentation' because of 'unfremen that ar sufferit to labour and use ye exertionne of thair craft within yis burgh'. They ask that unfreemen should no longer be able to exercise the 'Wright Craft' in the burgh and that in consideration for the Aberdeen wrights' 'wyffs, bairns and familie', a guaranteed rate should be set for the 'expenss and stipend of thair labour'<sup>17</sup>. In 1691, to protect the wrights from unfreemen selling their goods at the weekly 'Timmer Market'<sup>18</sup> at the Market Cross, James Collinsone, Deacon of the Wrights and Coopers, is

granted the right to 'revise and take inspection of all timber work brought to the Mercatt Cross of Aberdeen to be sold, such as chairs, and all other work belonging to the said Trade by any unfreemen ilk mercatt day, and in all time coming after the date of thir presents, the said provost, bailiies and counsel being always judges therein, and to collect and ingather the said fines accordingly for the use of the town.'<sup>19</sup>

The Trades acted promptly to deal with George Bartlet the young upholsterer from London. On September 14<sup>th</sup> 1767, just three weeks after the first advert for his upholstery business appeared in the *Aberdeen Journal*, the minutes of the Incorporated Trades record that leave has been granted to prosecute him before the magistrate for setting up as an upholsterer 'without any manner or freedom thereto'. His case set a precedent and from then on all upholsterers had to become members of the Tailors' Trade'<sup>20</sup>.

The Incorporated Trades offered protection not only against 'unfreemen' infringing upon trading privileges, but also against attempts by journeymen to unite against their masters. In a statute of 1732 'Anent Combinations among Workmen' the Trade condemns 'the many and great abuses that have lately crept in amongst and prevailed with their journeymen and servants, and their entering into signed associations among themselves whereby they become bound to one another under a penalty not to continue in their master's service or to work after seven o'clock at night contrary to the usual practice...The Trade approve the acts made against meetings of servants and apprentices, fixing the hours from 6a.m. to 8p.m., and no master to employ journeymen who had been dismissed for breach of this ordinance.'<sup>21</sup>

By 1768, however, the journeymen wrights have become sufficiently organised to place this announcement in the *Aberdeen Journal*.

'The JOURNEYMEN WRIGHTS of Aberdeen give notice to the public, that considering the lowness of their wages, and the dearth of every article they need to buy, they cannot any longer work at the former wages; and that after the 10<sup>th</sup> of June curt, every man is to have his wage raised 2d. per day more than they now have; and as the masters have raised theirs a year ago it is but reasonable that the journeymen be raised likewise, so they hope the masters will take this as notification of the same.'

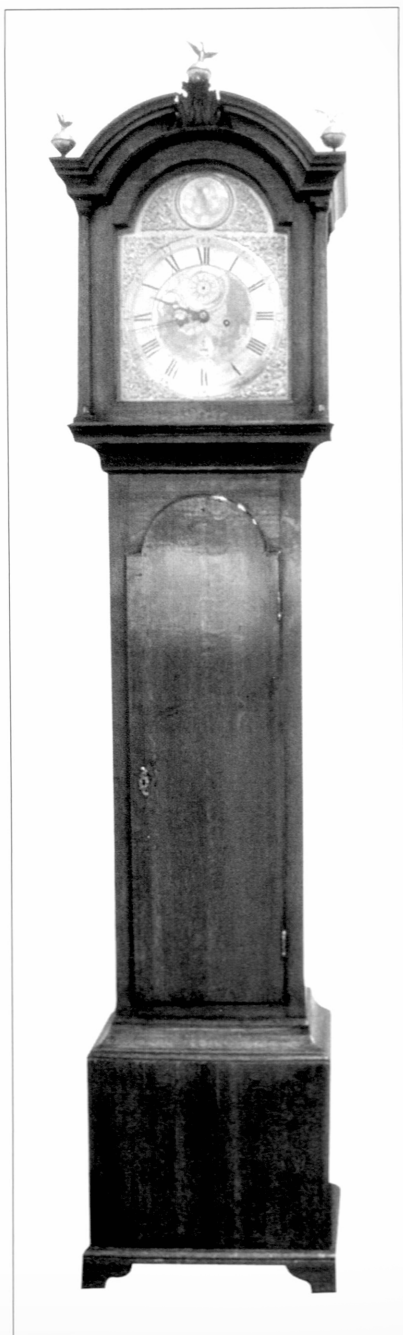
There are no references in the *Aberdeen Journal*, at least, to the kind of disputes between masters and journeymen described in Edinburgh and Dundee during the 1770s and 80s<sup>22</sup>. A notice in the *Journal* in January 1778, placed by the 'United Societies of Cabinet and Chairmakers in the City and Suburbs of London', may relate to this unrest indirectly. Their trade is 'overrun' with 'young and inexperienced persons' and the societies have resolved that no person shall be admitted as a member unless they can provide proof, in the form of their 'Indentures, or a Certificate from a Minister or magistrate', of having served 'the full term of seven years'.

In applications to join the Incorporated Trades, a distinction was made between an 'indweller' and an 'extranean'; an 'indweller' being the son, or son-in-law, of a previous member and an 'extranean' a craftsman with no previous connection to the Trade. Fees were adjusted accordingly. For indweller or extranean, the level of workmanship required for acceptance into the Wrights and Coopers was high. The following are from a new list of 'more vendible' essays prescribed for wrights in 1750<sup>23</sup>.

'A spring table, consisting of three folding leaves, every leaf folding above another; the first leaf, when folded over, is to answer a dining table; the second leaf to answer a



4. Elbow chair, c1760, wych elm, Town House, Old Aberdeen  
*Photograph courtesy David Jones*



5. Long case clock by Hugh Gordon, Aberdeen.  
The case has a typical acanthus leaf flourish in the centre of a broken pediment  
*Courtesy Aberdeen City Art Gallery*

quadvile or whist table; the third leaf to answer a backgammon table, the said three tops are to hang on a one pair of hinges; out of the body of the said table is to arise a writing-desk with nine drawers, and a book-frame on springs, the said frame to have eagle claw feet with a shell or flower on the knees of every foot, the said table is to have close banded and chequer feather bands.'

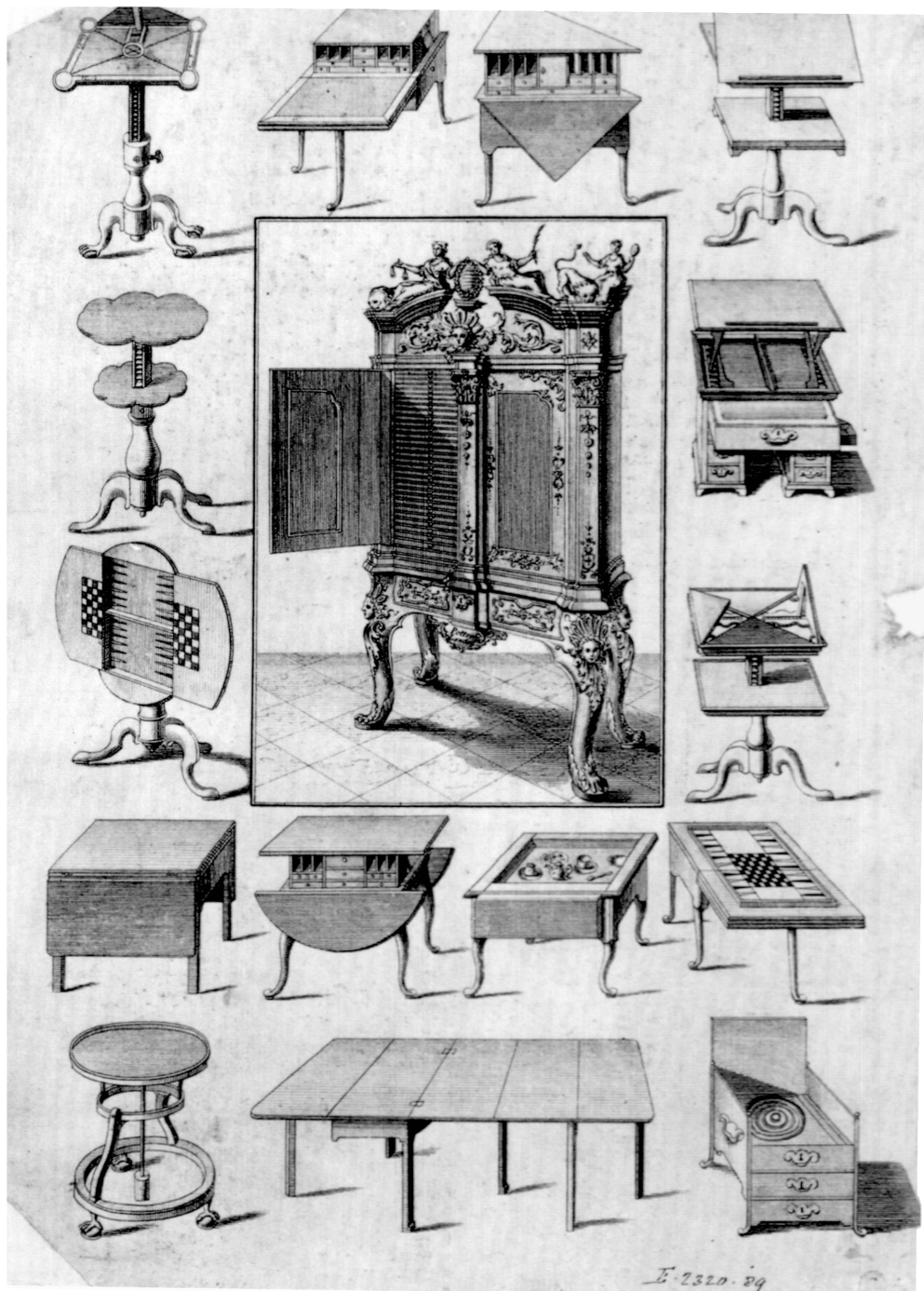
'A dining table, six feet long on the top, by five and a half feet in breadth, with two folding leaves, the said leaves to be hung without the help of any kind of metal hinges; the table to have claw feet, with a moving ball to answer instead of brass castors; the carriage of the table to be made to answer the top by an equal margin below when folded out or folded in, and round the top of the table the edge is to be a piece of carving commonly called the egg and anchor. The frame of the table is to be chequer feather banded of different kinds of wood.'

Cross banding and chequer feather banding are also prescribed for the top and twenty-four drawers of a library table. In comparison, the essays prescribed by the Glasgow Incorporation of Wrights at the end of the century seem somewhat less demanding.

'Formerly, in terms of a minute dated 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1792, it [the essay] was:- If a window, not less than two and one-half feet the broad, six lozens [panes of glass] and beeded. A bound shutter four feet high, and fourteen inches broad, beeded. A knife box, fifteen inches long at the top, and bevelled both ways, by ten inches, and not below four and one-half inches deep. A footstool sixteen inches square; and if a bound door, six feet high and two feet and one-half foot broad, not less than three panels. All to be made from rough wood in the Essay Room.'<sup>24</sup>

Although the essay masters had the power 'when considered necessary, of locking him [the applicant] into a stranger's workshop', the applicant could not be kept under constant supervision while at work, as the case of John Masson shows.<sup>25</sup> In March 1731 Masson is given the essay of 'a Buffett with a Shell Arch...with Pillars according to the Composite or Roman Order with a medallion Cornish and ane Ovall Table with ane Ovall Carriage rolling joynted'<sup>26</sup>. In October the luckless Masson is brought before the Masters and the Deacon, William Crystall, for giving the capitals to another wright to complete. Masson is ordered 'in repent of his Transgression to pay instantly to the Boxmaster for the use of the poor Three pounds Scots' and has to 'begin again of new the said two Capitalls'. A knowledge of classical architecture also featured in the essay requirements for wrights in Edinburgh. In his book on the architect William Adam, John Gifford states that after 1674 Edinburgh wrights were required to draw a column according to one of the classical orders, but that 'in most instances this knowledge of the classical orders was clearly intended only for application in furniture-making.'<sup>27</sup>

There are several examples of essay pieces being raffled or put up for auction in the *Aberdeen Journal* of the 1750s. These advertisements give the most detailed descriptions of furniture made in Aberdeen. In July 1753 'a MAHOGANY DESK & CABINET, being the Essay-piece of Alexander Middleton, House-carpenter & Cabinet Maker' is to be sold by auction. The advert continues that 'If the Purchaser inclines to furnish Glass-Pannels for the Cabinet, the Exposer obliges himself to put them in, gratis.' The glaziers belonged to the Hammermen Trade, which might explain why Middleton was not required to supply 'lozens' for his essay-piece. Robert Dallas's essay of a 'Mahogany CHEST of Drawers well completed and finished and adorned with very fine Chequering' is put up



6. Advertisement sheet, signed Potter, London, c1740, showing various 'spring tables with rising writing tables and multiple leaves  
 Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum, E2320-1889



for raffle in December 1754. James Clerihew's essay, a mahogany desk and cabinet 'of a new and curious Form' is to be auctioned at Trinity Hall in November 1755. An advert for a 'Curious TABLE' made as the essay piece of Joseph Forbes, 'Cabinet Maker and Joiner in the Netherkirkgate' and 'lately come from London' prompts an acrimonious exchange between Forbes and James Pirie, 'Wright in the Broadgate'. In a notice in the *Journal* on July 30<sup>th</sup> 1751, Forbes describes at length and in the most glowing terms his spring table, made of the best Mahogany', claiming

'It is the first Table of the Kind ever made in Scotland, and is approved of by the Judges to be the best of Work, of any they ever had access to see abroad or at home. It is equal in value to twenty pound ster. Which makes it not vendible; for which reason, it is to be exposed to sale by publick Raffle'.

On August 27<sup>th</sup> Pirie advertises his spring table also made as his essay, which is to be raffled 'at half a crown a chance' one week before Forbes'. His table is also made of the best mahogany and 'is reckoned by proper Judges to be equal, if not superior to any of the kind ever done in Scotland, and is valued at 12 l. ster.' Two weeks later, Joseph Forbes reminds subscribers of the date of his raffle, adding

'The Spring-table advertised Aug. 27, seems to have been done with an envious Design; but the best Judges who have seen both, acknowledge the former preferable by double the Difference to the latter, in all Respects, to those of a modish taste.'

In the next issue James Pirie has the last (printed) word.

'[He is] surprised to see... that his last Advertisement has given Offence, as he therein, neither took the smallest notice, nor made the least Insinuation of any other Workman, or his Performance, he cannot comprehend, how his advertising this Piece of work, should be done with an envidious [sic] Design (as he is pleased to express it) unless its being valued so low, has given Umbrage...had my Inclination for raising my own Character, or that of my Table, at the Expence of my Neighbours, been as strong as his seems to be, I had not refused to allow a great many Master-Wrights, (who ought to be the best Judges, and who actually were Judges of both at the Trades-hall) to sign this, or any other public Testimony to the contrary, allowing the Work of mine equal, and the Design preferable'.

Forbes and Pirie must have known one another, they took their oath and were admitted to the Wrights' and Coopers' Trade on the same day, so perhaps personal animosity as well as Forbes' 'inclination for raising his own character and that of his table' was a factor in their bad feeling. Forbes' entrepreneurial spirit is further revealed by an entry in the Minute Books of the Wrights and Coopers in 1751. Between submitting his Petition and paying his dues in October and having his essay accepted in April, he has married the daughter of a Freeman and asks to be admitted paying the same dues as a Freeman's son-in-law. Four pounds nine shillings Scots are refunded to Forbes and thereafter 'every Freeman entering in this Trade for the future, in the situation of the said Joseph Forbes shall be admitted on payment of the said dues.'<sup>29</sup>

Forbes' styling of himself as 'cabinet maker and joiner' and not the more traditional 'wright' may also be a symptom of his inclination to 'raise himself'. Early advertisements in the *Aberdeen Journal* show the term 'wright' still being used by the makers of fashionable furniture; in 1766 David Sheriffs makes chairs in the 'neatest and newest patterns' and describes himself as a 'wright'. James Clerihew arrives in 1755 a 'cabinet

maker from London' and dies in 1771 a 'wright in Aberdeen'. William Knowles retires from business in 1795 as a 'wright' selling off 'Cabinet Articles' such as 'Mahogany Desks and Commode Tables'. His shop is taken over by A. Kiloh, a 'wright' who has 'served in the first shops of London'. As it is improbable that Mr. Kiloh was making cartwheels for the 'best shops in London', the use of one term or the other to describe a furniture maker in Aberdeen at this time seems to be determined by fashion or tradition, rather than demarcation. Kiloh's is the last instance of the term 'wright' being used in this way in the *Aberdeen Journal's* advertisements, by 1795 'cabinet maker' is the preferred term. Perversely, Magnus Law calling himself a 'cabinet maker' advertises in 1774, 'all kinds of CABINET WORK', but also makes fishing rods and draws 'all Kinds of Plans and Elevations with curious Designs and Models of Buildings'. The extension of the wright's activities into what we would now term architecture has already been alluded to in Patrick Barron's work for the Town Council. More modest commissions are accepted by James Massie, Wright, who executes 'all kinds of cabinet work in the neatest manner and contracts with gentlemen for house building.'

The career of William Crystall (1697–1748) links several of the themes of this article. As a successful wright in the first half of the century he worked on public and private commissions that demanded the skills of an architect as well as those of a craftsman in wood. It is an indication of his standing in the community that, unusually, his death was announced in the *Aberdeen Journal*. The announcement, on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1748, refers to his achievements and the regard in which he was held in the city.

'On Thursday last, died here after a tedious Illness, WILLIAM CHRYSTAL, Wright, late Conveener of Trades; he was famed for his knowledge of Architecture, and had a Head for Contriving, as well as a Hand for Executing, superior to any in this Country; at the same time he was endowed with all the Social Virtues, which makes his Death justly lamented by all who had the Pleasure of his Acquaintance.'

He was one of a family of wood workers; his father, Alexander, was a member of the Wrights and Coopers, as was his brother John. Alexander also seems to have been a well-known figure. On his death in 1754, aged eighty-five, the *Aberdeen Journal* regrets the loss of a maker of musical instruments 'well known for his ingenious performances and whose death was 'regretted by all Lovers of Harmony'. William Crystall's upward progress is recorded in the Wrights' and Coopers' Minute Books; he starts well with an apprenticeship to Patrick Gray, then Deacon Convener, in 1715; his essay is 'found sufficient' in 1719 and in 1720 he takes the oath to the Trade. He becomes Deacon of the Wrights and Coopers and like his master is elected Deacon Convener in 1730/1731. At this time the first of the Town Council's improvements to the Tolbooth are being made and Crystall provides the panelling in the principal room. In 1739 the civic responsibility that expressed itself in the new streets and the Police Commissioners Act later in the century, led the Town Council to commission the building of an infirmary. William Crystall is sent to inspect the Edinburgh Infirmary and the Glasgow Town's Hospital (more workhouse than hospital) before drawing up the plans for Aberdeen's own institution<sup>29</sup>. Crystall's building was demolished in the 1830s.

A commission to design and build a loft in the Mither Kirk of St. Nicholas for the Society of Advocates in Aberdeen illustrates his familiarity with classical design and, unfortunately for Crystall, the problems that can be encountered in satisfying the client

and receiving payment. The following extracts come from a petition Crystall presented to the advocates in 1733 to recoup the extra costs resulting from alterations to the original design<sup>30</sup>. The loft, as first commissioned in 1721, was to be 'after the forme of the Corinthian Order, With such Pillars and other ornaments, ane of Wainscot and other Particular Wood, And to be made out in such a frame and order, as was then appointed and put in writing With a Recommendation to spare no Cost nor pains in Beautifying this Loft.....In Persuance of this I began the said Work and wrought with my own hand the Whole Carving and continued at the said work with three servants and sometimes more for upwards of a year.'

However, for a proper display of piety, a little more ostentation was required; 'in stead of two plain Pilasters to support the back of the Loft, There should be two Pillars of the same carved work and order with those supporting the breast....That in stead of the Statue of Justice in the middle of the breast of the Loft there should be likewise the Statue of Fortitude, as now placed with other Necessary Ornaments...That in stead of Plain Pannell work in the breast It should be inriched with Carved Pannells several Narrow Pillaster pannells And all Angle Joynted'.

Thrifty as well as pious, the advocates agreed to give Crystall Ten Pounds Sterling more, but he had to provide 'a handsome Charter Chist or Box for holding the Writes belonging to the faculty, And for which Chist or Box, Mr. Crystall is to make no demand'<sup>31</sup>.

Evidence of Crystall's private commissions exists in the archives of the Burnett family of Kemnay House, in accounts presented for furniture in the 1730s and early 40s. An account dated May 12<sup>th</sup> 1732 is for 'an Coffin for your Aunt, being Enamled green'. In 1734 his account, part of which was paid in loads of meal, includes 'an large Chist of Wainscott...3 large Sash windows...an large Naprie press'. He supplies 'ane Lairge Mahogonie dinning Table' and 'a Mahogonie pillar Table' in 1741 and his last account to George Burnett in 1742 is for '3 nine foot dales for a dressing Table', the workmanship and glue for said table and two days' work of one man polishing chairs<sup>32</sup>. The accounts survive in the Kemnay muniments, but it has not been possible to positively identify the pieces mentioned in them. Regrettably, Aunt Rachel's coffin remains the only piece of Crystall's work whose whereabouts is certain.

In February 1748, when he was already suffering from the 'tedious illness' referred to in the *Aberdeen Journal*, William Crystall drew up his will. He declares himself to be 'presently diseased in body, but sound and perfect in mind, memory and judgement' and gives instructions for most of his household goods to be auctioned off after his death. The inventory of the roup suggests a comfortable home; '4 Walnut chairs', 'Chimney glass and branches', 'a month Clock', '22 Pictures Dble framed', 'a Landskip', 'Dozen China cups and saucers' 'Crystal Decanter'. Most revealing is his collection of books which includes works on painting, gardening, history, poetry and the volumes one might expect to find in the possession of a fashionable and successful wright at the time; Palladio, Vitruvius and Euclid. A work by William Halfpenny described on the inventory as 'Wm. Halfpenny's *Architecture*' supports the idea that Crystal was not merely a provincial wright, but a craftsman who sought to familiarise himself with current thinking on design. *The Foreigner's Guide thro London* and a map of the city suggest that he had first-hand experience of metropolitan taste. The inventory also contains several scientific

instruments 'a Prospect' [a prospect-glass or field telescope?], 'a Telescope', 'a Microscope', 'Cambara obscura' and 'a Cane with a Telescope'. As might be expected, the auction attracted some note-worthy buyers; Provost Aberdein<sup>33</sup> and Dr. Gordon<sup>34</sup> and two of the city's best known craftsmen, then just at the beginning of their careers, Hugh Gordon the clockmaker and Coline Allan the goldsmith. Crystall's fellow wrights make up the majority; Patrick Barron buys the Vitruvius and the Halfpenny, *The builder's Chist book* and *Theory and Practice of Architecture*, 'a Drawing board and Square', 'a big Ogee' and several other tools, as well as quantities of 'beach Clapboard', 'Gothenburg dales' and 'oak ends'. John Taylor, who is mentioned as a cabinet maker in 1748, buys *Fineers for Clocks*, from which we can reasonably assume that both Crystall and Taylor made clock-cases. Perhaps the attendance at the auction of Hugh Gordon and fellow clockmaker John Mearns indicates a professional connection. James Pirie, surely the same man who duelled with Joseph Forbes, and who witnessed the will as Crystall's 'servant', buys one of the volumes of Palladio, 'a parcel old plains' and some 'mortice irons'.

The case of William Crystall, the professional standards of the Wrights and Coopers and the advertisements found in the *Aberdeen Journal* (allowing for hyperbole) show that, though geographically remote, furniture makers in eighteenth century Aberdeen were not remote from fashionable ideas, nor were they dependant upon Edinburgh for ideas of 'present taste'. Had Aberdeen been merely a northern economic backwater this might have been the case, but eighteenth century Aberdeen had the economic confidence of a busy port with a rich agricultural hinterland and an unrivalled position as the 'metropolis of the northern division of Scotland'<sup>35</sup>. There was clearly a market for fashionable furniture among Aberdeen's prosperous citizens, but the regional characteristics that would have made that furniture 'Aberdeen furniture' have yet to be established. The Editorial to the 2002 *Journal* includes this observation: 'Defining the furniture of such a diverse country [Scotland] is a greater task than the novice scholar might imagine.' In the case of Aberdeen the task is made all the greater by the scarcity of pieces identifiable as being by Aberdeen makers, a situation commented on Godfrey Evans in *Polite Society in Aberdeen in the eighteenth Century*.<sup>36</sup> Research is continuing to survey inventories and household accounts in which the clues may be found and the connections made that will allow more Aberdeen-made furniture to be identified.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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3. For an account of Fendour's work in Aberdeen see Sallyanne Simpson, *The Choir Stalls and Rood Screen in King's College Chapel, Aberdeen 1500-2000* Jane Geddes ed. Northern Universities Press, 2000
4. Godfrey Evans, *Polite Society in Aberdeen in the Eighteenth Century*: textual record of the exhibition held in James Dun's House, 61 Schoolhill, Aberdeen, July 5<sup>th</sup>-September 13<sup>th</sup> 1980, Aberdeen Art Gallery and

Museums, 1980

5. Samuel Johnson, p.42

6. James Macaulay, *The Growth of a New Town in Aberdeen Before 1800: a New History* E. Patricia Dennison, David Ditchburn and Michael Lynch eds. Tuckwell Press, 2002, p.409

7. Aberdeen Town Council Minutes, 4.8.1722 (Aberdeen City Archives)

8. Ibid. 17.8.1741

9. Samuel Johnson, p.42

10. W.A. Brogden, *The Bridge/street in Scottish Urban Planning in The Neo-Classical Town: Scottish Contributions to Urban Design since 1750* W.A Brogden ed. Edinburgh, 1996, p.49

11. *Aberdeen Journal*, 20.2.1775

12. Ibid. 2.1.1775

13. Aberdeen Town Council Minutes, 3.10.1751 (Aberdeen City Archives) A watercolour of the Great Room by A.D. Longmuir, painted just before its demolition in 1871, is held in the city archives. It shows Mosman's landscape hanging above the fireplace with the frame incorporated into the overall scheme of the panelling. The painting now hangs in Aberdeen Art Gallery, apparently in its original frame (see figure 1).

14. John Stabler, 'English Newspaper Advertisements as a Source of Furniture History', *Regional Furniture*, vol. V, 1991, pp.93-102

15. Donald W. Nichol, 'Aberdeen Imprints and the ESTC' in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock eds. Aberdeen University Press, 1987, p.312. A single edition of the *Aberdeen Chronicle* appeared in 1787. No more seem to have been published until 1806. J. Ferguson, *Directory of Scottish Newspapers*, National Library of Scotland, 1984

16. Sebastian Pryke, 'A Study of the Edinburgh Furnishing Trade taken from Contemporary Press Notices, 1708-1790' *Regional Furniture*, 1989, p.54. One of the London makers mentioned by Pryke, John Williamson, advertises a sale of looking-glasses in Marischal College in the *Aberdeen Journal* of 13.10.1777.

17. Ebenezer Bain, *Merchant & Craft Guilds - A History of the Aberdeen Incorporated Trades*, Aberdeen, 1887, p.260

18. The 'Timmer' or Timber Market is believed to have dated back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-eighteenth century it had become an annual rather than a weekly event. (*Press & Journal*, 25.8.1982) In 1911 the *Daily Journal* reports that 'A real Timmer Market would be as great a novelty in Aberdeen as a reindeer on the Gold Coast.' (*Daily Journal*, 30.8.1911)

19. Ebenezer Bain, p.241

20. Ibid. p. 243

21. Ibid. p.246

22. Sebastian Pryke, 'A Study of the Edinburgh Furnishing Trade taken from Contemporary Press Notices, 1708-1790', *Regional Furniture*, 1989, p.61

23. Minute Books of the Aberdeen Incorporation of Wrights & Coopers, 14.5.1750

24. James C. Erskine & Sons, *Historical Memoranda Connected with the Incorporation of Wrights in Glasgow*, Glasgow, 1890, p.19

25. Minute Books of the Aberdeen Incorporation of Wrights & Coopers, 11.10.1731

26. Masson's essay piece follows closely David Jones's description of the fixed presses or buffets that struck 'a note of domestic theatre' in the dining-rooms of west of Scotland. See David Jones, 'Introduction to the Glasgow Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Work', *Regional Furniture*, 2002, p.1

27. John Gifford, *William Adam 1689-1748*, Edinburgh, 1989, p. 44

28. Minute Books of the Aberdeen Incorporation of Wrights & Coopers, 30.4.1751

29. Iain D. Levack & H.A.F. Dudley eds., *Aberdeen Royal Infirmary*, London, 1992

30. Aberdeen City Archives, Acc. 528 Box F1/9/1

31. Aberdeen City Archives, Acc. 528 Box F1/9/1

32. I am indebted to Madam Susan Burnett of Kemnay for access to these accounts.

33. Alexander Aberdein, Provost of Aberdeen 1742-1744. Provost Aberdein was one of the 'curators' appointed by Crystall in his will to advise his daughters in their minority.

34. Probably Dr. James Gordon of Straloch and Pitlurg, Professor of Medicine at Marischal College, whom Crystall would have known from their involvement in the new Infirmary. Dr. Gordon was appointed its first physician and surgeon.

35. *The First (Old) Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol XIX (1791-1799), p.140

36. Godfrey Evans, *Polite Society in Aberdeen in the eighteenth Century*: a textual record of the exhibition held in James Dun's House, 61 Schoolhill, Aberdeen, July 5<sup>th</sup>– September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1980 (Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums, 1980) p.5

## APPENDIX

The following are the furniture makers mentioned in the Aberdeen Journal from 1748 – 1800. Wrights have only been recorded where there is reference to new-made furniture.

- Anderson, James, Wright, 18.9.1786  
 Baillie, John, Cabinet Maker & Upholsterer (from London) in Elgin, 21.3.1774  
 Barron, Patrick, Wright, 25.5.1756 Deacon Convener 1738/39  
 Bartlet (Bartlett), George, Upholsterer (from London), 24.8.1767 Vennel Close, Gallwogate 25.4.1768 George Christie's House, Broadgate, at the Bed & Sopha 22.2.1779, 31.5.1784, 4.6.1792, 12.4.1796, 1.5.1798, 13.5.1799  
 Bishop, James, Carver & gilder, Longacre 26.9.1797  
 Bourk, Patrick, Upholsterer (from Dublin) 18.1.1773  
 Chree, John, Japanner, Netherkirkgate 7.4.1794  
 Clerihew, James, Cabinet Maker (from London), 25.11.1755, Guestrow 2.12.1755, 2.12.71 (notice to deceased's creditors)  
 Cooper, John jnr., Cabinet Maker & Joiner, Burnet's Close, Shiprow, 17.6.1755, 28.3.1774, 28.11.1775, 24.6.1776  
 Crystall (Christall, Chrystall) John, Wright, 20.3.53, Gallowgate, 20.1.1756, 14.12.1756  
 Crystall (Christall/Chrystall), William, Wright, 5.7.1748 (death announcement), 19.5.1748 (notice of auction) Deacon Convener 1730/31  
 Dallas, Robert, Wright, 17.12.1754  
 Dallaway, P., Japanner & Drawing Master, Longacre 7.11.1791, 22.12.1791  
 Dott, Thomas, Cabinet Maker in Banff, 3.1.1798 (death announcement)  
 Duffus, Alexander, Wright in Cullen, 18.8.1777  
 Elliot, John, Carver, James Smith's House, Netherkirkgate Port, 19.2.70  
 Farquharson, Henry, Carver & Gilder, 2 Prince's Street, Edinburgh 4.10.1796  
 Forbes, Joseph, Cabinet Maker & Joiner (from London), Netherkirkgate, 30.7.1751, 3.9.1751, 29.4.1762  
 Grant, Robert, Japanner, Tea Tray and Clock Dial Manufacturer, Longacre 21.11.1797, 26.11.1798  
 Green, William, Wright, Marischal College Close, 26.4.1757  
 Houison & Bishop, Carvers & Gilders, Longacre 30.8.1796, partnership dissolved 26.9.1797  
 Kiloh, A., Cabinet Maker, Virginia Street (Wm. Knowles' shop) 7.10.1795, 8.5.1798  
 Knowles, William, Wright, 25.4.68, 25.11.1782, Virginia Street 6.6.1791, 17.3.1795  
 Law, Magnus, Cabinet Maker, Upperkirkgate, 14.3.1774, 10.4.1775, 20.5.1776, 14.6.1784  
 Littlejohn, William, Cabinet Maker & House Carpenter, College Close, Broadgate, 21.6.1757, 25.12.1759, 19.6.1780, 18.3.1790, 4.10.1790, 5.12.1791, 1.10.1792, 30.9.1793, 30.9.1795, 4.10.1796  
 Lyon, James, Upholsterer, Mr. Massie's House, Netherkirkgate 22.5.1787, Queen Street 20.6.1791  
 Lunan, Thomas, Wright, Old Meldrum, 19.5.1760  
 Massie, James, Wright, 24.11.1788 (James Anderson advertises roup of looking-glasses at Massie's ware-room 18.9.1786)  
 McGie, George, Upholsterer, Broadgate 3.6.1776, 14.4.1777  
 Middleton, Alexander, House Carpenter & Cabinet Maker, 31.7.1753  
 Milne, Walter, Cabinet Maker & Wood Merchant, Fochabers (previously Portsoy), 26.5.1760 (death announcement)  
 Morison, Alexander, Wright, 24.5.1762. Probably the Alexander Morison, wright, who had the distinction of being the last man executed at the Gallowhills in Aberdeen on 6.11.1776. He was executed and hung in chains for the murder of his wife. James H. Wilson, *Bon Accord Repository* (Aberdeen, 1842)  
 Mortimer, Alexander, Upholsterer, Broadgate, 27.5.1758, 29.1.1770  
 Munro, James, Cabinet Maker in Inverness, 21.10.1799 (marriage announcement)  
 Oughton, George, Cabinet Maker in Banff, 19.4.1784, 7.6.1784

- Piper, Alexander, Wright & Cabinet Maker in Banff, 18.7.1797 (notice to deceased's creditors)
- Pirie, James, Wright, Broadgate, 27.8.51 10.9.1751, 5.12.1174, 2.1.1775, 20.3.1780
- Rae, George, Upholsterer (from Edinburgh), Deacon Green's House, Provost Cruikshank's Close, Broadgate 10.6.1755, Capt. Spark's Forehouse, Shiprow 15.6.1756, Patrick Barron's House, Shore Brae 16.6.1758.
- Reid, David, Joiner & Cabinet Maker, Gallowgate, 14.6.1784
- Reid, James, Cabinet Maker & Joiner in Banff, 26.4.1784, 20.6.1785
- Robertson, William, House Joiner, Cabinet Maker & Chair Maker (from London), Castlegate 29.5.1769, 1.6.1772, Gallowgate 14.6.1773, Mr. Dyce's House, Castle Street 19.6.1775
- Rose, Alexander, Cabinet Maker in Ellon, 10.4.1759, 31.5.1760, 5.6.1769, 18.4.1774
- Scott, Alexander, Upholsterer, Mr. Farquharson's House, Broadgate 24.5.1784, 25.5.1785, 3.4.1786, Back of the Narrow Wynd 29.5.1787, 20.5.1788, 4.5.1789, 18.3.1790, 18.4.1791, 20.8.1792, 8.6.1793, 14.6.1796, 23.8.1796, 23.5.1797, 22.5.1798, 17.6.1799, 11.11.1799
- Sheriffs (Shireffs), David, Wright, Gallowgate, 20.11.1759, 30.5.1763, 2.6.1766, 20.6.1768, 15.5.1769, 2.5.1774, 1.5.1775, 13.5.1776, 16.6.1777, 6.6.1778, 26.10.1778, 27.9.1779, 29.5.1780, 21.5.1781, 13.5.1782, 23.2.1784 (notice to deceased's creditors) Deacon Convener 1777/78
- Simpson, John, Wright, opposite the north end of the Fleshmarket 25.4.1774, 20.2.1775
- Smith, John, Cabinet maker, Broadgate, 23.9.1776 (Piece to be raffled by the widow of John Taylor can be seen at his premises)
- Spring, Robert, Taylor (Upholsterer)
- Stevenson, James, Picture Frame Gilder (from Edinburgh) 30.7.1754
- Stewart, James, Cabinet Maker, 30.8.1757
- Strachan, James, Wright, Cabinet Maker & Chair Maker, the Green 27.4.1767, 17.4.1775, 26.5.1777, 31.5.1779, 22.5.1780
- Strachan, John & Co., Upholsterer, Netherkirkgate (James Lyon's shop) 16.5.1791, 19.3.1792, 4.6.1792, 24.6.1793, 12.5.1795, 2.8.1796, 13.9.1796
- Taylor, John, Cabinet Maker, 5.12.1748, Robert Burnett's Close, Exchequer Row 20.1.1756, 14.12.1756, Adam Scott's House, Castlegate 19.6.1759, (Piece to be raffled by his widow 23.9.1776)
- Watt, Elizabeth, Japanner & Gilder, Gallowgate 27.10.1788, 22.6.1789
- Williamson, John, Looking-glass Manufacturer, London 13.10.1777 (holds sale at Marischal College)
- Young & Trotter, Upholsterer, the Pelican, Luckenbooths, Edinburgh, 5.6.1750