

Susan Stuart: *Gillows of Lancaster and London: unique insights into how an 18th century cabinet-making business was organised*

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Having acknowledged her personal debt to Christopher Gilbert for first suggesting that she take up the Gillows mantle after the death of Lindsay Boynton, Susan gave an enlightening talk, elaborating on just one of the numerous strands of interest that can be plucked from her recently published *magnum opus*. She began by considering the workforce and how apprenticeships were organised. The average boy came aged 14 for a seven-year term, with a normal fee from his benefactor of £20 in Lancaster and £100 in London. In return he would be trained in all aspects of the trade, including clock-case making and undertaking, as well as being taught handwriting, drawing and accounting and given his food, drink and lodging. After this apprenticeship he would be entitled to his freedom in the trade. By 1830 Gillows had ceased to charge a fee.

The workforce was a mixture of weekly-paid permanent workers and journeymen who were paid by the day for each piece they made. This gave a flexible arrangement to cope with fluctuating demand. There is ample evidence of

workmen moving between Lancaster and London. The Lancaster piece-work price agreements, made by all the masters from 1746, are the earliest and most extensive in existence. Carvers, gilders and japanners were top rank employees, sometimes earning double the wages of cabinet makers, although furniture painters were singled out for their lack of moderation in alcohol! From the late 18th century there was a 'sick club' into which workmen could pay against illness, but parish relief remained the usual means of support.

Turning to the promotion of the business, the primary means was by maintaining links with families and encouraging customers to make personal recommendations to others, especially when they were building new houses. Susan saw the firm's reputation as based on the adage 'good wood, good workmanship and good value'. Gillows could also play on the fact that furniture could be had cheaper from Lancaster because of lower labour costs. Tours were planned to visit customers to show them designs in the latest fashions. The firm had a presence at public events such as annual races, assize courts and parliamentary elections. Newspaper advertisements, handbills and trade cards were also used. By the second half of the 18th century a network of gentlemen-merchants had been established as agents, often working on a commission basis.

At the Gillows premises in Lancaster there was a showroom where clerks took orders, and an accounting house where details were maintained. The whole system, from manufacture via the packing room to delivery by canal, sea or wagon, can be followed through in the records. The partners went to much trouble to check the credit-worthiness of new clients. Between six and 12 months' credit was usual. The London and Lancaster branches were run independently with each billing the other for money owed, but by the end of the 18th century the balance between them was very close.

Few pieces known to come from the London shop have been recognised as the records were lost in a fire and in bombing during the Second World War. The partners and foremen kept an eye on quality control, but occasionally faults were acknowledged when customers complained. When their charges were considered high, they quoted their superior timber and workmanship. A gross profit margin of between a quarter and a third was the normal aim, but a discount of 5-10% was allowed to the London shop and other wholesale customers, as well as those who paid on the nail.

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