

An Introduction to the 1801 *Cabinet & Chair Makers' Norwich Book of Prices*

ROBERT WILLIAMS

I

Norwich at the beginning of the eighteenth century was the largest provincial town in England and was also an inland port, connected to Yarmouth by the river Yare. By 1801, when the second edition of the *Cabinet & Chair Makers' Norwich Book of Prices* was published, it had fallen behind as the focus of economic growth had shifted to the new and developing centres in the North and Midlands. Without the mineral resources and water power that many of these centres possessed Norwich had slipped to ninth place and was now behind the main manufacturing centres and ports, which in order of size were, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Sheffield, Plymouth and Newcastle/Gateshead.¹

Norwich's prosperity had been based on weaving of worsted fabric, which had developed into a wide range of quality fabrics in bright colours, and by the middle of the eighteenth century perhaps up to half of the population was employed in cloth production. As machine made cottons captured the home market and with the advent of machine spun yarn from the north of England, the cottage industry of hand spinning on which Norwich relied went into a slow decline. The manufacturers became increasingly dependent on their export trade which suffered particularly during the wars against France of 1793–1815. By 1801 Norwich was still primarily an industrial town but the weaving trade was soon to be surpassed by leather making, brewing and agricultural products as well as banking and the beginnings of the insurance business. So from a major town principally concerned with processing the raw material of wool, Norwich became the provincial capital in the centre of a rich cereal growing and cattle rearing area.

The *Dictionary of Norfolk Furniture Makers* shows that Norwich was a large furniture making centre that was able to cater for all classes of society in the town and countryside, producing all the new and up to date London fashions. Furniture makers starting in business often advertised their London experience, as did the chair-maker Richard Peete in 1753, 'having experience in several of the best Shops in London'.² As a regional centre which could offer the expertise in furniture making that would attract and hold skilled workmen, and as an alternative to London for a high standard of apprenticeship, Norwich must have had an influence on the other furniture making towns of East Anglia. The fifteen-year old Elliot Smith from the Cambridge family of furniture makers was apprenticed for five years to the Norwich cabinet-maker Thomas Smith in 1797 for a premium of £70.³ Samuel York, from another Cambridge family of furniture makers, advertised in the *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* of 21 October

¹ Cornfield (2004), p. 158.

² Stabler (2006), p. 194.

³ Stabler (2006), p. 214.

1831, that he had ‘... considerable experience during his seven years servitude in the Upholstery connected with the Cabinet Business in one of the first houses in Norwich, beside the general knowledge he has since gained from many of the first-rate Houses in London’. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the furniture makers of Norwich decided to publish a price book, they modelled it on the *Cabinet-Makers’ London Book of Prices* whose second edition was published in 1793.⁴

Before the arrival of the 1801 Price Book there is scant information on furniture making by piece work in Norwich, but it appears that it was already happening elsewhere in East Anglia. In the *Norfolk Chronicle* of 8 September 1792, the cabinet-maker James Lesley of Wells wanted ‘... a Cabinet Maker, and a Chair Maker The same price will be paid as in London by the journeyman cabinet maker’s price-book, and the expense of carriage of tools will be allowed’.⁵ On 31 January 1789, the year following the first publication of the London book, the cabinet-maker Francis Miles of Woodbridge in Suffolk advertised in the *Ipswich Journal* for a journeyman cabinet and chair-maker, stating: ‘any one that is a good hand, and has tools, may have constant employ, good work, and the London prices’.⁶ The Ipswich cabinet and chair-maker R. Smith also advertised in the *Ipswich Journal* of 1 January 1792 for six cabinet-makers, saying that ‘The London Book-price will be given’.

That East Anglian furniture makers were willing to pay London prices is a little surprising, because the London rates must have been higher than the local ones. Perhaps there was a severe shortage of journeymen or perhaps they were hoping to attract journeymen with experience of working in London, who may well have been paid a premium for their knowledge. The introduction to the Norwich book states that ‘common work’ was 30 per cent under the London prices, and the best work ‘altogether in proportion’. This reduction on London labour rates was general throughout the country. From Louth in the neighbouring county of Lincolnshire the *Stamford Mercury* of 25 March 1814 records an offer to pay journeymen London prices less 2s 6d in the pound, or 12½ per cent. As Bowett has shown, the higher transport costs for imported timber and other materials put many regional makers at a disadvantage to London,⁷ so this difference in the journeymen’s wages was the one factor that gave the furniture makers the opportunity to claim their products were ‘as cheap as in London’.

The 1801 *Cabinet & Chair Makers’ Norwich Book of Prices* is in fact the second edition. No copies of the first are known to survive, nor is it known when it was published, but the need for a second edition is explained in the first sentence of its introduction:

The incorrectness of the first edition of this work, and the few articles of Cabinet and Chair Maker’s Work there-in contained, call loud for a New Edition with Additions.

There is very little information about the Norwich Company of Cabinet and Chair Makers, who produced the book, other than what can be extracted from the details

⁴ *Cabinet-Makers* (1793).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁶ www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

⁷ Bowett (2008), Part II.

that appear on frontispiece, title page, and introduction, together with one newspaper advertisement, which will be discussed in due course. However, an earlier notice published in the *Norfolk Chronicle* of 13 April 1771, concerning a dispute between journeymen and masters, suggests there was an organised group of journeymen which may have been the forerunner of the Norwich Company:

At a Meeting of a very great Majority of the Journeymen Cabinet and Chair-Makers in the City of Norwich, which was caused by a prior Meeting of the Masters, it is understood by evident Proof, that their Meeting was only to ingross a few Privileges, enjoyed for Ages past. Therefore We the Journeymen cannot look upon any Member of that Meeting without an eye of Pity or Contempt; yet we hope that there are some so worthy, who are not willing to agree to their Terms. Now we Voluntarily agree to give Thanks publicly, to the worthy Master (Mr. R. Peete,) who distained their Proposals and would not listen to their arbitrary Proceedings.⁸

In the introduction to the price book the Company states:

And, as the greatest pains have been taken to collect the prices and most fashionable pieces of Cabinet and Chair work, this Publication will, therefore, prove of great advantage to those Masters and Men who have not had the opportunity of working in and seeing, the first manufactories in London.

The impression given is that the core of the Norwich Company and especially the committee who revised and compiled the book were journeymen who had either been trained or, much more likely, had worked to improve their knowledge and skills themselves in London. Quite possibly they had belonged to the London Society of Cabinet Makers and had seen how it protected the journeymen's interests, and had returned and had set up or expanded the role of the Norwich Company.

The returning craftsmen were perhaps seen as an elite group of journeymen, who could probably command a premium on their wages to work for a master and who would be proud to advertise their London training. This is what the Norwich cabinet- and chair-maker Elden Earl, did in both the *Norfolk Chronicle* of 21 July and the *Bury and Norwich Post* of 8 August 1792, where he:

begs leave to inform the public, that his Son being returned from Messrs. Gillows, Cabinet makers, Oxford Street, London, and having engaged a — very excellent hand from Seddon's, Aldersgate Street, he undertakes to make, on the most fashionable and newest construction

This is followed by a list of fashionable furniture. One prominent Norwich maker who also followed this path was the cabinet and chair-maker Benjamin Titter, who was apprenticed to the cabinet-maker William Grant in Norwich in 1786 and made free in 1794.⁹ He moved to London and worked as a journeyman in the workshop of George Oakley in Old Bond Street, before returning to Norwich sometime after 1799 to work as foreman for the cabinet and chair-maker Samuel Martin. In 1805 he took over the business of the cabinet-maker William De Caux. There must have been a small but steady stream of Norwich journeymen going to work in London to improve

⁸ Stabler (2006), p. 194.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 227–28.

themselves. For instance, the 1806 Norwich Poll Book records fifteen Norwich furniture-making freemen in London; seven cabinet-makers, four upholsters or upholsterers, two carvers and gilders and two chair-makers.¹⁰

Like the London Price Book, the Norwich Price Book was produced by the journeymen alone. Published at a time of high inflation caused by the war with France, the book's introduction emphasised why it was needed:

No doubt but some objection may be made to it, but we hope the unparalleled advance of every necessity of life will establish it beyond the power of prejudice ... we further hope and trust, the small advance upon the common work will meet no opposition, as the present times and the price of provisions absolutely require it, to enable the honest mechanic to do justice to his employers ...

An indication of the inflation of these times in Norfolk was recorded by Arthur Young in his report to the Board of Agriculture (1804). In the tables at the back of the book he detailed the increase costs of agricultural piece work between 1790 and 1804, the majority being over 50 per cent and up to 70 per cent in one case. The table of artisans' costs, which included carpenters, averaged around a 40 per cent increase over the same period.¹¹

Only one newspaper advertisement has been found for the Price Book. This was not in the Norwich newspapers but in the *Bury and Norwich Post* of 9 December 1801. This was printed in Bury St Edmunds and covered Suffolk, a large part of Norfolk and over the borders into Essex and Cambridgeshire. The advertisement gives information that is not found elsewhere. It confirms that the book was intended for the sole use of the Norwich trade, where it had 'met with the approbation' of the master cabinet and chair-makers. It was now to be offered to the trade in general beyond Norwich and was, 'far better adapted for the use of country towns than any other'. There is however one noticeable inaccuracy or exaggeration, for the book is said to contain '300 Piece Prices'. There are in fact just under two hundred pieces in the book but there are approximately 300 pages, which may be how the discrepancy came about.

The advertisement states that the Price Book had been published in ten numbers costing one shilling each and now all were available. This publishing in numbers was not unusual, and many furniture design books of the period were sold in this way. Presumably this encouraged journeymen and other potential purchasers who might be put off by having to lay out the total purchase price all at once. This would also help the Company of Cabinet and Chair makers to defray the cost of printing, as money received for the first numbers would help pay for the following ones. Thomas Sheraton published his *Cabinet-Makers and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book* in the same way in 1791. One of the advertisements for it appeared in the *Chester Chronicle* of 16 September 1791, stating that it was to be in thirty numbers, at one shilling each, produced at the rate of one every fortnight.¹² The first issue had an elaborately engraved frontispiece and this put the cost up to two shillings and six pence, 'on account of an elegant frontispiece to be delivered in the course of the publication'.

¹⁰ 1806 *Norwich Poll Book*, <https://books.google.co.uk>

¹¹ Young (1804), pp. 507 and 509.

¹² www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

Binding all the numbers into a single volume was, of course, the responsibility of the buyer.

The frontispiece of the Norwich Price Book was printed from an engraved copper plate, and the impression left by the edges can be seen on the page. The word frontispiece is separate from this and was printed from set type. It is clear that as well as being used as the frontispiece it was designed to be used to print the membership card for the Norwich Company of Cabinet and Chair Makers. It has the printed abbreviation *No.* and a blank space for a handwritten number, and a blank oval for a name. On this copy it has the number 20 and the ink inscription 'Jno. Poole Norwich'.

The frontispiece is similar in style to the membership card of the United Society of Cabinet Makers of London.¹³ It has a ribbon inscribed 'With Hearts & Hands United' about the central oval with drapery and a shield with the compasses from the Joiners' company arms and a circle with clasped hands. On either side below is a half-round marquetry pier table and a cabriole pattern arm chair. The bottom quarter is divided by a line and has a swag of foliage and the words in between 'NORWICH UNION SOCIETY, for Insuring, CHESTS, & TOOLS'. Confusingly, the title Society was used as part of the early name of the Norwich Union insurance company, and John Stabler has pointed out that the first Norwich Union insurance company symbol was also clasped hands. This may be coincidence, since the clasped hands also appear on the London membership cards — it was a universal symbol of mutual solidarity. Although less elaborate than Sheraton's frontispiece costing 1s. 6d., the Norwich frontispiece still represented a large outlay for the Norwich Company of Cabinet and Chair makers, to have it engraved. The suspicion must be that the Norwich Union Society paid for or contributed to the cost of engraving the copper plate so as to be able to advertise their name to a group of higher paid craftsmen and their masters.

An association with Norwich Union insurance is quite probable, because the Norwich Journeymen's Society may have had an agreement with them to insure the tools of its members. The London West End cabinet-maker's society also insured the tools of their members in this way, as did the East End cabinet-makers.¹⁴ The Norwich Union Society had been established for only four years when the Norwich Price Book was published. Unlike many of the other insurance companies it had been started as a mutual company, which meant its policy holders would be liable to make up any losses but also would be eligible to a share of any profits it made. Profits were calculated every seven years, so in 1804, on its seventh anniversary, the majority of the policy holders had seventy five per cent of their premiums returned to them.¹⁵ The publicity from this dividend of course helped the company grow very quickly. By 1805 Norwich Union had almost 120 agents throughout England.¹⁶ The newly appointed agent for Cambridge was the young cabinet-maker Elliot Smith, who had finished his Norwich apprenticeship in 1803, returning to Cambridge to be made a partner in the family business with his half-brother John.¹⁷ Being an insurance agent fitted in well to the

¹³ Illustrated in Kirkham (1988), Fig. 1.

¹⁴ Kirkham (1988), p. 158.

¹⁵ Ryan (2004), p. 365, gives this figure as 50%; Armstrong (2014), gives the figure as 75%. An advertisement by Norwich Union in the *Northampton Mercury* of 16 December 1804 confirms the figure of 75%.

¹⁶ Wright (1982), p. 149.

¹⁷ Williams (1976), p. 69.

furniture making trades, especially if they were already in the allied businesses of appraising, valuing, auctioneering and being house agents, and as agents they received a commission of 10 per cent of the premiums paid on policies they sold.¹⁸ Pigot's directory for 1830 lists agents for fifteen different insurance companies in Cambridge, five of which were cabinet-makers and upholsterers.

The inflationary pressures caused by the war with France continued to devalue journeymen's wages and they must have approached the masters in 1810 for the Norwich rates to be raised. This negotiation resulted in a notice being placed in the *Norfolk Chronicle* for 19 May 1810:

Norwich, 12th May, 1810. In consequence of the high prices of provisions, and by the request of the Journeymen Cabinet and Chair-makers, the Masters have agreed that an Advance of 12 ½ per cent. in addition to the Norwich Price Book should take place from the date hereof.

It was signed with the names of nine of the leading firms in Norwich; Martin and Smith, John Freeman, Thomas Smith, B. P. Titter and Co, Samuel Tubby, William Earl, James Cann, Edmund Wolverton and (William) Hubbard.

John Stabler has noted that as a result of the ending of the war and the Peace of Paris in May 1814, some masters considered the increase in the rates was no longer justified and at least one master, Benjamin Titter, had broken the agreement by withdrawing the extra payment. A notice appeared in the *Norwich Mercury* of 10 December 1814 from the journeymen, which carried a veiled threat as well as a petition to the masters:

To the Master Cabinet and Chair Makers of Norwich. We, your Journeymen, return you our grateful thanks for your steady observance of the agreement made between us, May the 12th 1810, of an advance of twelve and a half per cent. on the Norwich Prices, on account of the then High Price of Provisions which we are sorry to say have not in general met any reduction, which we hoped would have been the case of a Continental Peace; this disappointment must have been unpleasant both to you and us — much more to find Mr. Titter, one of those Employers who signed the said agreement has retracted and reduced the wages to the old system; we are therefore fearful, were you to follow his example, that the articles we manufacture must in a great degree be slighted, which the eye of the most minute Employer could not search out or discover, which would prove in a little time of great disadvantage both to you and the public in general, and we shall loose that credit which Norwich Workmen have for these last twenty years boasted of in the Cabinet and Chair Branch; we therefore petition you to continue our present prices till provisions find its level, and most assuredly we shall, as we have hitherto done, continue our best exertions in manufacturing every part thereof to your credit and to the general satisfaction of your respectable employers. We subscribe ourselves your most obedient and humble Servants, The Journeymen Cabinet and Chair Makers.

Stabler describes the word *slight* as a dialect term meaning 'to do (work) carelessly or negligently'.¹⁹ The journeymen might have ultimately had to accept a reduction in their wages by the masters, because of the continuing recession following the end of the war, and would have probably gone back to the rates of 1801.

¹⁸ Armstrong (2014).

¹⁹ Stabler (2006), pp. 26 and 228.

Despite the occasional problems between the masters and journeymen, the Norwich book of prices seems to have been very successful and, even though only the one newspaper advertisement for it has been found, it seems to have been used over a large area of East Anglia. Four advertisements by East Anglian cabinet-makers who recorded they will pay by it have been found. In a notice of 18 October 1806 in the *Norfolk Chronicle* the upholsterer and cabinet-maker Henry Bullen of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, asked for two to three journeymen. In the same year Elliot Smith from Cambridge also advertised in the *Norfolk Chronicle* of 4 October 1806 for journeymen cabinet-makers (approximately 65 miles from Norwich, Cambridge is perhaps a little further than might have been expected for the use of the Norwich book). This is one of a small group of advertisements placed in the Norwich newspapers by the Smiths between 1803 to 1808, asking for sawyers used to cutting veneer and for cabinet and chair-makers, although this one is the only one to mention payment by the Norwich book of prices. Since Elliot Smith served his apprenticeship in Norwich between 1797 and 1803 he would have undoubtedly seen and most probably used the price book, especially as his master had been the cabinet-maker Thomas Smith, one of the nine signatories agreeing the 12½ per cent advancement in 1810. In Wisbech, some fifty-five miles from Norwich, John Curtis at his Chair, Cabinet and Upholstery Manufactory, advertised in the *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* of 17 April 1812 for two or three journeymen chair and cabinet-makers who ‘may have constant employ by the Norwich book of prices, and the late advances thereon’. The latest notice found was in the *Norfolk Chronicle* of 16 October 1819, when cabinet-maker and upholsterer James Reeve of King’s Lynn wanted ‘A Journeyman Cabinet-maker, who can make circular and other work: will be paid the best prices by the Norwich Price Book’.

II

The Norwich Price Book must have been a huge undertaking for the Norwich journeymen to produce. Its large size, approximately two hundred and ninety-eight pages, makes it one of the largest and most comprehensive regional price books that have survived from this period. The only refinements not included were illustrations with engraved plates, but of that period the supplement to the Liverpool price book (only thirty-two pages) was the only English regional price book to have plates. The only comparable book, in terms of size and detail, is the 1811 *Edinburgh Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet-Work*, which although only dealing with cabinet-making has two hundred and ninety-four pages and seven plates.²⁰ The chair section of the Norwich book with its eighty-one pages is exceptional by the standards of the other regional books. For example, the Leeds book (1791) has its chairs listed over four pages and the Preston book (1802) has twelve of its one hundred and forty pages devoted to chairs and sofas. Only two other separate regional chair-making price books of this period were published, the Edinburgh (1825) with sixty-seven pages and Leeds (1827) with eighty-three pages and ten plates.

²⁰ Jones (2000). A list of the known British provincial Price Books and their locations can be found in Gilbert (1991), pp. 257–58.

The cabinet-makers' section of the book is made up of one hundred and sixty pages containing one hundred and twenty-six individual priced specifications for furniture. This is followed by thirty-one tables for pricing the different patterns of banding, panelling, veneering, moulding, etc. There are also four pages at the back of the chair section which include bedsteads, a crib and bed-steps, which had been omitted from the cabinet-making section.

As Stabler has noted, the cabinet-making section is closely modelled on the 1793 edition of the *Cabinet-makers' London Book of Prices*, with almost three quarters of it being a direct copy of the items from the London book. A selection was made from the London book of those pieces that must have been more commonly made in Norwich. Interestingly, it does not include any serpentine fronted pieces; perhaps they were going out of fashion by 1801, or perhaps the London book was used for these more specialised pieces. Some of the wording of the descriptions of the pieces has been altered, the London term 'Round-Front' being replaced by the presumably accepted term in East Anglia of 'Sweep-Front'. Some small changes were made; for example, for A Straight-Front Cellaret Sideboard, more description is given for the cellaret drawer, which is changed from 'a deep drawer at one end prepared for the plumber', on page 122 of the London book to 'one cellaret drawer, lined with lead, and partitioned off for nine bottles' on page 52 of the Norwich book.

Not all the dimensions given in the Norwich book are identical to the London ones. This is especially noticeable with the sideboard and sideboard tables, where the London ones are 2' 6" deep and all the Norwich ones are 2" shallower. This could be regional preference but one wonders if the journeymen, in making the price book acceptable to the masters, may have intentionally made these shallower so that this helped the differential with the London price and made their own price look more acceptable. The same may apply to the interiors of bureaux and secretaries, where the standard London ones are detailed with six small drawers and letter holes and the Norwich ones with only five small drawers and letter holes. Again it is not clear if this is a regional preference or a way of reducing the initial price.

There is, however, one clear regional adaption which appears in the specification of the Lobby Chest, which is the first piece to be listed in the cabinet-making section. The Lobby Chest appears in the London price book and is copied in various regional books. It seems to be defined by the drawer configuration of two small and three long ones, compared to the Dressing Chest's four long drawers, although the Common Dressing Chest in the Norwich book, under 'Extras', has the option of having either long or short drawers, which rather defeats the object of calling them by different names. But the regional option listed towards the end of the 'Extras' is to have a napkin press fitted to the top. This is detailed as follows:

If head to ditto, to form a napkin-press, and plain facia
With a hollow on the top edge and two loose press boards o. 6. o.

There is an option for beading the edges of the supporting standards and facia and having brackets in the corners and a circular (arched) top could be added for an extra two shillings. The specification does not mention the screw which was crucial part of the press, but these may have been bought in from specialist suppliers. John Stabler uncovered an advertisement in the *Norwich Mercury* of 13 May 1786 from 'James

Cann, Cabinet-Maker, Turner. Wood Screw Cutter and Press-Maker, Hog Hill, Norwich'.²¹ Stabler also noted that these presses are not peculiar to Norfolk or indeed East Anglia, but they are certainly commoner in Norfolk than the rest of the country. They typically take the form of an oak chest of drawers with the East Anglian features of a central cupboard with a door or two small drawers in the top centre, often with a scalloped moulding fitted onto the front of the chest just under the top. They are a little difficult to date but the oak examples seen are usually of mid-eighteenth-century style, but could well have been made later into the century. The best known example is one in oak with panelled sides, with scalloped moulding, two small central drawers and with the standards for the press and facia beaded, originally from Carrow Abbey in Norwich.²²

The Handkerchief Press, listed on page 152 of the cabinet-making section, appears to be a miniature version of the napkin press with loose press boards which must have had a screw thread to compress them and is offered with the extras of a drawer and a sweep (arched) top to the press.

A number of items are not in London book, including four-post and tent bedsteads, clock cases, Venetian and other blinds, work- and gun-boxes. In London these might have been made by specialist workmen and so not included in a general cabinet price book, but they do appear in many of the regional price books as these specialisms did not usually exist in the regions.

Other pieces not listed in the London book were new designs that had become popular since 1793. These include the Canterbury, Sofa table, Quartetto tables, Whatnot and Bed-steps. Prices for a Canterbury and Bed-steps had been given in *The Prices for Cabinet Work* published by the London masters in 1797 but the Norwich specifications do not copy these, and in fact it was not until the first *Supplement* of 1805 that the London *Cabinet Makers' Book* was updated. So the Norwich book was probably the first British price book to specify a Sofa table, Quartetto tables and a Whatnot, predating Thomas Sheraton illustrations in *The Cabinet Dictionary* (1803). Incidentally, the Trio tables listed in the 1805 London *Supplement* have the same dimensions as those given in the Norwich book and also have prices listed in the Extras for when a set of four tables were made.

The listing of these pieces of furniture confirms just how up to date the Norwich book was and how advanced and knowledgeable the journeymen were. All this knowledge of the best London practise and design cannot have reached Norwich alone but must also have been known in the other large regional cabinet-making centres over the country, where no doubt their journeymen had also been working or had contact with those from London.

On the blank pages between the cabinet-making and chair-making sections of the price book are hand written specifications for four chairs, most probably added in later during the working life of the book, judging by the cost of the arms listed. The first one is for a 'Matted Chairs' and 'Extras in Hall Chairs'.

Although bound together with the cabinet section, the chair-making section has its own page numbering, title page, introduction, contents, tables of extras and errata. It

²¹ Stabler (2006), p. 113.

²² Illustrated in Cotton (1987), p. 30; Gilbert (1991), pl. 76; Knell (1992), fig. 100.

could stand alone as a separate price book and most probably made up the last four numbers of the ten, so it is quite possible that it was used on its own. The price section is made up of seventy-five numbered pages, (actually seventy-six as there are two pages next to each other both numbered 10), detailing sixty-nine individual specifications. These include flat and hollow seats, elm and mahogany chairs, also with both loose and stuff-over seats, beech chairs for japanning, smoking and hall chairs, cabriole chairs, table chairs (or children's high chairs) stools, upholstered easy chairs, sofas and settees, different patterns of arms and forming panels out of the solid.

The importance of this chair section is that it pre-dates the first edition of *The London Chair-Makers' and Carvers Book of Prices* for workmanship by a year,²³ so instead of repeating the London specifications the journeymen listed the patterns of chairs that were made in Norwich. It is laid out in the same way as the cabinet section, with the basic chair description and price and then extras for any additional work.

All the specifications in the book are for framed chairs, with mortise and tenon joints. The probable reason there are a large group of 'common' lower priced versions of chairs in elm and other native woods is that, unlike many other regions in England, Norfolk had very few turned chair-makers who would normally supply this lower-end market. Cabinet-makers in East Anglia, certainly from the second half of the eighteenth century, had taken up chair making, adding it as part of their enlarging business. So it was to be expected they would make a simpler form of the fashionable chairs that they already made, to cater for the cheaper but expanding end of the market. Turned or 'pin' chairs were certainly made elsewhere in East Anglia, from Beccles and Bungay on the Norfolk/Suffolk border, through Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich and into Colchester and Chelmsford in Essex. Pin-chair makers are also found in the Fen areas of northern Cambridgeshire, to the very edges of Suffolk and Norfolk and up into Lincolnshire.

Gerry Cotton has drawn attention to the 'Tables of Extras' in the chair section of the Norwich Price Book, which details the round buttons (balls) between the splats which are so often found on the hollow seat chairs, as well as their turned spindles.²⁴ These turned balls, although very popular in East Anglia, were also used in other parts of the country, especially on both 'common' and fashionable Scottish chairs,²⁵ so balls in a chair back, on their own without any other East Anglian features, should not be taken as a guarantee that a chair is East Anglian.

The 'common' chairs are listed as being made in elm, ash, beech and walnut. Elm is the most commonly found wood with the hollow seat chairs and, as Bill Cotton has recorded, it was a staple of East Anglian furniture making; as Gerry Cotton noted the term 'elm chair' was used as a generic description rather than as a choice of material in various chair specifications.²⁶ Elm was also used in the manufacturer of fashionable chairs, presumably for those who wanted a fashionable pattern but could not pay the cost of making in mahogany. Ash is very rarely found in hollow seat chairs. Beech, although available and listed for some of the chairs to be japanned in the Norwich

²³ Master Chair-Manufacturers (1802)

²⁴ Cotton (1988), p. 71.

²⁵ Cotton (2008), pls 310, 311.

²⁶ Cotton (1987); Cotton (1988), p. 71.

book, is found occasionally in hollow seat chairs, often used in combination with other woods such as elm.

Walnut was by this time out of fashion and had been demoted to a 'common' wood. It was mainly used in the solid for chair making and gunstocks and is usually only found on the earlier hollow seat chairs. The French wars created a huge demand for native walnut for musket and other gunstocks as the alternative Continental supplies of walnut were not accessible because of the war. Many advertisements appeared for it in East Anglian and other English newspapers and the price doubled between 1804 and 1807, continuing to rise so that by 1814 the majority of mature trees must have been felled in East Anglia. Although the smaller sections under three inches thick not needed by the gun makers would have been available to the furniture makers, it did in effect virtually disappear as a chair-making wood. If the Norwich book had been published ten or twelve years later, the imported North American and Canadian birch would have probably been listed in its place, as this was to be often used in East Anglian chair making.

The other wood listed is cherry-tree, which was always a popular wood for chair making, possibly for its similarity to mahogany, and because of this was clearly not a 'common' wood. It is listed in Extras; 'If these chairs are made of Cherry-tree, charge extra from other common woods. In the shilling 0. 0. 1 ½'. This premium paid to the journeyman was of 12½ per cent, which was the same amount he was paid for working in mahogany. As is confirmed by the details listed in the 'Extras' for A Mahogany Night-Chair on page 44, where 12½ per cent is deducted if the chair is made of 'common' woods rather than mahogany.

Following the changing fashions of the time about half the standard chairs in the Norwich book have a 'banister' back (a single vertical splat, plain or pierced), the term splats being used to describe multiple vertical or horizontal bars. Of the others, most have square backs, some with wide tops (overhanging top back support), five have vase backs (shield shaped) and one an oval back.

The 'common' chairs start with two flat seat kitchen chairs, one banister and the other square backed. These are followed by three elm hollow seat chairs, each with an option of the three back patterns, banister, square and square back with a wide top. Three elm loose seat chairs have the same options, the loose seats undoubtedly being intended to be rushed. Then come the matted seat chairs, these of framed construction but with shaped seat rails so they could be rushed. The majority of these chairs are listed in the specifications with 'plain slips', these being the thin strips of wood pinned to the edges of the rushed rails. Incidentally the same name 'slips' is also given to the strip of wood pinned on the back section of a wooden hollow seat between the back uprights.

With the beech chairs for japanning a new description of 'nail seat' is introduced. This is the local name for a stuff-over upholstered chair seat, which is confirmed by the inclusion of 'straight braces' in the specifications. These are fitted across the corners of the seat rails to stop the seat frame going out of shape when it is under tension, when the upholstery webbing is stretched and tacked across it.

The mahogany chairs that follow are listed by the back designs, each group going through the seat options of nail-seat, loose-seat and hollow seat, wood bottomed. The nail-seat and loose-seat chairs also have the option, which also appear in *The London*

Chair-Makers' and Carvers Book of Prices (1802), of shaped seat rails as detailed in the 'Table of Extras'. These are 'sweep' (curved) for the sides or fronts and 'commode' (serpentine) for the fronts and also hollow shaped upholstered seats for the nail-seat chairs. With the 'loose-seat' chairs, the loose seat frame is curved into a hollow shape and then upholstered, but at a cost of an extra 1s. – 1s. 8d. Chairs of this pattern seem to have been too expensive to be very popular. The mahogany chairs finish with the vase-back (shield back) pattern, making the hollow wood seat example, with the journeyman being paid 5s. 4d., for the basic specification, the most expensive hollow seat, single chair pattern.

'Smoaking' chairs (sometimes now called corner chairs) follow with specifications for matted seat and both elm and mahogany nail seat versions. Additional options are loose seats, cross stretcher rails and 'For framing a back board into the top', so making the back/head rests that are encountered on some of these chairs. These smoking chairs appear in many of the regional price books but interestingly there is no reference to them in the London chair-makers' books. Then come Hall chairs, with a beech chair for japanning and a mahogany chair with options for different shaped backs.

These are followed by an upholstered 'Berger' chair and a mahogany 'Cabriole' chair. Hepplewhite's *Cabinet-Makers and Upholsterer's Guide* (1788) states that 'Chairs with stuffed backs are called cabriole chairs'. Four are illustrated, two with stuffed backs and two with wooden backs with either a banister or splats, mainly with arms and oval or circular stuff-over seats. They were clearly designed as fashionable and comfortable chairs and one is illustrated on the frontispiece of the Norwich price book. The Norwich book lists them with either vase or oval backs, either with a banister or 'Rabbiting inside the back for stuffing'; they could have either a round or oval seat.

The mahogany 'Night-Chair' has a banister back with the option of 'a wide top, dove-tailed on back feet', or a 'Hollow seat, wood-bottomed, or hollow stuffed seat'. This is followed by specifications for six 'Table-chairs' (child's chairs), two elm flat seated ones and three mahogany nail seat (stuff-over) versions with banister, square back or vase back. Then comes an upholstered 'Berger' table chair, followed by three specifications for stools for the table chairs to stand on. Standard stools follow with a 'Night' and a 'Window' stool.

The 'Easy chair' includes the only reference to a hinged reclining back in the Norwich book:

If the back part is made to fall back with racks, and hinged to the back feet, the wings fast to the back, and work in the elbows o. 3. 6.

The remaining specifications are for a 'Gouty Stool', sofas, sofa bedsteads, a settee and a couch.

On page 66, slipped in between these and five specifications for arms, is the enigma of the book. It is headed 'Square-Back Cabriole Chair' and is a hollow-seat, wood-bottomed arm chair with the 'back about two feet from seat' and 'without lower rails, splats, or banister', is costed at £0 10. 6. This is a high figure for just an arm chair, and the back at about two feet high (61 cm) is approximately 5½"–7½" (14 cm–19 cm) higher than an average arm chair. High backed hollow seat chairs although uncommon are not rare, but this one is much more expensive than it should be. As a comparison

in cost, 'A Mahogany Hollow-Seat, Wood-bottomed, Square-Back Chair' on page 26, is costed 'without banister, or splats' at £0. 3. 5. Adding the 'Mahogany Stumps and Elbows' on page 67 at £0. 2. 6., still only makes a total of 5s. 11d. Although the cabriole chair would have probably been of larger dimensions, which would have cost a little more, it does not explain the large cost difference. Could this be a specification for that rarest of East Anglian chairs, the high back reclining chair, as recorded by Bill Cotton?²⁷ There is no reference to racks and the back being hinged on the Cabriole chair specification but if the name used in Norwich for these reclining back chairs was 'cabriole-back', when fitted to a hollow seat chair, it would not be necessary to list the details of the design. We know from the specification for the Easy chair that the metal fittings for the back to fall cost 3s. 6d., so adding this amount to the cost of a standard hollow seat, wood bottomed arm chair (5s. 11d.) brings the total to 9s. 5d., not far short of the price of 10s. 6d. for the Cabriole chair. The fact that it is made in mahogany also adds to the high price (the elm version is 2s. 6d. cheaper).

There is one last reason I believe this chair had a reclining back; listed first in the 'Extras' are:

For lower rails, screwed to the back feet, each chair	—	0	0	10
Ditto framed into back feet	—	—	—	0 1 2

No other chair seems to have rails screwed in place, which would indicate that added strength was needed, which of course would be the case if the lower legs would have the added strain of supporting a hinged back.

The last prices in the book are for different patterns of arms, listed as stumps (arm supports) and elbows. These start with the simpler elm ones and go up through French elbows, mahogany ones and mahogany French elbows and ones for japanning. These are followed by the items omitted from the cabinet-making section and then the tables for forming panels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to thank my wife Judy for her patience and understanding in having to spend many evenings on her own, while this introduction was researched and written.

Many thanks also to Lauri Perkins, the librarian at Winterthur who so kindly supplied me with a full working copy of their own edition of the Norwich Price Book and who, when we discovered the fourteen pages were missing from the Norwich Heritage Centre copy, so helpfully arranged that the Winterthur photographer would copy these for the reprint in this journal.

Many articles have their basis in the research of others and this one is no exception. I have drawn heavily on the work of John Stabler and that of Bill and Jerry Cotton and would like to note my debt to them.

My thanks to editor Adam Bowett for his help, encouragement and also patience during the gestation of this introduction.

One person I would like to mention, who is sadly no longer with us, is Christopher Gilbert, whom I first met at a Furniture History Society conference in the early 1970s. We carried on a correspondence over the years about research, in which Christopher was always very encouraging and appreciative of any information I could give him for his current project at the time. He was also my editor for my articles in *Furniture History* between 1976 and 1978, and

²⁷ Cotton (1987), pp. 42–43; (1990), pp. 231–32.

it was he who first told me of the existence of the Norwich Price Book and all those years ago suggested I should write about it and I am sorry he cannot see the results of the seed that he planted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PUBLISHED SOURCES

- BOWETT, A., 'Furniture Woods in London and Provincial Furniture, 1700–1800', *Regional Furniture*, XXII (2008), pp. 97–114.
- CABINET-MAKERS, LONDON SOCIETY OF, *The Cabinet-Makers' London Book of Prices*, 2nd edn (London: The London Society of Cabinet Makers, 1793), reprinted *Furniture History*, XVIII (1982).
- CORNFIELD, P. J., 'From Second City to Regional Capital', in Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson (eds), *Norwich since 1550* (London: Hambledon & London, 2004), pp. 139–66.
- COTTON, B. D., *Cottage and Farmhouse Furniture in East Anglia: Regional Styles in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (self published, 1987).
- COTTON, B. D., *The English Regional Chair* (Woodbridge: Antiques Collectors' Club, 1990).
- COTTON, B. D., *Scottish Vernacular Furniture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).
- COTTON, G., '"Common" Chairs from the Norwich Chair Makers' Price Book of 1801', *Regional Furniture*, II (1988), pp. 768–92.
- GILBERT, C., *English Vernacular Furniture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).
- JONES, D., *The Edinburgh Cabinet and Chair Makers' Books of Prices 1805–25* (Cupar: Kirk Wynd Press, 2000).
- KIRKHAM, P., 'The London Furniture Trade 1700–1870', *Furniture History*, XXIV (1988).
- KNELL, D., *English Country Furniture* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1992).
- MASTER CHAIR-MANUFACTURERS AND JOURNEYMEN, COMMITTEE OF, *The London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices* (London: The Committee of Chair Manufacturers and Journeymen, 1802).
- RYAN, R., 'Banking and Insurance', in Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson (eds), *Norwich since 1550* (London: Hambledon & London, 2004), pp. 361–84.
- STABLER, J., 'A Dictionary of Norfolk Furniture Makers 1700–1840', *Regional Furniture*, XX (2006).
- WILLIAMS, R., 'A Cambridge Family of Furniture Makers and the Furnishing of the Master's Lodge, Trinity College, Cambridge', *Furniture History*, XII (1976), pp. 64–85.
- WRIGHT, B., *The British Fire Mark 1680–1879* (Cambridge: Woodhead-Faulkner, 1982).
- YOUNG, A., *General view of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk* (London: 1804; reprinted Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1969).

ELECTRONIC SOURCES

- <https://archive.org> Digital Library of Free Books. *The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices*, 1788; *The Prices of Cabinet Work*, 1797; *The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices*, 1803; No. 1 *Supplement to the Cabinet-Makers Book of Prices*, 1805; *The London Cabinet-Makers' Union Book of Prices*, 1811.
- <https://books.google.co.uk> 1806 *Norwich Poll Book*.
- www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk *Bury and Norwich Post*, *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, *Chester Chronicle*, *Ipswich Journal*, *Norfolk Chronicle*, *Northampton Mercury*, *Norwich Mercury*, *Stamford Mercury*.

ROBERT WILLIAMS is a furniture restorer and conservator based outside Cambridge. His initial research into furniture making in Cambridge has broadened out to cover East Anglia. This has included being one of the regional co-ordinators for the *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* (1986), for which he wrote a group of smaller biographies of East Anglian makers.

He is one of the founder members of the Regional Furniture Society.
robert@rwfr.co.uk