

CIRCULAR SAWS

This brief note arises from a conversation I had with Bill Cotton concerning a reference in his new book (page 322) to Mark Chippindale, a Lancashire chair maker, who after his premises had burned down, put in an insurance claim for a circular saw. The remarkable aspect about this seemingly mundane occurrence is the date - 1815.

The earliest recorded use of a circular saw in England was 1781 in the workshop of William Walton Taylor, a Southampton carpenter. Taylor was contracted to the Royal Navy to make tackle blocks, of which something like 1000,000 per annum were needed by 1800. He was one of many such subcontractors employed at Naval yards along the south coast of England. Taylor's contribution to the history of woodworking machines was shortlived, for by 1805 the Navy had cancelled the contracts of all its sub-contractors for pulley blocks, having decided to tool-up with special purpose built steam powered machines.

The further history of woodworking tools hinges to a great extent on the significance of this event, for the designer of the machine was Marc Isambard Brunel, its maker was Henry Maudslay, and the man who commissioned it was Samuel Bentham, Inspector General of Naval Works. Bentham had already, between 1790 and 1793, patented and constructed machine borers, tenoners, lathes and saw benches from which almost all subsequent woodworking machinery was derived, and on the strength of his designs achieved his influential post. Brunel had established by 1805 a steam powered circular saw at Battersea, and at the same time was involved with Joseph Bramah in setting up machinery at the Woolwich Arsenal to produce gun carriages, ammunition boxes, powder cases and other paraphernalia of war. All these developments stem directly from the pressures placed upon the English military industrial establishment by the war against France, and Brunel's blockmaking machinery continued to manufacture blocks for use in every subsequent war until 1945.

Those interested in the development of woodworking machinery may find this information in a book called 'Two Hundred Year of Woodworking Machinery', by W.L. Sims. The author is an engineer, and is primarily interested in the machinery itself, and not on its impact on the furniture industry. His book is frustratingly short of references, particularly to primary sources. On the other hand the facts and the technical information are there, accompanied by good reproductions of line engravings and later, photographs.

'Two Hundred Years of Woodworking
Machinery' by W.L. Sims is published by
Walders Press, Burton Lazers,
Leicestershire, LE14 2UH.

Adam Bowett