

Life and Work of Thomas Chippendale

Thomas Chippendale senior was born in Otley, the small market town in the Yorkshire dales, and was baptised in the parish church there on 5th June 1718. His family had long been involved in the wood working and timber trades and he was probably received a practical apprenticeship from his father. He may well have had further training with Richard Wood, the leading furniture maker in York, before moving to London. In 1748 he married a Susan Redshaw and in due course they had nine children.

Chippendale probably worked as a journeyman cabinet maker and freelance designer before embarking on his great project, the publication of his lavish book *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director*. This appeared in 1754 and illustrated 161 engraved plates of 'Elegant and Useful Designs of Household Furniture in the Gothic, Chinese and Modern Taste'. It was almost immediately sold out and was reprinted in a second edition the following year. A third edition, with many new plates, appeared in 1762.

Chippendale's *Director* was the first attempt in England to publish a book of designs for furniture as means of self-promotion. The result was that his business immediately became known to a wide circle of potential clients and for ever afterwards his name became by-word for a distinctive rococo style.

In the same year as the publication of the *Director* in 1754 Chippendale acquired new premises at 60 – 62 St Martin's Lane, in the heart of the fashionable shopping area of London. For the next 60 years all his clients' furniture emerged from this address until 1813 when his talented son, who had inherited the business, was finally ejected following his bankruptcy.

Chippendale described himself as an 'upholder' which implied that he was able to supply his clients with furnishings of every kind. In effect he was an entrepreneur running a large business employing perhaps as many as 50 in-house craftsmen and any number of out-workers. He was the artistic director of the enterprise supervising the workforce and its production, appeasing clients and always keeping one step ahead of new fashions. Ideally he preferred long-running commissions to equip large country or town houses from attic to basement, with grand pieces for the reception rooms (including wallpapers and textiles), 'neat but substantially good' items for the family rooms, and utilitarian objects for the servants. A number of houses bear witness to this practice to this day, for example Harewood House and Nostell Priory. But Chippendale also supplied 'off the peg' items to casual customers, he seems to have had a good line, for example, in elegant hexagonal tea or work tables selling at about four guineas each. He also had an important wholesale business in importing large sheets of French mirror glass, by far the most expensive item in any furnishing scheme. He was even prepared to act as an undertaker for valued clients.



Research to date has identified over seventy of Chippendale's clients, their patronage being documented in invoices, payments in account books and entries in bank ledgers. About 600 pieces of furniture can be attributed to his workshop on the basis of documentation or convincing stylistic affinities, substantially more than any of his contemporaries or rivals. The development of his style can be traced from the *Director*-style rococo furniture made for Dumfries House (late 1750s), through the early Adam-inspired pieces for Sir Laurence Dundas (early-mid 1760s), to the mature neo-Classicism of Harewood (early 1770s), leading ultimately to the super-refined elegance of Burton Constable (late 1770s).

By this date it seems likely that his son, Thomas Chippendale junior was in control of the artistic side of the business. Chippendale senior died in 1778, having re-married the previous year and fathering another two children.

Thomas Chippendale the Younger

Thomas Chippendale junior was born in London in 1749 and was evidently trained by his father perhaps as well as receiving formal instruction in drawing. After his father's second marriage and semi-retirement in 1777 he assumed a central role in running the firm. Two years later his only publication appeared, *Sketches of Ornament*, consisting of six plates illustrating an anthology of neo-Classical motifs. He was also an occasional dealer in pictures.

After his father's death in 1779 Chippendale junior continued the business at St Martin's Lane with Thomas Haig, his father's accountant and partner who now became senior partner. After Haig's death in 1803 his executors were obliged to find large sums to pay legacies out of the capital of the business. Unable to do so, Chippendale was declared bankrupt in 1804 although he continued to trade from the St Martin's Lane premises until 1813.

Chippendale junior continued working for a number of his father's clients for example at Nostell Priory, Harewood House, Burton Constable Hall, Paxton House and Temple Newsam. His largest accredited body of work is at Stourhead, Wiltshire which contains furniture in the Egyptian and Grecian taste. His style developed along with those of his times, from an elegant attenuated neo-Classicism towards the eclectic tastes of the Regency. He married in Mary Anne Whitehead in 1793 but they appear to have had no children.

