Furniture historians have traditionally distinguished between furniture made in London and that made elsewhere in Britain by a number of criteria: function, design or style, construction, and materials. None of these is an infallible guide and some, particularly notions of design or style, are highly subjective, but with materials, usually wood, we have at least a basis of tangible, objective reality. Most furniture woods are readily recognisable and those that are not can usually be quickly identified by microscopic analysis. If we can be reasonably certain of the materials employed on a given piece of furniture, what conclusions can legitimately be drawn about provenance? Conventional wisdom holds that 'country' or vernacular furniture should be made of indigenous timber; fashionable provincial furniture might contain a mix of both indigenous and exotic, and London furniture will employ exclusively exotic or fashionable woods. This analysis is of course simplistic, but it has served the purposes of dealers, valuers, auctioneers and others in the antiques trade whose lives have been made easier by such time-honoured rules of thumb. It can also be misleading; if one substitutes 'cheap' for indigenous and 'expensive' for exotic, then contradictions immediately arise. In many areas of the country imported deal was cheaper than native wood, and might be used for archetypal vernacular pieces such as settles or dressers. Conversely, we find upholsterers in 18th century London employing native beech almost exclusively for their chair frames, while modest oak 'wainscot' furniture was a staple of most London joiners and cabinet-makers. The purpose of this article is to examine the subject of timber use in furniture-making in more detail. It seeks to determine how and why the furniture timbers used in London differed from those outside London, and whether we can use timber selection as a reliable criterion for distinguishing between British metropolitan and provincial furniture of the 18th century.

I

One of the most striking things that emerges from even a casual survey of London newspaper advertisements or stock-in-trade inventories from the first half of the 18th century is the narrow range of woods commonly used by metropolitan furniture makers. The woods most commonly advertised (and this is largely confirmed by analysis of workshop inventories) were wainscot, walnut and mahogany. To this should be added the rarely advertised but ever present deal, and beech.

This restricted range of materials can be explained by several factors. First, fashionable opinion favoured mahogany, walnut and wainscot above all others. This is borne out by domestic inventories, which reveal that most fashionable upper and middle-class London houses were furnished in these three woods, with japanned ware a substantial fourth
component. Public taste, while apparently craving novelty at every turn, was also highly conservative, and even the richest patron dare not stray too far from the approbation of his neighbours. So long as the fashionable woods were in constant supply there was simply no real demand for other less fashionable timbers.

Second, furniture-makers in London were often specialised in their work, because this was the most cost-effective way of operating in a large city with a large and diverse manufacturing base. A London frame-maker or carver rarely needed anything other than deal in his workshop, and a chair-maker might have only beech and walnut in his. Even cabinet-makers tended to stick to the middle ground of mahogany and walnut for best and wainscot for second-best furniture. Those who experimented with rare and unusual woods were very few, especially in the first half of the century. Provincial furniture makers, by contrast, needed to be more versatile. They were not only chair-makers, cabinet-makers, joiners and carvers under one roof, but sometimes also wheelwrights and carpenters. Many were also building contractors. Thus they needed timber for every eventuality, and relied heavily on local supplies as well as imported wood. The universal nature of provincial work is manifested by the enormous quantity and range of wood on hand in the workshops and stores of the Bastard family of furniture makers and builders of Blandford in Dorset, all destroyed in the devastating fire of 1731. The third and perhaps most important factor in London furniture-makers’ use of woods was their almost complete dependence on imported timber. London’s position on the Thames, bounded by hills to the north and south and with the open sea to the east meant that it was quicker and cheaper to transport timber by water than by land. Indeed, in comparison to many provincial centres, London was positively at a disadvantage when it came to some home-grown timber. In 1663 Balthazar Gerbier noted that oak timber was ‘... bought in some parts of the Country for thirty three shillings per load... and in and about London for forty-three shillings, forty foure, forty five, forty seven and fifty at the Merchants Yarde’. The high price reflected not only the cost of transportation but the fierce competition which made London a seller’s market at times of high demand. For these reasons London had long depended on seaborne trade to supply raw materials for building, joinery and furniture making. In theory this should have given London’s furniture makers access to the widest possible range of timber, but in practise this was not the case, for the economics of seaborne trade did not favour timber. For most merchants it was a cargo of ‘dernier resort’, only to be carried when no other was available. It was bulky and of low value relative to other commodities and therefore profit margins were low. The extraordinary reality of the 18th century timber trade was that it accounted for half of England’s ocean-going tonnage but only 3 per cent of its value. In the long distance trades timber was usually only carried as an adjunct to other, more profitable goods, and the sources of imported timber were therefore largely determined by wider economic factors. A typical example of this was mahogany, which at least in the early days of the trade was only imported to fill shipping space when the sugar crop fell short, and Virginia walnut, which performed the same role in the American tobacco trade. The exceptions were the Norway and Baltic timber trades, which were profitable because of the huge demand, economies of scale and the short voyage, which made several trips a year possible. In the Norway trade in particular timber was the primary commodity, accounting for more than 90 per cent of the shipping tonnage sailing between Norway
and Britain. Somewhere between the two lay wainscot oak. In medieval times this had accounted for less than 10 per cent of the Baltic trade, and it played a similarly small role in the 18th century, when Holland was the major supplier. In both cases, however, wainscot was a staple, with a steady demand and therefore a ready market. As such it was a reliable standby when there was any spare capacity after other Dutch commodities such as tiles, brick, linen and metalwares had been loaded. Although not of high value, the relatively large quantities and short sea voyage made wainscot a viable article to carry.

The concentration of shipping effort on just a few fundamental raw materials was made necessary by the sheer scale of demand in the capital. It was essential that timber could be supplied in the quantities needed to sustain London's ever-growing demand. In this respect furniture making was essentially an adjunct to the construction industry. In 1730, for instance, more than 2.3 million deals and 157,846 wainscot boards were imported into London. The majority of the former and a large part of the latter were consumed in shipbuilding, domestic construction and civil engineering, with the remainder being mostly employed for furniture. Even if domestic timber could compete on cost, it was not available in either the quantity or the consistent quality needed. Imported deal and wainscot, therefore, were the twin foundations on which the London furniture trade rested, without which the Georgian furniture industry could not have existed.

As the figures just cited reveal, deal was by far the most plentiful timber in London, but furniture made from it was almost never advertised by furniture makers. It was reserved strictly for the most mundane furniture, such as kitchen tables, dressers and shelves, or for secondary uses in carcase work. The significant exception to this was among carvers, for whom deal was the most commonly used wood, but of course the deal itself was rarely seen, being hidden under paint or gilding. There was a hierarchy of quality, beginning with 'Christiana best yellow', through 'Christiana best white', 'Yellow Dram', 'Crokery', &c., all taking their name from the port of shipment and almost all, until well after 1760, coming from Norway. Red and yellow deal (Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris*) was the most expensive, typically 1 1/2d. - 2d. per foot, because it was the strongest and most durable, and therefore most in demand, but cabinet-makers generally preferred white deal (Norway spruce, *Picea abies*) which was less resinous, lighter and easier to work. Veneered carcases, dustboards and drawer linings tended therefore to be of white deal rather than red. Deals generally came in thicknesses of between one and three inches, but few furniture makers stocked anything thicker than 2 1/2", which was known as a 'double deal'; Richard Roberts had sixty-three 'double white Deals' among his stock in 1733. For cabinet-makers, 1" or 1 1/4" deals formed the basis of most carcase work, being used whole (but planed smooth to about 7/8") for carcase sides or 'slit' to about 5/8" or 1/2" for dustboards and drawers (Figures 1 & 2). Carvers often required thicker scantlings, but mirror and picture frames were frequently made of deals pieced up to the required thickness. Later in the eighteenth century higher import duties tended to encourage the importation of thicker deals up to 3" thick, which had then to be sawn down to the required dimensions. Deal furniture occurs commonly in London domestic inventories, usually placed in garrets, kitchens, offices and cellars. Because poor households are underrepresented in inventories it is likely that the incidence of deal furniture was much higher than is apparent from the surviving evidence, and many poor houses may have been furnished entirely with deal.
Unlike deal, wainscot was a highly visible furnishing material which, however, has largely been ignored by furniture scholars and the antiques trade. Virtually every London furniture maker’s trade label printed before 1740 mentions wainscot furniture alongside walnut and mahogany. There was certainly a hierarchy of value and cost, but wainscot was by no means a poor man’s furniture. Among the London makers whose labelled wainscot furniture survives are Coxed and Woster, Benjamin Crook, John Gatehouse, Edward Newman, William Palleday and John Phillips. These pieces are linked by their plain, workmanlike style, neat construction and the peculiar blandness of grain and figure which characterises wainscot oak. Unlike many provincial pieces of this date, which might employ oak throughout, London makers tended to favour deal for dustboards and other secondary purposes. The chest of drawers by Edward Newman is a case in point (Figure 3). Although of joined construction with side-hung drawers, it is stylistically neat and understated, with modish bracket feet made by thicknessing the lower extensions of the stiles. It is constructed of pale, straight-grained and slow-grown wainscot oak with dustboards and backboards of deal. In most cases the pale colour, slow, even growth and straight grain readily identify the oak as wainscot, although as Robert Campbell remarked in the London Tradesman, some wainscot-quality oak was
The easiest way to determine whether the wood is imported or indigenous is to look on the undersides of drawers or the backs of carcases for the characteristic signature of the Dutch sawmills, a fine, regular kerf which is quite different from the irregular cuts made by English pit saws (Figures 4 & 5).

If newspaper advertisements and trade cards are reliable indicators, wainscot furniture gradually fell from favour in London from about 1740 onwards. As we shall see, one reason for this was competition from mahogany which, except for a brief period in the 1750s and 1760s, was almost always on a par with or only slightly more expensive than wainscot. This means that good quality wainscot furniture tends to be characteristic of London before c.1760 but not after, and this is consistent with the surviving labelled pieces, which almost all date from the first half of the eighteenth century.

The same factors of availability, cost and quality which determined the use of imported deal and wainscot instead of native timber applied to more fashionable woods such as walnut and mahogany. Although we cannot make any reliable estimate of the quantities of home-grown walnut used in London, we can certainly do so for the imported variety. To take one year at random, in 1750 walnut valued at £1,581 was imported from North America, and £757 from Europe, amounting in all to about 571 tons. The prevalence of
imported walnut, particularly American, is reflected in records of furniture-makers’ stock-in-trade, in which ‘Virginia’ walnut is cited consistently from the 1720s to the 1760s, with English walnut making only an occasional appearance. For instance, on 13th March 1725 the widow Gammage (wife of the late chair maker Robert Gammage of St Paul’s Churchyard) advertised for sale ‘Mahogenny Wood, Virginia Walnut, English Walnut, and Walnut-Tree Wood for Gun Stocks’. Another example, remarkable because it does specify English walnut in sizeable quantities, is the inventory of Richard Roberts, taken in 1733. In his yard and workshop he had ‘... five hundred seventy two feet of three Inch English Walnut, seventy one feet and a half of two Inch the same, two hundred and forty two feet of four Inch the same, three hundred and twenty three feet and a half of Inch and a half...’. Nevertheless, his finished stock included a number of ‘Virginia’ chairs. Virginia walnut continued to feature in the stock of London furniture makers into the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1760 Paul Saunders had ‘306 Foot of Inch Virginia Walnut Tree’ valued at 1s. a foot (the same price as his mahogany, of which he had nearly 12,000 feet), and in 1763 William Linnell had a considerable quantity of walnut chairs on hand in various stages of manufacture.

The North American trade was vital to the survival of walnut as a primary furniture wood, but the wood was only carried as a supplement to the trade in tobacco and other more lucrative cargoes. The price, generally between 3d. and 12d. per foot depending on
quality, was in effect subsidised by those commodities, and by the government, which waived import duties on American timber from 1721 onwards. The same concessions were not granted to walnut from Europe, which was subject to import duties of between 20 and 30 per cent, and much more in the case of importations from France. These were partly offset by lower freight costs due to the shorter sea voyage, but it nevertheless meant that walnut imported from Europe had to be of sufficient quality to merit paying the duty. It is likely that whereas most of the American walnut was used in the solid, particularly for chair-making, much European walnut was cut into veneers. Indeed, occasional annotations in the customs returns mention that walnut imported from France and Holland in particular came in the form of ‘faneers.’ The much-vaunted ‘Grenoble’ walnut, famously praised by John Evelyn in 1679, is the best example of this high-end trade. It is a moot point whether all these highly figured veneers actually came from Grenoble, particularly as the French government prohibited exportation of walnut from France after 1720. More probably, ‘Grenoble’ wood began as a description of provenance and became a trade term for veneer-quality walnut timber. It still had a cachet long after it ceased to be available on the London market. ‘Grenoble wood’ is one of the specimens employed on a remarkable Chinoiserie specimen wood cabinet of about 1760 in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.

Although importations of walnut remained steady, averaging over £1,000 per annum into the 1760s, the wood became increasingly insignificant compared with mahogany. From 1725 the value of annual importations of mahogany regularly exceeded those of walnut from all sources, and mahogany rapidly became an indispensable staple. Furniture pundits have tended to attribute the decline in popularity of walnut furniture to the importation of mahogany, but the import statistics do not reveal any clear link between the two. Indeed, the peak year for walnut importations from all sources was 1765. There was, however, an apparent link between the importation of mahogany and the decline of wainscot furniture, and it may be no coincidence that importations of wainscots into London peaked in 1720. Although one of the factors contributing to this decline must have been the increasing use of painted deal rather than plain wainscot for wall panelling and other interior joinery, it was also the case that mahogany came to be used for many purposes hitherto reserved for wainscot. As well as for furniture making, it was used for high-class joinery, doors and doorcases, staircases and even floors. In 1720, 190,773 wainscots were imported into London, equivalent to about 400 tons. In 1728 the mahogany imported into London amounted to 484 tons, and from 1750 the amount regularly exceeded 2,000 tons. It is an extraordinary fact that from the late 1720s onwards mahogany was more abundant in London than wainscot, which probably accounts not only for the decline in wainscot importations but also for the almost complete disappearance of wainscot furniture from the repertoire of London furniture makers by about 1760. In essence, the advent of mahogany relegated wainscot to a secondary wood. In terms of price, mahogany was on par with wainscot throughout the 1720s and 1730s (between 3d. and 5d. per foot), and although mahogany prices rose sharply in the 1740s and 50s, this was countered by the increasing use of veneers, and by the importation of cheaper Rattan mahogany from the Mosquito Shore. The arrival of large quantities of Honduras mahogany in the 1770 and 1780s all but killed off the Dutch wainscot trade because it caused the price of the cheapest mahogany to drop to 4d. per foot
(and sometimes less), significantly below that of wainscot. In 1770 only 53,607 wainscots were imported into London (about 111 tons) compared with over 4,000 tons of mahogany. At the peak of the trade in 1788 more than 30,000 tons of mahogany were imported into England and Wales. It is hard economic facts like these, rather than the connoisseurial discussions of R. W. Symonds, which reveal the true impact of mahogany on Georgian furniture making. The only branch of the 18th century timber trade to employ more shipping than mahogany was the North European deal trade.

In contrast to mahogany, other exotics such as ebony or rosewood from Africa and the Far East came in only sparingly, because the ships were relatively few, space was at a premium and the costs were high. The timbers routinely carried by the East India Company and by vessels trading to West Africa were dyewoods such as red sanders (Pterocarpus santalinum) and sappan wood (Caesalpina sappan) from Asia and camwood (Baphia nitida) and bar wood (Pterocarpus spp.) from West Africa. For these there was always a demand in the European dyeing industries, and they were cheap to carry because, being shipped in short pieces and billets, they occupied otherwise redundant space among other, more profitable goods. In the parlance of the time they were used to ‘dunnage’ the hold.

Because of the generally high freight costs, merchants were reluctant to speculate in timbers which were unfamiliar or for which there was not a guaranteed market. This was why mahogany was not generally imported until duty was removed in 1721, and the same reasoning applied in trades to other parts of the world and other woods. Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on dyewood, furniture woods from both Africa and Asia were available, at a price. For ebony (Diospyros spp.) there was always a small demand, not only among furniture makers but among turners and musical and mathematical instrument makers. Ebony was imported both from Asia and West Africa, but the most abundant variety was a false ‘ebony’ imported from the West Indies. This was cocus wood (Brya ebenus), otherwise known as Jamaica wood or Jamaica ebony. Because of the greater number of ships in the West India trade and the shorter voyage, cocus wood was both more plentiful and cheaper than the genuine article, and for many purposes suited equally well.

Rosewood furniture occurs in a number of domestic inventories and newspaper advertisements in the first half of the eighteenth century. This was not Brazilian rosewood but what is now called padouk (Pterocarpus spp.). It was called rosewood because of its rosy colour, not its scent, and was imported both as timber and in the form of furniture, most of which latter came from Canton. Other varieties of padouk were imported from West Africa, and marketed as red wood, Angola or Guinea wood. The Daily Advertiser of 10 February 1744 carried an advertisement for ‘a Great Quantity of Chairs made of Walnut-Tree, Mahogany, Rosewood, Angola or Guiney wood.’ The last two were synonyms for barwood, which was the trade name for various African species of Pterocarpus usually imported as dyewood. The use of these exotics is associated with a group of elite London furniture attributed (on somewhat tenuous grounds) to John Channon, Frederick Hintz and others. Padouk furniture was certainly not uniquely a London product, however. A number of pieces attributed to the Edinburgh cabinet maker Francis Brodie are known, of which a documented example survives at Dumfries House. It is nevertheless fair to say that because of its high price and limited availability, padouk
was unlikely often to be available outside London, Edinburgh and perhaps one or two other major ports. The quantity imported was never very large. Although accurate figures are impossible to determine, because of the unknown quantity of private trade carried in by East India Company Officers, official importations of rosewood from Asia never exceeded 48 hundredweight per annum between 1720 and 1760.16

Shipping costs were not the only factor limiting the availability of exotic woods. Equally important was the complex arrangement of laws governing the trade of Great Britain with the rest of the world. From 1651 onwards the Navigation Acts ensured that all trade between Britain and its colonies was restricted to British or colonial shipping — foreign vessels were excluded. Most of the European powers imposed similar rules with regard to their own colonies, with the consequence that it was not easy to obtain raw materials from parts of the world not within Britain’s direct control. For instance, it was not until the Anglo-Portuguese trade treaty of 1808 that British vessels were allowed to trade directly with Brazil, which is why Brazilian rosewood (Dalbergia nigra) was not commonly used in British furniture making until the beginning of nineteenth century. Similarly, the most popular woods for high-status French furniture (amaranthe, bois satiné, bois violette and bois de rose) were generally unavailable in Britain because they were imported directly from Cayenne to France and could only be obtained in England with difficulty.

The number of native woods employed by London furniture makers before 1760 was also limited. By far the most important was beech, of which Defoe tells us a ‘vast Quantity’ was shipped down the Thames from the Chilterns for the use of turners and chair-makers, as well as for firewood.17 Beech chairs are cited on trade labels, such as that of Francis Thompson, turner and chair maker in St John’s Lane, who sold ‘all Sorts of dy’d Beach Chairs’ about 1750.18 The presence of a substantial quantity of beech in a furniture maker’s inventory is a clear indication that the man was a chair maker (either joiner or turner) and not a cabinet maker. In 1733 Richard Roberts had beech in four, three, and two-inch planks, together with a number of beech clapboards (for splats?).19 The joiner Robert Loveland had cane, walnut and 675 foot of beech plank in his workshop when he died in 1706, as well as a quantity of chairs both finished and unfinished.20 Thomas Perkins, a joiner with premises in the parish of St Giles Cripplegate in 1723, must also have been a chairmaker, for his materials comprised walnut and beech in planks, quarters and clapboards.21

Other native timbers were used in much smaller quantities. Native oak does not feature in any furniture makers inventories so far examined, although it was employed by carpenters and joiners for structural work. The accounts of the Commissioners for Building Fifty New Churches contain prices quoted for deal, wainscot and oak between about 1712 and 1730, and reveal that oak timber cost between 3 and 4 shillings per cubic foot, or 3.4d. per superficial foot.22 This was cheaper than wainscot (quoted at 5-6d.), but it could not compete on quality, consistency or ease of working. Ultimately, wainscot was the more cost effective option.

Two other important British timbers, ash and elm, are similarly absent from London furniture makers’ stock-in-trade. No doubt they were used occasionally; a desk labelled by Henry Bell (fl.1736-40, successor to Coxed and Woster at the White Swan in St Paul’s Churchyard), apparently veneered with elm, has been recorded.23 Six ‘sweep back’ elm
chairs survive at Aske Hall out of a total of 18 supplied by Thomas Chippendale in 1764. A survey of later 18th century London domestic inventories has uncovered no ash furniture and only one piece of elm – an oval table recorded in the parlour of Thomas Marriot of Clerkenwell in 1779.

Fruitwoods are often discussed in generic terms, but each variety was used for quite different purposes. Pear (Pyrus communis) was undoubtedly the most commonly used fruitwood in London. It occurs in furniture makers' inventories both in the solid and as a veneer. Solid pear-tree frames were commonly advertised by picture-frame makers, while the veneers were usually employed by cabinet makers as a ground for japanning. Much, perhaps most, early and mid-eighteenth century japanned case furniture was first veneered with pear wood, both to eliminate the laborious process of preparing the carcase with gesso and to protect the japanning against movement in the carcase. In 1731 the cabinet-maker Samuel Jakeman had 'a parcel of Holly Peartree & Wallnuttree Finiers' in his working garrets. Nearly thirty years later, Paul Saunders had '461 Foot of inch Pear Tree' valued at 3d. a foot, and in 1763 William Linnell had 'a parcel of pear and wallnut tree' among his stock.

The two other common British fruitwoods, cherry and plum (Prunus spp.) are absent from London furniture makers' inventories before 1750, and occur only sparingly thereafter. Paul Saunders had '146 Foot of 2 Inch Cherry Tree' in stock in 1760, valued at £1.5s. per hundred (3d. per foot). It is not clear what this was used for, but the dimensions might suggest chair wood rather than case furniture. In 1772, six cherry tree chairs with check cases were recorded in the London inventory of Thomas Robinson. These were in the nursery, whereas the better rooms were furnished with mahogany. It is possible that cherry was used as a cheaper alternative to mahogany, to which it has a passing resemblance if stained.

Holly (Ilex aquifolium) is not commonly found in London inventories before 1750, but it was undoubtedly used in small quantities. It was chiefly a marquetry wood, and can be found used for panels of Berainisesque or 'filigree' marquetry on case furniture and on chairs, usually on the splat or legs.

'Ewe' veneers are cited in the inventory of Lazarus Stiles, who died in 1724. Although not common, burr yew veneers have been recorded on a number of high quality (probably) London-made pieces of case furniture of the 1720s and 1730s. Burr yew was probably present in small quantities throughout the century, occasionally coming to the fore with particular makers such as Mayhew and Ince, but rarely being used except as a veneer.

The 'Mapell' (Acer campestris), of which Lazarus Stiles had 72 pieces in his workshop in 1724, was probably also in burr form. It may have been stained in colours; the best known exponents of stained burr maple veneers were John Coxed and his successors, Grace Coxed and Thomas Woster, but there were undoubtedly others. Another form of maple was marketed as 'air wood'. This was curled or 'fiddleback' maple, at least some of which was imported from Germany, and was mainly used by the makers of stringed instruments. The Evening Post of 30 May 1723 contained an advertisement by William Tabel 'the famous Harpsichordmaker' who had 'some fine Airs-wood for finishing the insides, to dispose of.'

Limewood was also undoubtedly used in the early eighteenth century, but seems to have been a speciality of carvers, for it has not yet been found in furniture makers' inventories before 1760.
While there was clearly a demand for native woods of various kinds and for various purposes, it is important to recognize that, with the exception of beech, at no time did they represent more than a small fraction of the total timber on the London market. Similarly, exotics such as ebony and rosewood were available only in very limited quantity. It was deal, mahogany, wainscot and walnut, in descending order of magnitude, which dominated the London timber market in the first half of the century.

II

Of the many factors influencing the availability of furniture timbers outside London, the most important was undoubtedly geography. Furniture makers in landlocked, mountainous areas with poor roads, such as mid- and north Wales and the Pennines, were almost wholly reliant on local resources. It is no accident that traditional furniture forms made with indigenous woods – joined chests, dressers, press cupboards – persisted longest in these areas, for cultural conservatism and poor communications and transport went hand in hand. The difficulty of transporting timber any distance in the mountainous areas of Wales was recently highlighted by Richard Bebb, who reproduced the following comments of a Liverpool shipwright attempting to source timber in Merioneth in 1763:

Here are several fine parcels of timber inland; but the county is so mountainous, that no carriage can be drawn. And after the timber has been cut down, they have been obliged to saw it into boards, or thin planks, and transport them over the hills, by a single planks fastened to each side of a horse.45

To lesser degree, the questions of geography affected all parts of the nation, not only in terms of the availability of materials, but also in social or cultural priorities. Janet Sleep's research has shown that there was a clear difference in furnishing priorities between urban and rural households in Norfolk, for instance. The former tended to adopt new fashions in furniture rapidly, the latter to hold on to traditional forms and to spend their money on land, buildings and livestock rather than consumables.46

The contrast between furniture makers in isolated rural communities and their contemporaries in major seaports was marked. In Hull, Bristol, Liverpool or Lancaster, furniture makers could generally obtain the same imported woods as their London counterparts, and they also derived supplies from their immediate hinterland and from the coastwise trade. Susan Stuart has shown how in Lancaster Gillows obtained a range of foreign woods equal to their London rivals, as well as getting native timber from the minor ports of north-western England and south-western Scotland.47 In addition, any timber within about two days' carriage by land (perhaps 20–30 miles) was usually economically viable. Again, the Gillow archive is informative on this topic; in 1790 the firm purchased ash trees from Burton-in-Lonsdale, about fifteen miles from Lancaster.48 They also bought lime trees from Clitheroe (50 miles by road, or perhaps by sea via Preston) and fir trees from Claughton (8 miles).49 Scarce large or shaped timber for particular jobs, particularly for engineering, house and ship-building, often travelled much further.

Between these two extremes there was a varied mix of indigenous and imported
materials, in proportions depending largely on local circumstances. Although there must have been an element of tradition or customary usage in some of the choices in furniture woods, particularly in areas with strong independent cultural traditions (Wales is again a foremost example of this), for most provincial furniture makers the most important considerations were demand and price. A local manufacturing base for fashionable furniture made of imported woods could only exist where there was sufficient demand, and this presupposed a substantial population of affluent, fashion-conscious clientele. Newspapers reveal that from about 1720 onwards many provincial cities and large towns had such a population to which furniture makers directed their advertisements. The Lincoln chair maker Edward Mason placed the following advertisement in the Stamford Mercury of 23 August 1722:

These are to give Notice that all Persons that have Occasions for fine Chairs of the Newest Fashion; crooked Back with French or Claw feet, or of any stain upon the polished Work, that they may be furnished by Edward Mason, Chair-Maker in St Martin's Stamford Baron, as cheap as London, and the work as Good.50

Where the demand for smart furniture existed there were clearly furniture makers willing to satisfy it, but their ability to do so depended greatly on the availability, at reasonable cost, of raw materials. For every mile that a balk, plank or board was transported, and for every change of carriage from ship to barge to wagon to packhorse, the price went up. And whereas silk thread or packets of tea were light and easy to carry even into the mountain fastnesses of Wales, timber was not.

The key to the transport network for timber was water, for this was the easiest and cheapest way to carry bulky goods, and it therefore follows that one of the primary determinants of the availability of imported timber was the distance from the nearest navigable waterway. Even before the canal age surprisingly large areas of England were accessible via the major rivers and their tributaries, particularly from the North Sea. Figure 6 shows the extent of the navigable waterways of England and Wales up to 1750. One of the most noticeable features of the map is the marked difference between the east and west sides of the country in terms of their accessibility to water transport. Large areas of eastern England were accessible by water, including the industrial and cloth producing heartlands of Yorkshire, the east Midlands, East Anglia and the Thames valley. The rivers Tyne, Wear and Tees gave access by water into County Durham and northern Pennine dales. The great port of Hull at the head of the Humber estuary was the gateway to the East Riding of Yorkshire via the rivers Hull and Derwent, the North Riding via the Ouse as far beyond York as Boroughbridge, and via the Aire to Leeds and the Don to Sheffield. Also from the Humber, the River Trent wound south into Lincolnshire then west through Newark, Nottingham and Derby. Defoe relates that inland navigation from King's Lynn via the Ouse and Cam 'supplied about six Counties wholly, and three Counties in Part, with their Goods.'51 The furthest navigable points were, from east to west, Thetford, Bury St Edmunds, Cambridge and Bedford. Barges could also sail up the Nene to Peterborough, up the Welland to Stamford, and up the Whitham beyond Lincoln. From there they could navigate into the River Trent and into the East Midlands.51 Even apparently minor rivers were significant channels of trade. The citizens of Norwich received their overseas goods
6. English rivers and canals navigable by 1750.

*The author*
from the port of Yarmouth, from where it was shipped up the rivers Yare and Wensum in vessels with a draught of less than three feet.\(^5\) The river Thames gave access to central southern England at least as far as Oxford, while most of the south coast ports afforded some limited penetration into the southern counties.

In contrast, the west of England was served by only one major river, the Severn, and its tributaries. It is, however, Britain’s longest river, extending from the Bristol Channel into the heart of the west Midlands and the Welsh marches. Mid- and north Wales, the western Pennines and the Lake District had no navigable waterways to speak of. Some of north Cheshire and south Lancashire was accessible via the Mersey, Irwell and other rivers, which partly explains the commercial rise of both Liverpool and Manchester.

So it was not so much the difficult terrain that made some areas inaccessible as the lack of navigation. The importance of inland navigation to commerce and hence prosperity was eloquently expressed in a petition from the cloth merchants of Wakefield to Parliament in 1699. They complained that they had to take their goods ‘twenty-two miles by land carriage [to Rawcliffe, where the river Aire became navigable], the expense whereof is not only very chargeable, but they are forced to stay two months sometimes while the roads are passable to market, and many times the goods receive considerable damage, through the badness of the roads by overturning.’\(^5\) The subsequent Act of Parliament resulted in the rivers Calder (to Wakefield) and Aire (to Leeds) being made navigable before 1720. The rise of both Leeds and Wakefield, and indeed most of south and west Yorkshire, as centres of commerce and industry was a direct consequence of this development.

For the great majority of furniture makers in provincial England the question was therefore not ‘Is the wood available?’ but ‘How much will it cost?’ Inland water freight rates for timber were typically between 3 and 6 shilling per ton per mile.\(^5\) At the lower rate a journey of ten miles added three farthings to the cost of a foot of mahogany, an increase of about 20 per cent at 1730s prices, to which wharfage and tolls must also be added. This was not cheap, but certainly cheaper than land carriage. Of course, as the prime cost of mahogany and other woods rose, the relative cost of transport was reduced, so that freight costs fell in relative terms between 1720 and 1800. As we shall see, improvements in both water and road transport in the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century also meant that costs fell in absolute terms, which was a major factor in widening the availability of imported timber. The availability of exotic timbers many miles from the sea, even at an early date, is demonstrated by the number of provincial furniture makers advertising mahogany furniture before 1740. A trawl through the Dictionary of English Furniture Makers reveals mahogany furniture being advertised in almost every part of England by this date: John Bickadike of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Joseph Hall of Hull, Thomas Harrison of Middleham (Wensleydale), Humphrey Hands of Warwick, John Pearce of Derby, Samuel Lockwood of Ipswich, Francis Lomax of Shrewsbury.\(^6\) The availability of mahogany in ports is not surprising, but its presence Middleham, Derby, Warwick and Shrewsbury is testament to the fact that imported wood reached even the most landlocked towns, provided they were on or near a navigable river. In 1720 the merchants of Derby and Lichfield petitioned Parliament to improve the navigation on the River Weaver because it was by this route that they received their West Indian goods from Liverpool.\(^7\)
The availability of both mahogany and American walnut outside the metropolis was one of the more unexpected consequences of the abolition of duty on American colonial timber in 1721. Prior to 1721, more than 97 per cent of the walnut imported into England came into London, and less than 3 per cent into outports. Between 1723 and 1760, while the figures for European walnut remained much the same, the average coming from North America into outports rose to 29 per cent of the total, and in some years was as much as 90 per cent. The equivalent figure for mahogany was 21 per cent. Thus, although London continued to dominate the market in furniture timbers and hence furniture production, the imbalance was no longer so marked. Furniture makers in the principal west coast ports - Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster - benefitted most, because these traded directly to the West Indies and North America. They therefore got their mahogany and Virginia walnut on the same or slightly better terms than their London rivals. It is probably fair to say that Gillows of Lancaster would have remained a merely local concern, similar perhaps to the Bastards of Blandford, without the Naval Stores Act of 1721.

Secondary ports received their timber coastwise from the primary importers. Some indication of the sums involved in transporting wood by sea can be gleaned from the Gillow archive. Having rapidly outgrown the supplies available in Lancaster, they regularly bought timber in Liverpool and shipped it coastwise, the freight for the short sea journey of 60 odd miles being charged at between 2½d. and 3d. per cubic foot. With incidental charges (insurance, wharfage, porterage etc.), the cost of bringing timber from Liverpool rather than importing direct into Lancaster amounted to 3 farthings per superficial foot. This may not sound much, but in 1770 it represented an increase of between 30 and 50 per cent in the cost of deal, 25 per cent in oak and 12.5 per cent in Honduras mahogany. The higher cost of imported raw materials in anywhere other than primary ports was probably the principal reason why provincial furniture makers sometimes felt obliged to advertise their wares as ‘as cheap as London’. To do so they had to offset higher timber prices with lower overheads and labour costs. In 1744 Thomas Ivory of Norwich offered to supply mahogany timber to the trade at London prices plus the cost of transport to Norwich, which neatly encapsulates the problem faced by timber dealers and furniture makers outside the primary West India ports.

The main consequence of the higher cost of imported timber in inland locations was that it had to be used sparingly. This seems to be the logic behind a provincial style which was probably common to many areas of Britain, in which oak was employed as the primary timber with mahogany used only for crossbanding and other details. This typically British aesthetic can be found on all articles of domestic furniture except chairs, including long case clocks. Because the dials of clocks are usually signed, these ought to be a sound guide to the areas where this type of furniture was made. No systematic study has yet been done, but it seems a straightforward task. One suspects, however, that the style was almost universal, which would be no help in settling questions of provenance, but it would demonstrate that most areas developed common solutions to a common problem.

One clear difference between the east and west of England, so far as imported timber was concerned, was in the source of their high quality oak. Dutch wainscot, the staple of the London furniture trade, was essentially a material characteristic of the east and south of England. Between 1700 and 1780, from 40 to 90 per cent of the wainscots annually
imported into England went into London, and the average was 64 per cent. Of the rest, the lion’s share went into east coast ports (including Leith, for Edinburgh), because that was where most of the trade between Holland and England was carried. In 1730 Edward Webster of St Neots, Huntingdonshire, was able to advertise furniture in ‘Wallnutt, Mahogany or Wainscot’ because although he was situated well inland, his wainscot could be shipped all the way down the Great Ouse from Kings Lynn. Some wainscot was also shipped coastwise from London and, either directly or indirectly, the south coast was well supplied – in the Bastard’s workshops at Blandford, Dorset (1731), there were several hundred wainscot boards of varying sizes. Comparatively little wainscot made it round the Lizard, however. Most West Country ports were concerned either with the African, West Indian and North American trades or with Southern Europe; relatively few vessels traded with northern Europe. Coastwise trade from London or the east coast was also limited, with the result that wainscot was less plentiful in Bristol than its economic status merited. Nevertheless, there are sufficient references to ‘Dutch oak’ in furniture makers’ bills to demonstrate that it was both available and held in high regard. In 1750 the pews of Christ Church, Bristol, were fitted out and fronted with ‘good Dutch oak well matched as to Colour and free from Sap’, and for the Mansion House in 1785 were supplied ‘4 Large Dutch Oak Dining Tables’. Further inland it was perhaps a different story. The Port Books for Gloucester, upstream from Bristol and a major inland port, reveal that very little of the timber shipped up the Severn from Bristol was wainscot. This may be why Francis Lomax of Shrewsbury advertised (c. 1730) a very wide range of fashionable furniture, including mahogany, walnut and cane furniture, but neglected to mention wainscot. Further north the absence of Dutch wainscot was almost complete. It does not occur in the stock advertised by Liverpool timber dealers, nor in furniture makers’ advertisements in Liverpool, Manchester, Chester and Lancaster, the four principal furniture-making centres of the north-west. When William Wells of Manchester sold off his stock in 1766, it consisted of ‘Dining Tables, Falling Tables, Chest of Drawers of different Sizes, Mahogany, Walnut and Oak Chairs of different Patterns’. The substitution of ‘oak’ for ‘wainscot’ was typical and consistent.

The absence of Dutch wainscot from the north-west of England is particularly well documented in the Gillow archive. There are very few references to wainscot in the Gillow archive before 1800 and where they do occur it seems to have been Baltic oak that was meant, not Dutch. It was often specified as Dantzig or Riga oak, and only sometimes described as wainscot. It was shipped, usually in the form of planks, to north-west England as part of the wider trade in Baltic naval stores and deals on which the shippers of the north-west ports depended. These raw materials were the return cargoes of a large export trade in Cheshire salt (and later Manchester cloth) to Germany and the Baltic. Oak was only a small part of the Baltic trade, but it was sufficient on the whole to keep furniture-makers and joiners supplied, at a price. At Lancaster in 1740 Gillows were buying English oak at 3–4d. and Danzig oak at 6d. per foot. The high price of the Danzig timber was the consequence of the long sea voyage to England’s north-west coast, and it meant that the firm sometimes paid almost as much for high quality oak as it did for mahogany. Therefore, even though they were operating in a primary port, Gillows was at a considerable disadvantage in respect of this crucial timber compared with their eastern and southern competitors. This may explain their emphasis on mahogany from
the inception of the business in 1728.71

The change of nomenclature between east and west, from wainscot to oak, is consistent in inventories and advertisements, and represents a clear division between those furniture makers who received their timber via east coast ports and those who did not. The notional dividing line between the two was created by the watershed of the highest navigable points of the rivers flowing into the North Sea. Derby had wainscot, but Stafford, twenty-five miles to the west, did not. In theory it would be possible to map this east/west divide by dendrochronological analysis, and the source of imported oak might in future be a means of distinguishing between furniture from the east and west of England. However, much depends on the putative date of the furniture. From the 1770s importations of Dutch wainscot began to decline, and wainscot logs from the Baltic (principally Prussia and Russia) were imported in increasing quantities into London and other east coast ports.73

Because of their geographical position the west coast ports were well placed to take advantage of the influx of North American timber after the 1765 Timber Act.74 Although North American timber had been free of duty since 1721, secondary woods like oak and softwoods were rarely shipped, because the cost for freight made them commercially unviable. The 1765 Act offered, among other things, 20 shillings bounty on every 120 ‘Deals, Planks, and Boards’ imported from the North American colonies. As a consequence, American oak and pine began to appear in English timber yards. Gillows were using American white oak by 1772 (and probably before), and it was available at a good price, typically 2½ d. per superficial foot.75 This was cheaper than Danzig and almost as cheap as local timber. In fact, Liverpool and Lancaster got their American timber cheaper than London. In London in 1776 American white oak cost about 4d. per foot.76 This was about 30 per cent cheaper than wainscot, but it was widely regarded as being inferior in quality. The trade in American oak and pine was brought to an abrupt end by the outbreak of war in the colonies in 1776, and only resuming on a significant scale in the 1790s. On the whole, North American secondary woods did not make a significant impact on the British market until the early 19th century, when Canadian timber began to be imported in large quantities for the first time.

The question of geography was less crucially important where native timber was concerned. In most parts of the country oak, elm, ash and beech were locally available, as were less commonly used woods such as sycamore, holly, cherry and other fruitwoods. The Bastard inventory of 1731 lists large quantities of English oak in balk, plank and boards, elm in boards and ash in plank, board and ‘square stuff’. The oak was valued at between 2d. and 3d. per foot, the elm 2d. and the ash 1½d. There is little indication of the use to which each timber was put. Some half-inch oak was used ‘for saishes’ (glazing bars?), some ‘Inch & ½ Norway oak’ for floor boards, some oak for ‘pillars for bedsteads, and there was half a load of old oak timber ‘for building.’ The general impression is that most of the indigenous timber went into the Bastard’s joinery and building business rather than furniture making. It may be significant that although the firm certainly made chairs – ‘2 doz: walnut chairs near finished’ – there was no beech wood in stock. The use of oak, ash or elm for chair rails and frames rather than beech may well be an indication of provincial manufacture.

For fashionable furniture the Bastards had plenty of walnut, both English and ‘foreign’
whether European or American is unspecified), in two grades of quality ('fine' and 'common'), in the form of planks, boards and veneers. They also had mahogany, although not in sufficient quantity to be enumerated. Their aspirations did not end there, for the firm clearly had the capacity to produce japanned furniture. Not only did they have ‘3 large stocks of pare tree veneers’, but also all the ‘Utensils for Japanning work of all kinds, wth gold and silver and all other pouders, & speckels with Indian prints &c patterns of all sorts &c gold size.’ Inlaid or marquetry work is suggested by ‘one Stock of Holley veneers’. It is likely that ‘plumbtree and cherry tree plank about a load...’ was probably destined for furniture whereas, as we have seen, such woods would have been uncommon in a London workshop of similar date.

This mix of imported and native woods was typical of most large provincial concerns. Mid-eighteenth century furniture-makers in Aberdeen advertised furniture of mahogany, walnut, cherry, beech, elm, oak, plane (sycamore) and laburnum.\(^7\) In the Port Books for Gloucester are recorded shipments of mahogany, walnut, oak and wainscot, deal, beech, elm, ash and others, all moving upriver to supply woodworkers in the West Midlands and Welsh Marches before 1750.\(^8\) In Norwich in October 1764 the cabinet-maker James Bird advertised ‘Oak Timber... Walnut-tree Plank, Ash, Elm, Pear-tree, Cherry-tree...’.\(^9\) The documentary evidence tallies with the survival of large quantities of semi-fashionable, well-made but unspectacular furniture made from native timber in all parts of the country. The majority was likely to have been made in urban or large village workshops, to which middle-class customers from the town and surrounding countryside took their custom. The much-quoted Parson Woodforde is probably typical of the breed: living comfortably a dozen miles north of Norwich, he patronised several Norwich furniture makers, buying a range of modest but fashionable furniture both new and second hand.\(^8\)

But this is a little-researched area; furniture scholars have been happy to concentrate on London makers, and more recently on vernacular ones, but provincial makers supplying the ‘middling sort’ have been neglected.

Although the principal native timbers occur in every part of the British mainland except the far north of Scotland, it is worth considering whether there were regional preferences in timber use, and if so, were they consistent enough to be of diagnostic value? Only one, the use of laburnum in parts of Scotland, seems to be sufficiently well documented to be a reliable means of attribution.\(^8\) The Scots or wych elm (Ulmus glabra, formerly U. montana) has also recently been highlighted as an important Scottish timber, used principally in chairmaking.\(^8\) While there are difficulties in applying this hypothesis in any given example, because it is not possible to differentiate U. glabra from other elms by microscopic analysis, it seems plausible, and may have basis in a simple woodworking rationale. Unlike most elms, which are often difficult to cleave and cross-grained, U. glabra has the reputation of working cleanly, an immense advantage when converting into ‘quarters’ (2" x 4") and other small scantlings used in chairmaking. It is also possible that the use of U. glabra in chairmaking extended south into the northern counties of England, where the species is also abundant.

Birch (Betula spp.) is another timber characteristic of Scottish furniture, and much despised south of the border, but its use seems to have been largely confined to the Highlands, where it was practically the only common hardwood.\(^5\) The situation was quite different in the 19th century, when large quantities of American birch were imported...
from Canada and used widely throughout the British Isles.

Elms of various species (U. procera, U. minor, U. stricta) were common in many parts of Britain. The wood features strongly in West Country furniture, particularly pieces of boarded construction, and occurs in quantity in the Bastard inventory of 1731. Elm was equally popular in East Anglia, both for chairs and case furniture, and it may be significant that both East Anglia and the west of England were regions where, by reasons of natural habitat or human activity, elms were particularly numerous. These areas, and indeed the south of England generally, were the hardest hit by the elm disease of the 1970s. Both Alun Davies and Richard Bebb have suggested that elm is also characteristic of south Wales and the Marches, but not of mid- and north Wales.

Although some areas are strongly associated with a predominant use of native oak – mid- and north Wales, the Yorkshire Pennines, the Lake District – the wood was employed too generally to make attributions on that basis alone. Many collectors and dealers claim to identify oak from north Wales on the basis of its reddish hue, but the same has also been said of Lake District oak. Dendrochronology has gone some way to making the regional attribution of oak furniture and objects a more exact discipline, but the application of the technique to furniture is in its infancy.

Ash is perhaps the most widely distributed native British timber, and was used very commonly by regional furniture makers. As with oak, its ubiquity makes it impossible to draw meaningful inferences from its presence in individual pieces. Many pundits consider that the use of ash for seat rails on upholstered chairs is indicative of Scottish manufacture, but it also occurs on furniture from many parts of the British Isles. As far as vernacular rather than fashionable furniture is concerned, the use of ash in chairs is common to almost every part of the British Isles. It is indicative of a common trade practice throughout the British Isles – it was typically a turner’s and chair-maker’s wood, rather than a cabinet wood. This situation was radically modified in the early nineteenth century by the introduction of large quantities of ash from Canada, which was commonly employed for drawer linings and other carcase work in fashionable furniture all over Britain, but that development is beyond the concerns of the present article.

The one inference which can legitimately be drawn in relation to all three woods is that neither native oak, nor elm, nor ash are likely to occur in London made furniture between 1700 and 1800, except occasionally as a decorative veneer. They are quintessentially provincial timbers, and reference to elm or ash furniture in London domestic inventories are rare. References to oak furniture are almost as scarce because of the domination of wainscot. Unfortunately, while there is no difficulty in identifying ash and elm, it is by no means as easy to reliably distinguish between good quality quarter-sawn English oak and imported wainscot except by dendrochronological analysis.

Fruitwoods are often regarded typically provincial timbers, but the evidence suggests that not all fruitwoods were considered equal. We have seen that pear tree was widely used in London for specific purposes, and it is possible that demand in London, not only among furniture, frame makers and carvers, but also among wood-block engravers, ensured that pear tree was more common in London than outside. Cherry was very commonly used outside London, both for chairs and seat furniture, but also seems to have had limited appeal in the capital.

Sycamore seems to have been used on a countrywide basis, mainly in a vernacular
context, and likewise holly, to a much lesser extent. Of other important native timbers, alder (Alnus glutinosa) was employed in many areas, particularly Scotland and the north west of England, but there is no evidence of it being use in London. There were a host of minor woods – rowan, whitebeam, hazel, hawthorn and many others – which seem to have had only local usage, and none at all in London.

III

The second half of the eighteenth century saw far-reaching changes in the use of furniture timbers both in London and outside. In London this was manifested in a much wider range of imported woods than available hitherto. This was largely due to the military and commercial dominance achieved by Britain in the West Indies and Asia as a result of the Seven Years' War (1756-63). One of the first indications of this was the advent of Indian rosewood (Dalbergia latifolia) usually called 'black rosewood' or 'blackwood', which began to be imported from the 1750s and to figure prominently in furniture makers' repertoires by the 1760s. The availability of black rosewood was almost certainly linked to the conquest of the Carnatic region of south east India from the French between 1752 and 1763. This gave Britain control of virtually the entire eastern seaboard and enormously increased trade with those areas. Among the many products returned was black rosewood, which was soon put to use by London's cabinet makers. One of the earliest references to this wood occurs in a bill for a lady's dressing table supplied by James Lawson to Sir Lawrence Dundas in 1764, and it was frequently used by Thomas Chippendale and other London makers from 1766 onwards.

The sweeping victories achieved by the British in the Caribbean resulted in the importation for the first time of mahogany from Cuba (1762), Honduras (1763) and Hispaniola (probably 1766). The occupation of Havana in 1762-3 resulted in the availability of Havana mahogany and cedar (Cedrela odorata) in both Liverpool and London in 1763 and 1764, although they largely disappeared from the market once Havana was restored to Spain. Small vessels continued to ply between Jamaica and southern Cuba, but relatively little mahogany was carried. Much more important was the trade in wood from Honduras and Hispaniola. The first came in as a result of concessions granted by the Spanish in Treaty of Paris (1763), by which British loggers were for the first time allowed to work unmolested in Belize, and the second as a result of the Free Ports Act of 1766, which allowed foreign vessels to bring colonial produce into Jamaica for the first time. From the 1770s onwards mahogany from Honduras and Hispaniola dominated the British market.

Another very particular example of the importance of military action in making hitherto unobtainable woods available is the case of 'Guadeloupe' wood. Guadeloupe was a French colony, but in 1763 it was captured and briefly held by the British. Before Guadeloupe was returned to France after the Peace of Paris, produce to the value of £423,000 was exported to England, among which were small shipments of mahogany and other woods. Some of this reached Thomas Chippendale, who in February 1764 invoiced Sir Lawrence Dundas for '... a very neat work Table of Guadalupe wood with a Hexagon top and Carv'd pillar and Claws... £3.13. 6.' In May of the same year the Earl of Coventry was supplied with 'A very neat Box of fine Guadalupe wood with a very
good Lock and frame... £9 — —.' Both these pieces survive, although the whereabouts of the former is currently unknown. A superficial examination suggests that in both cases the wood is West Indian satinwood (*Zanthoxylum flavum*), but this has not been confirmed by microscopic examination. The term ‘Guadalupe wood’ is therefore not so much descriptive of a type of wood as a triumphal reminder of Britain’s victory over France.

It is likely that changing taste also had a part to play in this expanding repertoire of furniture woods, for neo-classical furniture demanded bright, colourful woods to suit the interior schemes devised by neo-classical architects. Thus woods which had always been available but were hitherto ignored by furniture makers now came into use. Fustic (*Chlorophora tinctoria*), a dyewood commonly imported from the West Indies, occurs in the workshop inventory of Paul Sanders in 1760, in John Linnell’s inventory of 1763, and in Chippendale’s furniture of the 1770s. Satinwood (*Zanthoxylum flavum*), widespread in the West Indies but hitherto used only in the islands, often as fuel, rapidly became popular. Although information is scarce, it seems probable that much of this wood came from foreign islands in vessels sailing into the British Free Ports. Zebrawood (*Astronium graveolens*) came from Honduras and the Mosquito shore, and partridge wood (*Andira inermis* and *Caesalpinia granadillo*) from number of different sources. All these woods occur commonly on London furniture made from c. 1770 onwards.

It was increasingly realised not only that the furniture industry was a major employer and source of export revenue, but that furniture woods had the potential to increase employment for British settlers and traders in many parts of the world. This was the logic behind the Royal Society of Arts’ decision to awarded a gold medal to the Hon. Daniel Hewlet, of Black River (the principal British settlement on the Mosquito Shore, now Honduras) for importing 14,3030 feet of zebra wood into England. The following year fifty tons of zebrawood were imported, or about 24,000 board feet, of which 9,488 feet was imported by John Pitt, Esq., who was also awarded a gold medal. Thus furniture woods offered British settlers a profitable export while providing cabinet makers with the raw materials to create fashionable, world class furniture.

As well as increasing demand for woods from areas under British control, neo-classicism brought a new demand for woods hitherto little used in Britain The prime examples of these were kingwood (*Dalbergia cearensis*), tulipwood (*Dalbergia decapularis*) and purplewood (*Peltogyne spp.*). All three of these were indigenous to northern South America, where Britain had no possessions but France and Holland did. From c.1760 they began to appear with increasing frequency on London-made furniture, and in the inventories of London furniture makers. In 1760 Paul Saunders had 50 foot of ‘Violette Veniers’ in stock at 9d. per foot, and in 1777 France & Beckwith had nine hundred and six feet of rosewood and kingwood veneers in their Veneer Room. In 1773 Wright and Elwick of Wakefield offered John Constable ‘a very Curious Ladys Toilet of mix’d Woods, viz Violet, Citron & Cypress, & it is Extra Workmanship... I shall not have it in my power to maker such another, as I could not procure such a fine assortment of woods in the Kingdom.’ It may be significant that in two of these instances the woods are referred to by their French names, suggesting perhaps that France was the source. ‘Voilette’ was the French name for kingwood and ‘citronnier’ was often a synonym for satinwood. More probably the source was Holland. In 1779 Wright and Elwick ordered
‘foreign woods’ from Amsterdam but the shipment was blocked by the outbreak of war with France and Spain.\(^9\) The Dutch had direct access to all these woods via their colony in Surinam (Dutch Guyana). They shipped the woods home for distribution throughout Europe, and also acted as middlemen within the West Indies. The island of St Eustatius, situated between the Virgin and Leeward islands, afforded the Dutch a perfect entrepot for trading between Spanish, French and British possessions. In the 1780s Gillows bought almost all their satinwood (and probably their tulip and kingwood too) from St Kitts, a small British island conveniently adjacent to St Eustatius.\(^9\) The original source of the satinwood was probably Porto Rico or Hispaniola, both of which became important suppliers in the nineteenth century. Another source of exotic timber was the island of Trinidad, which was supplying purplewood and possibly other woods to Britain even before its capture from Spain in 1797.\(^8\) Either from Trinidad, or Surinam, or perhaps Honduras, small amounts of American rosewood also began to find their way to Britain, albeit on nothing like the scale of importations from Brazil in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

The increasing importance of the trade in these furniture woods caused the government to take an interest, directly resulting in the Mahogany Act of 1771, which allowed furniture woods from foreign possessions in the Americas into England free of duty.\(^9\) A Treasury document of 1784 lists the amount of mahogany, rosewood, satinwood, zebrawood, speckled wood and other woods imported from all sources since 1777. At the end of the document a senior Customs Officer added, ‘I find upon enquiry all the articles included in the above Account are used by the Cabinet Makers’.\(^10\) The further importance of trade with foreign islands was recognised in the Free Ports Act of 1787, which extended Free Port status to Dominica, Grenada and the Bahamas. Among the reasons for the new Act the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations cited the need ‘to bring in from Foreign Settlements... Dyeing Woods, Woods for Cabinet-Makers...’.\(^10\) By 1800 there was almost no limit to the variety of imported woods available in London; the first Australian woods began to appear in the 1790s.

As well as a striking increase in the range and quantity of foreign woods imported, neo-classicism resulted in a much more extensive use of some native timbers. Holly was very widely employed either in the white, or stained in colours. Recent work at Temple Newsam House and elsewhere has revealed that almost all the stained wood used in Thomas Chippendale’s marquetry furniture was holly, and indeed this was quite usual. In 1777 Beckwith & France had ‘Sundry Pieces of Holly blue and White’ in their veneer room.\(^10\) The so-called ‘boxwood’ stringing found on much late 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century furniture was usually of holly or sycamore.

A common companion to holly was ‘air-wood’, or fiddle-back sycamore and maple. Air-wood was sometimes used white, but more commonly dyed in colours. It seems to have been particularly favoured for grey or silver backgrounds. Among the veneers listed in the Beckwith & France inventory cited above were ‘twenty Air Wood stained grey forty seven white ditto’.\(^10\) This is probably the origin of the tradition that ‘harewood’ or sycamore was usually grey or greenish-grey in colour.\(^10\) Another beneficiary of neo-classical design was lime tree, which was widely used for carved and painted or gilded chair frames, by Thomas Chippendale among others. In 1760 Paul Saunders had 914 feet of ‘Inch Lime Tree’ in stock.\(^4\)
The degree to which this bonanza of previously scarce foreign woods affected provincial cabinet makers was naturally very variable. We have already seen how some primary ports such as Lancaster or Liverpool had very similar timber 'profiles' to London, and as London’s repertoire expanded so did theirs. From 1760 onwards the Gillow archives mention fustic (1764), satinwood (1775), palmalatta or zebra wood (1781), tulipwood (1781) kingwood (1787) purple wood (1787) rosewood (1792) and canary wood (1797). These dates are five to ten years behind contemporary London references, but it is not clear whether this is merely accidental or a manifestation of a genuine lag. It is conceivable that provincial patrons, those who actually bought from local makers rather than from London, were rather conservative in their taste. Nevertheless it is surprising how many provincial makers were able to get hold of imported woods. We have already seen how in the 1770s Wright and Elwick of Wakefield were obtaining ‘foreign woods’ via Amsterdam, and by the late 1780s such woods were widely available from a variety of sources. In Norwich in 1786 the stock of Wright Smith was sold off, consisting of, among other things, mahogany in board and plank, 'Cedar... King's and Queen's Wood; Rose, Tulip and Satin Wood...'.

The selection was wide but not exceptional, and could have been matched by makers in most prosperous provincial towns. It is notable that the majority of the provincial furniture illustrated in volume VII of this Journal (1993) was made of imported wood. Admittedly the sample was unavoidably biased towards later 18th century pieces from urban centres, but even in Wales, Richard Bebb has noted the increasing availability of imported timbers from the late 18th century onwards, beginning in and around the seaports and spreading inland from thence. As always makers in primary ports were best placed to profit. A Gillows specimen wood work box of 1808, now in the Judge’s Lodgings Museum at Lancaster, has 72 labelled specimens sent from Europe, North America, the West Indies, Central and South America, West Africa, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, south-east Asia and Australia.

There were a number of factors which contributed to the wider availability of cabinet woods to provincial makers in the second half of the eighteenth century. The general expansion of British colonial trade and the efforts made to increase importations of exotic woods have already been mentioned, but domestic developments also played an important role. After 1750 there was a marked increase in the number of ports which traded directly to the Americas, particularly on the east coast, which until then had relied almost entirely on mahogany shipped coastwise from London. Before 1750 Hull received only one vessel direct from America; in 1772 there were 15 entered in the Port Books. This development not only increased the volume of overseas materials entering provincial ports, but also reduced their cost. The distribution of timber inland from the receiving ports also became progressively easier and cheaper. Rivers were improved and canalised, and new canals constructed to move bulky goods throughout Britain’s commercial and industrial heartlands. A map of England’s navigable waterways in 1800 looks very different from the one in 1750 (Figures 6 & 7), and few places were by then more than a day’s travel from a canal or ‘improved’ river. Progressive and gradual improvements had taken place from the late 17th century, but it was the opening of the Bridgewater canal between the mouth of the Mersey and Manchester which inaugurated the era of most rapid change. Between 1761 and 1830 some 4000 miles of canal were constructed, mostly in the industrial heartlands of Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Midlands. When the
7. English rivers and canals navigable or nearly complete by 1800.

The author
8. Turnpike roads established by 1741.
Reproduced from Kenneth O. Morgan, ed.,
The author
9. Turnpike roads established by 1770.
Reproduced from Kenneth O. Morgan, ed.,

The author
Trent and Mersey Canal opened in 1777, the east-west divide was crossed; it was now possible to transport timber from Hull to Liverpool through the heart of England. It was perhaps by this route that Wright and Elwick of Wakefield hoped to obtain mahogany from Lancaster in February 1784, for the Leeds-Liverpool Canal was not completed until after 1800. Even England's shortest canal, built from Ulverston to the Leven estuary in 1796, had an effect, for it enabled Gillows to buy cherry and holly timber at Broughton-in-Furness in 1800. Although the change between 1750 and 1800 was undeniably dramatic, figure 7 shows that central Wales, the North Pennines and the Lake District remained essentially untouched. Difficult geography was still linked to poor communications, resulting in economic and cultural isolation.

The expansion and improvement of the road network was if anything even more dramatic than that of the canals (Figures 8 & 9). From the late 17th century the Turnpike Acts gradually transformed the condition of England's major roads. By 1750 some 1500 miles of turnpike road had been created, initially close to London but expanding into the Midlands and then to the North, as industrialisation took hold in those areas. The pace of turnpike development continued to accelerate until the advent of the railways in the 1840s. Although roads were still much less suitable than canals and rivers for carrying large quantities of timber, they were invaluable for moving small parcels of wood, as well as finished furniture. In March 1800 the joiner Robert Salvin, of Richmond, Yorkshire enquired about the cost of some 'good hard mahogany' from Lancaster. Such a purchase would have been inconceivable without the improvements made to the trans-Pennine roads under the Turnpike Acts.

The foregoing broad, but certainly not comprehensive survey seems on the whole to confirm the prevailing prejudices outlined at the beginning of this essay. London furniture was made almost entirely from imported wood and vernacular furniture predominantly from native wood, but with an increasing proportion of imported materials as time went on. Between the two, fashionable or semi-fashionable provincial furniture combined both native and imported woods in varying ratios, depending on location and date. In answer to the question – 'Does the choice of woods used in a given piece of furniture allow us to distinguish between London and provincial work?' – the answer must be a qualified maybe. It is easier to answer the question in a negative sense, to state which timbers were unlikely to have been used in London (alder, ash, elm, native oak, for instance), than to state positively that the use of a particular timber identifies London work. But perhaps that was never a realistic aim. More important are the indications which have emerged about the role of wider events and circumstances in determining the types and availability of furniture woods to British furniture makers outside London. The difference, in terms of the varieties of timber and their local availability, between the first and second halves of the century is unexpectedly sharp, and the reason has little to do with furniture making per se and everything to do with Britain's economic and industrial development between 1700 and 1800. The government's mercantile and colonial policies, and especially the condition of war or peace, had a direct bearing on the variety, quantity and price of timber on the workshop bench. The growth of the nation's transport systems by land and
water, which formed the veins and sinews of the industrial revolution, likewise had a profound effect on the distribution of those timbers to almost every part of Britain. The wealth generated through trade and industry created new demand, new clientele and hence new markets for furniture makers who were then able to utilise the new materials brought to them from every part of the globe. The effect will have been particularly marked in the Midlands and north of England, the new industrial heartlands whose unprecedented growth in the second half of the eighteenth century transformed Britain's economic and demographic balance. The extraordinary thing is that there are only two eighteenth-century furniture making firms outside London about whom anything substantial has been written. The first is Wright and Elwick of Wakefield, and the second Gillows of Lancaster. This is not even the tip of the iceberg; it is the tip of the tip of the iceberg.

REFERENCES
2. Balthazar Gerbier, Counsel and Advise to all Builders, London (1663), p. 64.
5. National Archives (hereafter NA), Cust 3.
7. NA, Cust 3.
11. NA, Cust 3.
13. NA, loc. cit. at note 7 above.
15. This was the Act of 8 George I cap. 12, known as the Naval Stores Act. For more on this see Bowett, loc. cit. at note 4 above.
16. NA, Cust 3.
17. This is confirmed by the English customs returns, which show that importations of walnut from France virtually ceased after 1720 [NA, Cust 3].
18. A similar situation obtained in the 19th century, when high quality Italian walnut was imported as 'Ancona' walnut regardless of its actual provenance.
19. Unlike wainscot, importations of deals did not decline, but rose after 1720 [NA, Cust 3].
20. NA, Cust 3. These figures do not include indirect importations of mahogany via North America.
21. The Mosquito Shore was the English name for the coast of modern day Nicaragua and Honduras (not to be confounded with British Honduras or Belize). Mahogany from this area was collected for export at the island of Ruatan, hence 'Rattan' mahogany. See Adam Bowett, The Jamaica Trade: Gillow and the Use of Mahogany in the Eighteenth Century, Regional Furniture, XII (1998), pp. 14-57.
22. NA, Cust 3.
23. The name padouk was not used in England until the nineteenth century. It is a Burmese word, introduced into British timber merchants’ vocabulary from about 1830.


25. See Sebastian Pryke, ‘The extraordinary billhead of Francis Brodie,’ Regional Furniture, VI (1990), pp. 81-99, where the desk-and-bookcase is wrongly identified as being made of mahogany.

26. NA, Cust 3.


29. NA, loc. cit. at note 7 above.

30. London Metropolitan Archive (hereafter LMA), Corporation of London Archive (hereafter CLA), Orphans Court Record 2760, Common Serjeant Book 5, fol. 164B.

31. LMA, CLA, Orphans’ Court Record 3214, Common Serjeant Book 6, fol. 93.

32. Lambeth Palace Library, Records of the Commissioners for Fifty New Churches.

33. Illustrated in Gilbert, op. cit. at note 9, above, figs. 82 & 83.


35. London Metropolitan Archive (hereafter LMA), ACC/0358/001.

36. LMA, CLA Orphans’ Court Record 3332, Common Serjeant Book 6, fol. 143.

37. Kirkham, loc. cit. at note 14 above; Hayward and Kirkham, op. cit. at note 14 above.

38. NA, C103/195, Robinson vs. Robinson.

39. LMA, CLA Orphans’ Court Record 3197, Common Serjeant Book 6, fol. 86.

40. A gilded desk and bookcase with burr yew veneered interior (c. 1720) was sold at Christie’s, King Street, 4 July 2002, lot 100; a pair of similar desks and bookcases was made, probably in London, for King John V of Portugal [R. W. Symonds, ‘A Royal Scrutoire’, Connoisseur (June 1940), pp. 233-236]; a diminutive, single door desk and bookcase veneered in burr yew was sold by Woolley and Wallis, Salisbury, in January 1998, and again at Sotheby’s New York, 24 April 2008, lot 5.

41. Stiles inventory, loc. cit. at note 39 above.


44. Kirkham, loc. cit. at note 14 above.


48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Beard & Gilbert, op. cit. at note 12 above, p. 150.


52. R. Finch, Coals to Newcastle, Lavenham (1973), pp. 54-56.


55. Ibid.

56. Beard & Gilbert, op. cit. at note 12 above.


58. NA, Cust 3.

59. Ibid.

60. 344/168, Letter Book, Gillow to Wm Rathbone 30 June 1775.

61. 344/179, Memorandum Book, fol. 120.

62. Beard & Gilbert, op. cit. at note 12 above.

63. NA, Cust 3.

64. Beard and Gilbert, op. cit at note 12 above, p. 955.

65. Legg, loc. cit. at note 1 above.
66. Davis, op. cit. at note 3 above, pp. 36-38.
69. Beard & Gilbert, op. cit. at note 12 above, p. 658.
70. Davis, op. cit. at note 3 above, p. 38.
71. 344/1, Waste Book.
72. Letter Book, 344/169, Gillow to Hugh Hornby and Sons, 4 March 1779; Gillow to Wm Rathbone, 20 October 1780.
73. NA, Cust 3, Cust 17.
74. This was the Act of 5 George III cap. 45.
76. Clavering, op cit at note 6 above, p. 9.
78. Wanklyn, loc. cit. at note 68 above.
79. Stabler, loc. cit. at note 53 above, p. 103.
80. Ibid.
82. David Jones, 'Robert Lorimer’s Use of Timber', Regional Furniture, XIX (2005), pp. 69-79. Jones argues that the Scottish or wych elm (which is also common in northern England and Wales) is identifiable by its pale colour, as compared with 'the red colour of the once common English, or Field Elm' [p. 71]. This is a subjective statement, and of doubtful diagnostic value when two hundred years of use and patination are taken into account. See also Bernard D. Cotton, Scottish Vernacular Furniture, London (2008), p. 286.
83. Cotton, op. cit. at note 82 above, pp. 284-5
85. T. Alun Davies, The Welsh Dresser, Cardiff (1991); Bebb, op. cit. at note 45, above, p. 73.
86. Bebb, op. cit. at note 45, above, p. 73.
87. NA, Cust 3.
89. NA, Cust 3; 344/164, Letter Book, Gillow to Wm. Rathbone 31 July 1763; Bowett, loc. cit. at note 21 above.
90. NA, Cust 3.
91. Gilbert, op. cit. at note 34 above, pp. 159 & 164.
92. Kirkham, loc. cit. at note 14, above; Hayward and Kirkham, op. cit. at note 14 above, I, pp. 168-180; Gilbert, op. cit. at note 34 above, p. 280.
94. Kirkham, loc. cit. at note 14 above; I am indebted to Geoffrey Castle for drawing the France and Beckwith inventory to my attention.
95. Christopher Gilbert, 'Wright and Elwick of Wakefield, 1748-1824: A Study of Provincial Patronage,' Furniture History, XII (1976), pp. 34-50 [40].
96. Ibid.
97. There are numerous references to purchases of satinwood at St Kitts, e.g., Letter Book 344/171, Gillow to Thomas Worswick, 5 April 1786.
98. Letter Book 344/172, Gillow to Messrs Worswick and Allman, St Kitts, 4 March 1789; 'There has been some small parcels of purple wood bro' here and we presume came from Trinidad.'
99. This was the Act of 11 George III cap. 41.
100. NA, T 64/276B/417.
101. This was the Act of 27 George III cap. 27; NA, BT/75, fols. 657-661.
102. Information kindly supplied by Geoffrey Castle.
103. Ibid.
104. Adam Bowett, loc. cit. at note 42 above.
105. Stabler, _loc. cit._ at note 53 above, p. 216.
106. Bebb, _op. cit._ at note 45 above, I, p. 75.
108. 344/170, Letter Book, Gillow to Elwick, Wakefield, 28 February 1784.