



Thomas Chippendale

Thomas Chippendale (1718 - 1779) was baptised on 5 June 1718 at Otley, a small market town in Wharfedale, Yorkshire, the only child of John Chippendale (1690 - 1768), joiner and his first wife Mary (1693 - 1729), daughter of Thomas Drake, stonemason of Otley.

His father re-married and had seven more children. Many of Thomas Chippendale's relatives followed woodworking trades, like his second cousin William who made the sturdy oak chest for the village school at Burn Yates in 1770. So young Thomas received an elementary education at Otley Grammar School and probably served a family apprenticeship.

As a young man Chippendale was almost certainly employed by Richard Wood, joiner and cabinetmaker of York, who later ordered eight subscription copies of the Director.

One of his apprentices, William Benson, reappears as foreman in Chippendale's London workshop, and in 1771 while working at Nostell Priory, Chippendale asked his former master to supply six

locks and to silver a looking glass.

In later life he probably came to regard York, rather than Otley, as his natural base in Yorkshire, although a deed dated 28 July 1770 in which "Thomas Chippendale of St Martin's Lane, London, Cabinet Maker" assisted one of his kinsmen over the conveyancing of property in Otley, shows that he maintained links with his birthplace.

London

The earliest trustworthy evidence of Chippendale's presence in London is his marriage licence for a ceremony at St George's Chapel, Mayfair where "19 May 1748, Thomas Chippendale and Catherine Redshaw of St Martin-in-the-Fields".

Nothing is known about his wife's background, but it seems that he missed the chance to improve his circumstances through a judicious marriage.

Their eldest child Thomas was baptised at St Paul's, Covent Garden in April 1749 and Catherine subsequently bore another four boys and four girls. In 1749 Chippendale rented a modest house in Conduit Court, an enclave off Longacre on the fringe of a fashionable furniture-making district.

In the summer of 1752 he moved to more respectable premises in Somerset Court, off the Strand, adjoining the Earl of Northumberland's great mansion. At this time it is likely that he was making small amounts of furniture for established firms on a sub-contracted basis rather than dealing directly with clients. He may also have served the furniture and upholsterer's trade as a freelance designer.

During 1753 Chippendale was busy producing drawings for his ambitious publication *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* and so needed a smart address from which to launch it as well as contrive an opportunity to dedicate it to the Earl of Northumberland.

Matthias Darly, who engraved most of the plates and who may also have been Chippendale's drawing master, shared the house for several months in 1753. Press notices soliciting subscriptions give the author's address as "Northumberland Court" (an alternative name).

A payment in Lord Burlington's private account book "13 October 1747 to Chippendale in full £6-16-0d" raises the possibility that he was "one of the Persons of Distinction" and "eminent Taste" who, Chippendale claimed, encouraged him to publish a volume of designs. But it would be misleading to suppose that he normally moved in

such exalted circles.

His social status at this time was that of a tradesman, glimpsed in a picturesque chinoiserie invitation ticket to a convivial gathering which he designed in 1753 for a fellow cabinet maker Caesar Crouch; its stylish affinities with several rococo furniture maker's trade cards, also engraved by Darly, suggests that Chippendale was in demand as an author of ornamental compositions.

The year 1754 proved momentous: Chippendale moved to spacious premises in the fashionable paved thoroughfare of St Martin's Lane (later numbered 60, 61 and 62) where the firm stayed for the next 60 years. He formed a partnership with James Rannie who injected capital into the business and he brought out the first edition of his highly influential furniture pattern book *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director*, copies of which, as the dual appeal of the title

London continued

intended, were acquired by the nobility, gentry and many fellow tradesmen.

The property consisted of three houses opposite Old Slaughter's Coffee House, a popular meeting place for some of the most interesting avant-garde artists and designers of this period. Other furniture makers operating in St Martin's Lane at this time included John Channon, William Hallett, William Vile and John Cobb.

The property at No 60 became Chippendale's dwelling, No 61 the shop and Rannie lived at No 62. A covered passageway led to a yard and extensive workshops at the back including a chair room, cabinet maker's shops, veneering, carpet, glass and feather rooms, a large upholsterer's shop, various timber stores, workrooms and a counting house.

They named their new establishment "The Cabinet and Upholstery Warehouse" and adopted a chair as their shop sign – presumably the stylish armchair featured on their trade card. Leading cabinetmakers considered it undignified to advertise in this way, preferring to attract patronage through personal recommendation. The fact that only a single copy of the card survives suggests that it was used for only a short time and never served as a maker's label.

No partnership agreement with Rannie has been traced, but their formal association evidently dates from about August 1754 when a joint lease on the St Martin's Lane property was signed. He was a wealthy Scottish merchant with shipping interests and capital to invest. Although described in his will as an "upholder and Cabinet maker" it is unlikely he possessed craft skills. He and his bookkeeper Thomas Haig probably looked after the accounting side of the business.

Ledgers reveal that in March 1755 the partners' premises and stock in trade were covered for £3,700. Later in April of that year, a fire destroyed their cabinet workshop. ___It is reported that after the death of James Rannie in January 1766 Chippendale's financial situation caused a severe strain on the business until in 1771 when Rannie's book-keeper Thomas Haig, who had stayed with the firm, apparently borrowed £2,000 from his late master's widow, which he used to become Chippendale's partner.

The rescue package also included backing from another executor, Henry Ferguson who became a third partner. The business became Chippendale, Haig and Co. Although this arrangement established a measure of financial stability, there were frequent cash flow problems caused by the failure of clients to settle their account

on time. This may also have affected the quality of furniture supplied to these clients as examples of cost cutting and uneven work can sometimes be found.

Thomas Chippendale junior, who became a first class cabinet maker and designer in his own right, played an increasingly important part in the enterprise, enabling his father to retire, perhaps on the grounds of ill health, in mid summer 1776 when he took a modest house in Lob's Fields (now Derry Street), Kensington.

Chippendale's first wife Catherine died in 1772 and he married Elizabeth Davis at Fulham Parish Church in August 1777. Four months later Elizabeth was born, followed in 1779 by John and Charles in 1780. In all Chippendale had 12 children, but only four were still living in 1784.

During his last illness in 1779 Chippendale moved to Hoxton where he died of consumption and was buried at St Martins-in-the Fields on 13 November. His son paid four guineas for his Hoxton lodgings, five guineas to the physicians who attended him and £24 funeral expenses.

He had lived simply and his house contents were valued for probate at only £28. Today a collection of his furniture could fetch millions.

Chippendale's Furniture Designs

Prior to the publication of *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Directory* in 1754 no cabinetmaker had ever published their designs in a comparable fashion to the lavish volumes produced by professional architects.

It is not known where Chippendale received his artistic education or learned the principles of rococo compositions. Matthias Darly, an engraver and professional drawing master may have taught him.

Some of Chippendale's drawings eventually came into the possession of Lord Folley and most were purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1920. Some had been pirated beforehand and a group of six is owned by the Chippendale Society and is included in the exhibition; others are at the Victoria and Albert Museum together with the designs of Matthias Lock, a carver by trade.

It was at one time believed that Lock and his associate Henry Copland "ghosted" the Director designs, but

there is now evidence that Chippendale was himself a fluent and accomplished draughtsman.

There were three editions of the Director. The second, with trifling corrections, appeared in 1755 and a third revised and enlarged edition containing 200 plates was published in parts between 1759 and 1762. A French edition also appeared at this time.

The first edition was dedicated to Hugh, Earl of Northumberland who repaid the compliment by patronising the firm. Most copies of the second edition were dedicated to HRH Prince William Henry who ordered furniture between 1764 and 1766. Publication of the Director had a positive effect on Chippendale's career as all known commissions date from after its appearance.

Until recently it was thought that at houses where Robert Adam and Chippendale both worked Adam regularly supplied Chippendale with drawings to execute. Such arrangements certainly existed between Adam and other leading cabinet makers but Chippendale is only known to have made furniture according to Adam's design on one occasion when, in 1765, he provided an opulent suite of armchairs and sofas in a transitional neo-classical style for the house of Sir Lawrence Dundas in Arlington Street, London. Adam in fact displayed great confidence in Chippendale's ability to design and make appropriate furnishings for even his finest interiors and apparently recommended him to clients.

Commercial Enterprise and Authentication

Modern research has identified over 70 clients, documented in invoices, payments in account books and entries in bank ledgers. However substantially more accredited pieces from Chippendale's workshop have been traced - about 600 items.

He fulfils the essential requirement of any major artistic figure, having left a large body of high quality work, including designs that display a steady development from an early through middle on to a late style.

His versatility is demonstrated by the fact that in addition to furniture, he was willing to design and supply wallpapers, carpets, fire grates, decorative ormolu, chimney pieces, complete room schemes and once even devised needlework chair covers. He is also known to have visited Paris in 1768 to keep up to date with fashionable taste. He offered a complete house furnishing service, undertook repairs, removals, hired out furniture, compiled inventories and was even prepared to direct and furnish funerals for respected customers.

Chippendale was also a supplier of mirror glass. This was imported from France and cut in the special workshops for his clients' bespoke frames and girandoles. The most expensive items in any Chippendale bill are one for looking glasses in piers and over mantels. This was the age in which mirrors were a much more prestigious way to decorate a State apartment than paintings.

The term "Chippendale" is now widely used as a convenient generic label to describe any high quality furniture inspired by his Director designs. However, even if the piece corresponds exactly to one of his published patterns, this does not amount to proof of authorship, because many practicing cabinetmakers acquired copies of the Director in order to copy the engravings.

The partners never employed a maker's mark, so the only unambiguous way of establishing Chippendale's authorship is to find his original bill or equivalent documentation. Chippendale was also perfectly happy to supply inexpensive items to non-account customers.

Chippendale's special claim for artistic fame is as a brilliantly original, innovative and influential designer who also made masterpieces of furniture. His celebrated pattern book even inspired a vigorous Chippendale revival in Victorian days.

Clients and Furniture

Most of the furniture that Chippendale made for Dumfries House in 1759 survives today.

A pair of candle stands received by the Duke of Atholl from Chippendale was thereafter given to a local man John Thomson for copies to be made. The practice echoes the way in which British visitors to Paris might acquire a single item of French silver and have a complete set copied back home.

A small anthology of rococo pieces at Wilton features the magnificent "violin" bookcase regarded as one of Chippendale's greatest masterpieces.

Other exhibitions contain an important group of Director style mahogany furniture. One such exhibition includes a pair of plain mahogany pedestals as well as an armchair from the celebrated suite, designed by Robert Adam and made by Chippendale, superimposing neo-Classical decorative motifs on a serpentine rococo frame.

There is documented evidence: letters, bills, estimates, memoranda, receipts and drawings that show how the firm undertook a major commission for Sir

Rowland's London house. These papers also show, the frustration of a client, impatient with Chippendale's dilatoriness, often threatening to withdraw his custom with dire consequences to his reputation. Chippendale, on the other hand, seemed almost permanently desperate for payment and yet always remained obsequious. By this date he is always referred to as "Mr" Chippendale – an important social nicety, implying that he was a distinctly superior tradesman.

Key Dates

- 1718 **Thomas Chippendale born, Otley**
- 1730's **(late) Working for Richard Wood, York**
- 1740's **(early) Moved to London**
- 1747 **First documented client, the Earl of Burlington**
- 1748 **Married Catherine Redshaw - five boys and four girls - living at Conduit Court, Longacre**
- 1749 **Birth of Thomas Chippendale the younger**
- 1752 **Moved to Somerset Court, the Strand, Matthias Darly, draughtsman living at same address_**
- 1753 **Preparation of plates for The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director and invitation to subscribers. Moves to 60, 61 and 62 St Martin's Lane**
- 1754 **Publication of first edition of The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director in partnership with James Rannie - Chippendale & Rannie. Three hundred and thirty three copies were ordered**
- 1755 **Publication of the second edition of The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director Fire at St Martin's Lane premises**
- 1759 **Begins designs for third edition of the Director**
- 1762 **Publication of third edition of The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director**
- 1766 **Death of business partner James Rannie**
- 1767 **Visits France**
- 1771 **New partnership with Thomas Haig and Henry Ferguson Chippendale, Haig and Co**
- 1772 **Death of first wife**
- 1776 **Thomas Chippendale, the elder retired to Kensington. Business continued by Thomas Chippendale the younger until bankruptcy in 1804**
- 1777 **Marries Elizabeth Davis (one daughter and one son born posthumously)**
- 1778 **Death of Thomas Chippendale at Hoxton**
- 1804 **Bankruptcy of Thomas Chippendale Jnr**
- 1822/3 **Death of Thomas Chippendale Jnr**