

A Bowett: The 1721 Naval Stores Act and the Commercial Introduction of Mahogany

Adam Bowett's important paper was based on part of his post graduate research into the export of timber. He began by pointing out some misconceptions made by early 20th century authors regarding the date of the abolition of the import duty on woods and the use of mahogany. Percy Macquoid gave the date as 1733 (*The Age of Mahogany*, 1906, p.49), and Herbert Cescinsky as 1748 (*English Furniture of the 18th Century*, 1912, p.27). However, R W Symonds writing in 1934 not only gave the correct date, i.e. 1721, but demonstrated that, far from mahogany being an expensive luxury as Macquoid and Cescinsky had suggested, it was, as a direct result of the abolition of duty on it, fairly cheap, and that this was born out by observations of early examples of mahogany furniture which were largely simple pieces. Despite Symond's articles (*Early Imports of Mahogany for Furniture, Connoisseur, Oct. & Nov. 1934*), the idea that mahogany was an expensive wood persisted. Except for an article published by Edward Joy in 1953 *The Introduction of Mahogany* (*Country Life*, Nov. 1953, 1566-67) the effect of the abolition of duty on timber in 1721, has, Adam pointed out, been largely ignored by previous authors. Then followed a very lucid, detailed, and well-structured lecture on the subject, an outline of which follows.

The background to, and purpose of, the 1721 Act

The Naval Stores Act 1721, was part of a series of measures whose main purpose was to promote the production of naval stores in the North American Colonies. These stores included soft woods used for mast and ship timber, pitch, hemp, tar, and then iron. These vital materials were needed by the British Navy and Merchant Marines, and had previously been supplied by Scandinavia and the Baltic states, collectively known as the "Northern Crowns". In return Britain exported cloth and manufactured goods, but the balance of the trade weighed heavily in favour of the "Northern Crowns". British ships consequently left in ballast, or only partially freighted, and the amount of ready money draining from Britain in order to pay for these essential imports became a problem for the government. When in 1696 the Board of Trade was set up, the question of naval stores was high on its agenda. Adam then outlined British problems at the beginning of the 18th century which included the wars with France, and the additional hazard of French privateers, internal wars in the Baltic which also caused disruption of supplies, and fluctuating prices. When in 1703 the Stockholm Tar Co. was awarded a monopoly of Swedish pitch and tar production and also insisted on delivering it in Swedish ships to the detriment of the British Shipping trade, another crippling blow was delivered. The final blow came, when as a result of the French wars, import duties on timbers were raised progressively from 1690 to 1704 from 5% to 30%. Britain was therefore obliged to seek new suppliers and the North American Colonies with seemingly limitless forests proved attractive. The Board of Trade was told in 1700 that .."a great part of our naval stores might be supplied from the plantations in the northern parts of America, that are now brought in at a dearer rate by the Eastland (Baltic) trade". The first acts to

encourage importations from America were targeted at tar, pitch hemp etc. but for various reasons were only partially successful. Colonial goods were criticised on grounds of poor quality especially by the Baltic merchants whose own trade had been damaged. Another group of pro-Colonial Merchants led by Joshua Gee believed that the colonies existed only to further the wealth of Britain and to supply raw materials which Britain lacked. In addition they argued that the Colonies must take British goods and the trade between Britain and her plantations would provide employment for her shipping trade. All these factors had a bearing on the introduction of the 1721 Act of Parliament. Gee argued that, above all, difficulties which inhibited trade between the colonies and Britain led to the colonialists seeking other markets for their products. The fear was that if colonial manufacturing was allowed to develop it would short-circuit the entire mercantile system on which Britain's growing prosperity depended.

North American Colonial Issues

Due to lack of demand for American raw materials, there was an imbalance of trade in favour of Britain. The colonies also had a severe shortage of ready money with which to pay for British goods. Even in Virginia and Maryland, whose tobacco was a profitable crop, workers were paid in goods such as tobacco, and therefore had no money to purchase British goods. One of the few attractive exports was American timber but this was subject to a high tax. One solution was to remove the tax in order to make timber a profitable return cargo for British shippers, and to pay the money, which formerly went to Scandinavia and the Baltic for wood and other naval stores, to the Americans instead. Thus, it was argued, Britain would be freed from dependence on the "Northern Crowns". The colonialists would also be able to buy British goods and the expanding trade would also benefit British shipping. It was on these terms that the act was recommended to Parliament in November, 1721, and it became law in June 1722.

West Indies Plantations were also included in the 1721 Act

The same act was also extended to include the West Indies plantations, despite the fact that in the early 18th century the islands had little to do with the export of wood, indeed most wood had disappeared on many islands by 1700. Although mahogany remained in Jamaica, planters preferred to use their slaves for producing sugar which was generally a profitable export, rather than using their labour to fell trees. They also relied on the North Americans to supply them with hogsheads to ship their exports to England. However, three West Indies varieties; Ebony Wood; Speckled Wood; and Sweet Wood; were included in the act of 1721. During this period it was noted that profits from sugar varied as gluts brought down prices in good years, and crop failures and wars also led to unpredictable prices. Timber was however in constant demand and proved useful in making up the loading which improved profits on the return journey of the well known "triangular trade".

The Commercial viability of Timber Imports

Adam then explained how the commercial viability of any imported commodity was decided, that is by assessing the relationship between its value, weight and volume,

Operating costs were high, because amongst other reasons journeys were long. Timber caused problems to shippers being both bulky and relatively light, therefore sometimes even a fully loaded ship needed ballast to reach its correct displacement tonnage. Dyewoods such as logwood, fustic and redwood were expensive during the early days of the West India trade, and being denser and heavier made an attractive cargo, but their value decreased during the 18th century. By removing the duties on timber, the act of 1721 restored the shippers profit margins, thereby transformed mahogany from a commodity not worth the cost of shipping it into a viable additional import when the sugar or tobacco crop failed.

The Outcome of the 1721 Act

What then, asked Adam, was the effect of the removal of duty on mahogany and American Walnut? Prior to 1722 very little mahogany was imported (fig. 5) but in 1723 the value of mahogany was £695; £3,121 in 1725; and in 1729 it had risen to £4,060. American Walnut imports were £659 in 1723, £2,852 in 1725; but had fallen to £571 by 1728. Mahogany from being a hardwood not worth importing in the early 18th century had as a result of the abolition of the tax in 1721 rapidly become a popular and economic wood for furniture. It was cheap enough to be used in the solid and carved, in addition to being used as a veneer. Adam's analysis of British entry-ports records regarding hardwoods, demonstrated that almost all walnut (98%) c.1697-1720 entered through the port of London, and only 2% entered through out-ports. However, mahogany imports from c. 1730 formed a different pattern with 20-40% entering through provincial ports and much of the mahogany which entered through London was later redistributed through other ports. Adam concluded that mahogany was a great leveller, as it was readily available to both London and provincial cabinetmakers as a result of the abolition of the tax on timber imports in 1721.

Post-Script

I would, if I may, like to add that I can confirm from my own research on the woods used by Gillows of Lancaster for clock cases, that mahogany was the most popular wood used by the firm from this period. Out of 50 clock cases recorded between 1732 and 1743, 42 were made of mahogany, 5 in oak, 2 in walnut and 1 in deal (Regional Furniture vol. I, 1987 p. 50-51).

We are greatly indebted to Adam Bowett, our secretary, for delivering such a clearly painstakingly researched, stimulating, and thought provoking lecture, and we look forward to hearing more about his important research in future.

Adam's lecture was followed by a lively discussion on imported woods. Several interesting points were raised including a reference to "Baywood" being imported into Britain in 1767, a date which Adam considered early. Adam also appealed for members to send him any references to "Rat (t) an wood".

Mahogany Importations 1700 - 1750

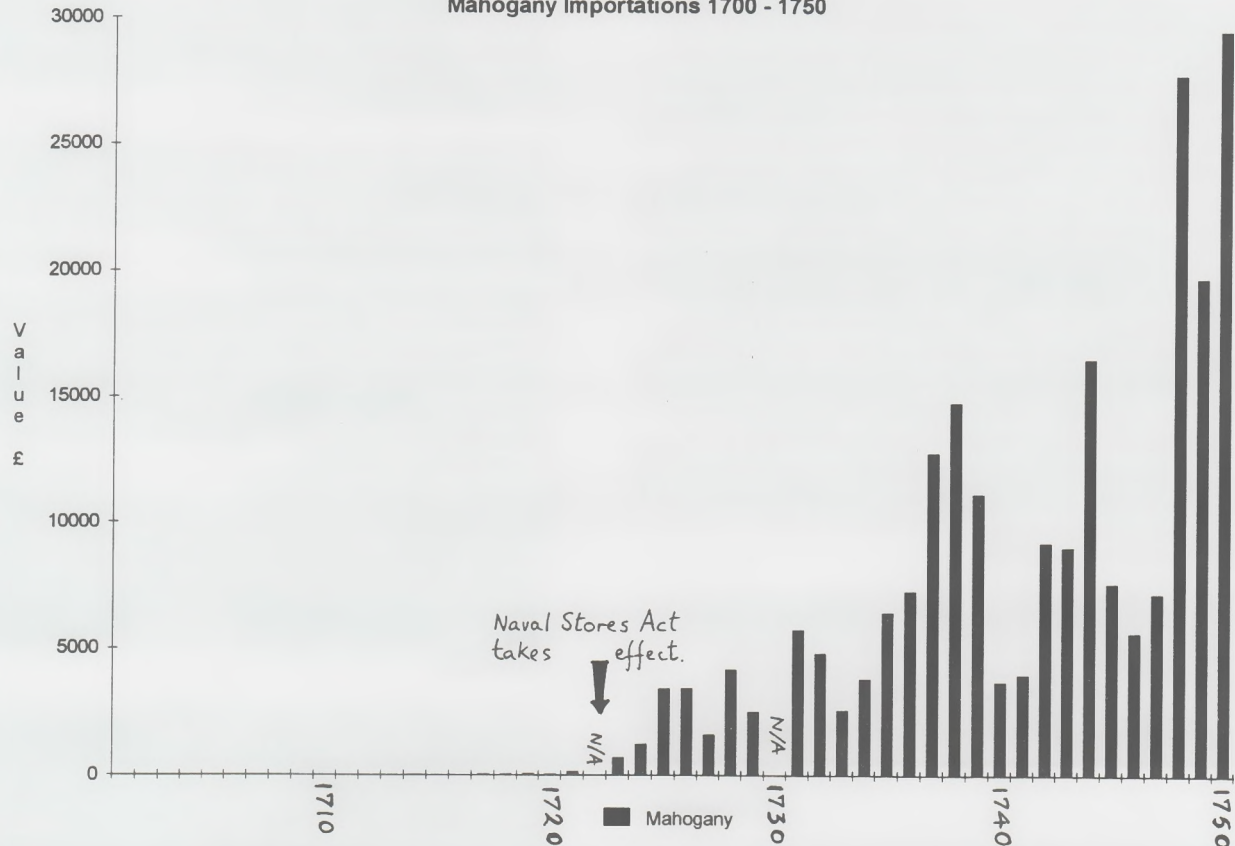


Fig. 5 Mahogany Importations 1700-1750