

New Light on Fish and Verlander

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In 1978 Robert Williams reported a walnut bureau signed by Peter Fish of Hopton, Suffolk, dated 1749, and he later reported a similar bureau by the same maker, which appeared in a Christie's sale, dated 1744 (Figure 1).¹ The present article concerns a third such bureau which has recently come to light (Figures 2 and 3).

The bureau is only 29 inches wide, compared with the Christie's bureau which measured 37 inches. The drawer handles are small, with backplates 3 inches wide. These factors might suggest that it was made for a lady. It is made of solid walnut throughout with veneered surfaces on the front. The only exceptions to the walnut construction are the back, the dustboards and front rails, and the sides of two thin drawers fronted by pilasters on either side of the central cupboard in the interior, which are deal. The right side of the left pilaster-fronted drawer carries the pencilled inscription 'Mr Verlander. Peter Fish Maker Hopton April the 6th 1744.' (Figure 4). The other side of the drawer is labelled 'Left', while the other drawer is labelled 'Right'. The interior is stepped and includes arched pigeon-holes, a secret drawer and a well with a sliding cover. The construction is of a high standard, with finely-cut dovetails, though the veneers are of fairly basic quality.



1 Bureau made by Peter Fish, dated 1744. *Christie's*

¹ Williams (1978) and (1993); also recorded in Beard and Gilbert (1986), p. 301; Christies (1980).



2 Walnut bureau signed by Peter Fish and dated 1744.
Private collection; photo Keith Osborn

The carcass conforms to Bowett's first-phase construction with nominal $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch sides, front rails and dustboards, with no reduction in thickness behind the front rail.² The dustboards are butt-jointed to the front rails which are 2 inches deep. The foremost 7 inches of the undersurface of the dustboards have a curious chamfering at their sides where they slot into the sides of the carcass. The drawers conform to Bowett's second-phase construction with lapped dovetails and lip-moulded fronts.³ The drawer bottoms are nailed up to the sides with runners planted on.

² Bowett (2002) pp. 49, 51.

³ Bowett (2009) pp. 64–66.



3 Interior of the bureau.
Private collection; photo Keith Osborn



4 Pencilled inscription on the side of a drawer.
Private collection; photo the author



5 Fish's initials stamped on
one of the lopers.
*Private collection;
photo the author*

The drawer-fronts, fall front, top and frieze are embellished with a band of feathered inlay inset from the edge, with no cross-banding. The drawer handles, back plates and key escutcheons are brass with traces of gilding. The loop handles are fixed by iron split pins whose free ends are flattened against the back of the drawer-front. The left-hand loper for supporting the fall front is impressed 'PF' (Figure 5). The strengthening blocks of the feet of the Christie's bureau were similarly impressed, and the lettering is identical. The right-hand loper is a mahogany replacement and the escutcheon on the fall-front is not original.

The Christie's bureau bore a pencilled inscription on the underside of a drawer. As recorded by Christie's the inscription read 'Maker Peter Fish for Mrs. Verlander, Hopton, Suffolk, Decbr. 15th 1744'. In view of subsequent research it is likely that 'Mrs' was a misreading for 'Mr', the upward curl to the end of the letter 'r' being mistaken for an 's'. Unfortunately, although we know that the bureau went to the United States, there is no record of the purchaser.

The first bureau reported by Williams was inscribed in the same position as the one recorded here, on the side of a thin drawer fronted by a pilaster in the interior. The inscription read 'Made by Peter Fish, Hopton, Suffolk, January 10th 1749'. Hopton is a small village close to the Norfolk/Suffolk border, 8 miles east of Thetford. On the face of it, it is surprising that a cabinet-maker producing work of this quality was based in such a small rural outpost. We have no record of his apprenticeship. His marriage to Mary Stevens is recorded in the Hopton Parish Register on 1 November 1748 and the baptisms of two sons, Peter and Samuel, are recorded in 1750 and 1755.⁴ At some time he moved 2½ miles over the border into Norfolk to the village of Garboldisham. His will, dated 19th June 1788, was proved on 13 August of that year.⁵

One would assume on the basis of the inscriptions that Mr Verlander was the customer, but in fact he was Simon Verlander, a master joiner. His admission to the freedom of Colchester is recorded as follows:

*Oct. 18, 1731. Simon Verlander, of Colchester, joiner, son of Simon Verlander, of Colchester, baymaker, no children, 10s 4d.*⁶

The Verlanders were a family of Dutch immigrant baize-makers or baymakers, many of whom are recorded as being admitted to the freedom of Colchester.⁷ Baymaking was a major industry in Colchester and was dominated by the Dutch immigrant community.⁸ However the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), among other factors, led to a recession in the trade in the early years of the 18th century and Simon senior, like many other baymakers, went bankrupt in 1721.⁹ He found other trades for his two sons, Simon junior the joiner, and John, who became a silversmith in London.¹⁰

No details of Simon junior's apprenticeship have come to light, but we know that he settled in Colchester because in Tymperley's Clock Museum, Colchester, there is an

⁴ Suffolk Record Office, *Hopton Parish Register*.

⁵ Suffolk Record Office, *Wills 1739*.

⁶ Benham (1907), p. 254.

⁷ Essex Record Office, *Admissions of Free Burgesses 1620–1741*.

⁸ Cooper and Elrington (1994), pp. 76–87.

⁹ *London Gazette*, 12th June 1722, p. 5.

¹⁰ Grimwade (1990), p. 688.



6 (left) Japanned corner cupboard by Simon Verlander.
Tymperley's Clock Museum, Colchester;
photo Tony Nichols

7 (above) The japanner's inscription on the back of the corner cupboard.
Tymperley's Clock Museum, Colchester;
photo Tony Nichols

oak corner cupboard with a japanned serpentine front (Figure 6) which carries an inscription on the back in black paint or shellac which reads: 'For Simon Verlander att Colchester' (Figure 7).¹¹ Presumably the inscription was applied by the japanner who may have had work from various joiners and cabinet-makers in his workshop and used this method of identifying his clients.

By the 1740s Verlander had moved to Hopton. At the back of the Parish Register there is an inverted inscription reading 'Birth of Dissenters Children Signified', listing Joseph and Samuel, sons of Simon and Ann Verlander of Colchester, born 11 August 1733 and 30 August 1737 respectively, dated 25 November 1742.¹² This type of entry was a common device by dissenters to avoid being penalized under the Test and Corporation Acts, and did not imply conversion to the Anglican faith.

It appears then that Simon Verlander, far from being a customer, was the master joiner, or cabinet-maker, employing Simon Fish as a journeyman or as an independent sub-contractor, making bureaux. Fish is a rather uncommon surname and it is interesting that it is known to have been adopted by a number of Dutch immigrants with the name Vitse or Fitse. Various Vitses appears as witnesses to the baptism of all eight

¹¹ Beard and Gilbert (1986), p. 921. The entry omits the word 'for' from the inscription.

¹² Suffolk Record Office, *Hopton Parish Register*.

children of Simon's grandfather, Jacob Verlander (another baymaker), so it is likely that they were relatives of his grandmother, Jacob's wife Maria.¹³ It is possible, therefore, that Peter Fish was related to the Verlanders. However Fishes were resident in Hopton before the Verlanders' arrival, as Williams has pointed out that the Parish records include the baptism of a Joseph, son of Joseph and Jane Fish, in 1728.¹⁴ The possibility of a relationship remains, nevertheless, an intriguing hypothesis.

The question arises as to why Verlander should have moved to this small village from Colchester. The likely answer appears in the form of the local landowner, John Buxton (1717–82) of Shadwell Lodge, five miles from Hopton, sometime Deputy Lieutenant of Suffolk.¹⁵ In 1745 Buxton commissioned Verlander to go to Manchester and report on the incursion of Charles Stewart, the Young Pretender, and his supporters. This resulted in a fascinating six-page letter from Verlander to Buxton, now in Cambridge University Library, in which he describes the motley crew of insurgents: 'The Majority of them made a very Shabby Appearance, many of the Horse Men having Halters instead of Bridles; Pads Stuffed with Straw, & ropes for Stirrups'.¹⁶ The letter ends with a rather obsequious request for Buxton's favour in Verlander's application to the Commissioner of the Excise Board for a post as exciseman.

Clearly Verlander was taken under Buxton's wing, and it seems likely that the relationship started with Buxton commissioning him to provide furniture for Shadwell Lodge, which Buxton's father had built between 1725 and 1730, before his death in 1731.¹⁷ It may be that Buxton visited Verlander's workshop in Colchester and suggested the move to Hopton. The fact that Buxton subsequently commissioned him to report on the '45 rebellion and then helped him to gain employment as an exciseman indicates that the relationship went further than that of cabinet-maker and client.

In his new role as exciseman Verlander moved to a substantial house on the High Street in Amersham, Buckinghamshire, where there was an established Dutch Reformed Church community. The house had associated buildings, yards and gardens and a meadow called Wielden Plot.¹⁸ He was evidently successful in his new occupation and in 1758 gave evidence to a House of Commons committee appointed to enquire into weights and measures standards.¹⁹

Verlander retained property in Colchester, and as a freeholder was entitled to vote there. His name is registered in the Colchester Poll Book for 1768. He appears in the Parliamentary Register for 1780 in a list of Collectors of Excise on a stipend of £120 a year among 'Officers employed in the Country on London Establishment'.²⁰ When he died in 1784, at the age of about 78, he was buried in the family vault at Bunhill Fields, the non-conformist cemetery in East Finsbury, London, where his sons and wife were already buried. His will included legacies of £890, mostly to relatives.²¹

¹³ www.at16home.demon.nl/COLCHESTER.htm.

¹⁴ Williams (1978).

¹⁵ Mackley (2005); also at www.lib.cam.ac.uk/MSS/Buxton/family.htm.

¹⁶ Cambridge University Library, *Calendar of Buxton Letters*, p. 80.

¹⁷ Mackley (2005), pp. 25–29.

¹⁸ Personal communication from Tony Reeve, Honorary Secretary of The Verlander Society.

¹⁹ Carysfort Report (1759), p. 16.

²⁰ Parliamentary Register (1780), col. 539.

²¹ National Archives, Prob 11/1116.

The story which has emerged from research into the bureau is of interest, firstly in demonstrating how the information contained in inscriptions on furniture is not always what it appears to be, and secondly in showing how an eighteenth-century joiner's career could deviate from the norm.

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