

The Christopher Gilbert Lecture: *The Upholsterer and the Retailing of Domestic Furnishing 1600–1800*

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After setting the scene gleaned from meagre early sources, Clive took us on an evolutionary journey through two centuries using the trade directories of upholsterers and furnishers as they emerged.

From 14th-century origins, with cofferers and saddlers, where wood is ‘garnished’ with cloth, arose the craft of upholstery. Armourers too padded cloth to protect rider and horse in combat, armour worn alone or under metal. By 1360 upholsterers were a separate trade and with a guild in place. Initially upholders had a poor reputation, related to selling second-hand and sometimes stolen goods. By 1474 the Mystery of Upholders (Upholsterers) monitored the quality of materials and padding used. Bulrushes were forbidden, with down and feather as the recommended standard.

The origin of the Guild Crest, granted in 1465, with three portable canopies, seems to lie with Royal encampments. These are free-standing tent-like structures as might form a canopied bed indoors. The image suggests 'upholders' provided fabric for all purposes to garnish spaces as well as furniture and aimed to meet the highest standards within buildings, and out of doors.

'Upholders' like most trades worked at home above a workshop, and sometimes had a showroom beneath. Booths might also be taken at fairs and markets. 'Upholsterer' replaced 'upholder' as a term by 1600. Businesses might stay small, some grew and made a fortune, becoming free-standing retailers of all the furniture and furnishing requirements of a household, including fabric goods, rugs and carpets.

An apprenticeship cost from £20 to £50, and apprentices became articulated young gentlemen often on a par with architects. Trade cards showed women could manage business, cut cloth, make up wraps, with needlework regarded as a genteel occupation.

Various attempts at regulation were tried with varying degrees of success over the period, the last one being in 1750, but by this time guild control was waning rapidly. They were leaders in fashionable taste for interiors, so developed an advisory role as supervisors of contracts as well.

Few pieces of upholstered furniture remain intact. Refurbishment has been key to the survival of a chair or sofa with changes of fashion. A somewhat ragged upholstered wing chair in Williamsburg, Virginia provided insight. Its stuffing exposed combined 'ox hair, cotton, tow, flax, small clippings of fabric, a sliver of bone and other trash – in other words the sweepings of the shop floor'.

By the start of the 19th century the upholsterers' role as all-round furnishers and interior designers was complete. Interior refurbishment extended to coaches, ships, churches and public buildings. Services included providing coffins and 'undertaking' to arrange all services after a death, including dressing houses in black for mourning.

The study of upholstery through centuries, a much-understudied topic was thoroughly enlightening and enjoyable.

*Crissie White, with warm acknowledgement
to Clive Edwards*