THE JAMAICA TRADE: GILLOW AND THE USE OF MAHOGANY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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For those weary of furniture history written as a minor branch of art history, the Gillows archive is a perfect antidote. Even the most cursory glance through one of the Waste Books, Letter Books or Estimate Sketch Books launches the researcher deep into the hard-nosed, tight-fisted core of eighteenth-century furniture making. For Gillows furniture making was a business, not an art form. It was, moreover, a manufacturing business, concerned with turning raw materials into finished goods. If any single raw material can be said to characterise Gillows' furniture, it is mahogany, and one of the most remarkable features of the archive is the way in which the broad commercial and political trends of the mahogany trade, which can be established from the statistical information available in the Public Record Office, are supported by the evidence of the Letter Books and other documents. The archive contains a wealth of telling detail concerning the purchase, importation and use of mahogany that is available from no other source, and which constitutes a historical record of first rate importance. What follows is intended to outline Gillows' activities both as importers and users of mahogany in the eighteenth century, and to discuss these in the context of the trade as a whole. The essay falls broadly into two parts. The first deals with the structure of the trade, its organisation, operation and general development between c. 1730 and c. 1795. The second deals with the sources and types of the mahogany employed in Gillows' furniture.

I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE TRADE

The first Waste Book records that in April 1732 Robert Gillow sold 8 3/4 ft of mahogany to an unknown buyer for 4s. 4d. This is clear evidence that within four years of becoming free of the borough of Lancaster, Robert Gillow was buying and selling mahogany timber. The early date is not surprising, since the west coast ports of Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster were involved in the mahogany trade from its inception. Between 1722 and 1750 these three ports received 21 per cent of all mahogany imported into England (the remainder almost entirely to London) and this statistic contradicts the common assumption that early mahogany furniture was purely a metropolitan phenomenon. It was Robert Gillow's good fortune to have begun his career at a time when mahogany was rapidly becoming the nation's most desirable furniture wood and at a place where he could buy it direct from its West Indian source.

Records relating to Robert Gillow's early activity in the mahogany trade are relatively few, and by the time that a fuller picture begins to emerge in the 1750s it is
1. Value of mahogany imports from Jamaica and the West Indies, 1723–63

Note: Values given in Figures 1 and 7 are based on the official valuation of £8 per ton, regardless of actual market value. Hence there is a direct correlation between the value shown in the graph and the amount of mahogany imported.

Source: P.R.O. Cast.

clear that he was already involved in the importation and sale of mahogany on a substantial scale. The source of his mahogany was Jamaica, which was both the commercial hub of Britain’s empire in the Caribbean and the largest single producer of mahogany until well after the Seven Years’ War of 1756–63 (Figure 1).

As with sugar and other Jamaican produce, the trade in mahogany was controlled by the resident merchant/factors of Kingston, Jamaica’s principal port. The factors played a dual role, sometimes acting as commission agents and sometimes as independent merchants. Planters wanting to ship their sugar or mahogany home did so through the factor, who charged a commission for handling the transport, storage and sale of these goods. At other times the factor bought mahogany and other commodities outright, to sell on at a profit. Similarly, the factor sold goods on commission for English merchants exporting to Jamaica, or imported and sold English goods in their own right. The letters of Benjamin Satterthwaite, resident factor at Kingston for the Lancaster merchant firm of Satterthwaite and Co. during the 1760s, reveal the many facets of the factor’s role. Apart from the necessary activities of buying and selling, Satterthwaite kept up a continual correspondence with Lancaster, relaying shipping news, current
prices of produce, the condition of the forthcoming sugar crop, the activities of other traders, and probable developments in the market.\textsuperscript{4}

Gillows used Kingston factors to buy mahogany and other West Indian goods, paying them a commission of five per cent on the transaction. In order to work successfully, the factor system required mutual confidence between all parties. It was often the case that the factor and his clients had more than business in common. Melinda Elder’s study of Lancaster’s slave trade has shown how in almost every case, ties of religion, kinship and locality bound West Indian factors to their Lancaster principals.\textsuperscript{5} Gillows were no exception. Until the 1760s Robert Gillow relied primarily on the services of Charles Inman and his various partners in Kingston. Inman was a member of a Lancaster trading family with connections in several West Indian islands, including Jamaica and Barbados. After Inman’s death in 1767, Gillows switched their Kingston business to John Swarbrick and his various partners. Swarbrick was another Lancastrian and a friend of the Gillow family.\textsuperscript{6} At St Kitts, a tiny island in the Leeward Islands where Gillows began to buy mahogany and satinwood in the 1780s, their orders were handled by Robert Gillow’s nephew, Thomas Worswick.\textsuperscript{7} Gillows also had commercial interests, though not in timber, in Antigua and Barbados. In the latter island, Gillows dealt with Benjamin Satterthwaite during his residence there from 1737–41 and again from 1749–51.\textsuperscript{8}

Incoming correspondence from Gillows’ factors does not survive, but the outgoing instructions allow a great deal to be inferred. In the early days of the trade instructions were brief. Thus Robert Gillow concluded a letter written in December 1747: ‘with respect to remittance in the Hannah nothing better than mahogany’.\textsuperscript{9} Often a price was specified: ‘Mohog: from 6\textsuperscript{d} to 7\textfrac{1}{2} if good, but you must send 20 or 30 pounds worth but it be good if possible’.\textsuperscript{10} (The prices given here are per superficial foot, a notional measure of timber twelve inches square by one inch thick.) From the 1760s the orders became more detailed, specifying size, quality and quantity. Rising prices certainly made the firm more discriminating in their buying, as did the rapidly expanding choice of timber on the market from 1763 onwards. One constant theme in the correspondence was quality, illustrated by this early letter of 1749: ‘Don’t fail sending twenty Pound’s [sic] worth of the Soundest and best moho you can get & the broader the better . . .’.\textsuperscript{11}

Since factors were general merchants and not specialists in timber, mistakes were bound to happen. More than once John Swarbrick was abused because the mahogany he sent was either too expensive, of poor quality, or wrongly measured. Swarbrick had the misfortune of acting as Gillows’ agents during the difficult times of the American war (1776–83), and perhaps endured more than his fair share of criticism. On at least one occasion the mahogany he sent was mixed with manchineel, a handsome timber but worth less than half the value of mahogany.\textsuperscript{12} In order to prevent a repeat of this and other mistakes, Gillows recommended that Swarbrick obtain expert advice before buying timber. They eventually located a former Lancaster cabinet maker resident in Kingston to assist Swarbrick in buying, after which there seems to have been little cause for complaint.\textsuperscript{13} Similar difficulties arose through the inexperience of Thomas Worswick at St Kitts, and on at least one occasion Worswick’s mistakes cost Gillows a considerable sum of money.\textsuperscript{14}
The factor was also responsible for the loading and shipping of return cargoes. The table in figure 2 shows some typical cargoes of vessels returning from Jamaica to England in the mid-eighteenth century. It is immediately obvious that mahogany was very much a secondary cargo, both in terms of the quantity shipped and of its value. Even for Gillows, for whom mahogany was an essential raw material, mahogany was not the only commodity of interest. Rum, sugar and cotton commonly took precedence, as shown in the following letter to Inman & Cork, written in November 1747; 'make Returns [in the Bridget] viz About 3 or 4 puncheons of rum & 3 or 4 baggs of cotton & about 20L worth of good moho: or more if you can get a fine parcel'.

The Bridget was a vessel in which Robert Gillow had a twelfth share, and he undoubtedly had shares in others. In 1756 Robert Gillow and Henry Baines bought the Africa, an ex-slaver, and fitted her out to trade with Antigua. These early 'adventures' in trade, recorded in the Waste Books, were modest — a few English manufactures exported, a little rum, sugar and mahogany returned — but they quickly grew in scale. Although a great deal more research needs to be done, it is apparent that direct involvement in general West India trade was an important and possibly vital ingredient of Gillow's business success. At the very least, it provided Gillows with access to a good export market. The letter quoted above concludes with a postscript; 'Should Esteem it a particular favour if you can engage any orders in my Wooden way'. This coy request is an early indication that Gillows were exporting finished mahogany furniture back to the West Indies, a trade which was to develop into an important part of their business.

It is often assumed that mahogany was an integral part of the 'triangular trade', in which ships went first to West Africa to buy slaves, then to the West Indies to sell the slaves, a finally home with a cargo of West Indian produce. Melinda Elder has shown how a number of Lancaster vessels took part in the triangular trade, carrying West
Indian produce, including mahogany, for their return ladings. But she has also shown that the majority of Lancaster's West India merchants were not slave traders, and that the number of slavers declined both relatively and absolutely in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although Gillows were connected personally and financially with a number of slavers, including Charles Inman and Benjamin Satterthwaite, there is no evidence that Gillows were themselves directly involved. But we need not necessarily infer that the firm had any moral objection to the trade. Rather, the longer voyages, unreliable sailings and the greater financial risk of the triangular trade made this an unattractive option for prudent men such as Robert Gillow.

The rhythm of the Jamaica trade was dictated by two things — the weather and the sugar crop. The first sugar was ready for shipping in April or early May, so most departures from England were timed to arrive in the West Indies about this time. Many of Gillows' instructions to their Jamaican factors are dated between November and February, so that they would arrive in Kingston eight or ten weeks later. Loading was a drawn out business, taking on average 70-100 days, but it was desirable to be away from the island before the end of the July. The beginning of August marked the onset of hurricanes, and on 1 August insurance rates rose accordingly. In May 1787 Gillow wrote to Yate and Hinde in Kingston: 'We hope you'll be able to make us a handsome remittance on or before the 1st of August as we should not Chose to have any Produce Shipp'd during the Winter Prem of Insurance'.

There was another reason why importers liked to get their cargoes away from Jamaica as quickly as possible, and this was to catch the market early. As Gillows pointed out, early sailings improved revenue and, equally as important, cash flow: *There are more reasons than one why we cou'd, & ought to wish produce to arrive early in England; in the first place it Generly Sells Quicker, better and for more speedy pay and in the next to Raise where withall, to discharge the Debts contracted for the Outward bound Cargo.*

The timber was shipped as logs, planks and slabs. Logs were usually squared to save space and weight, although small logs and veneer logs were left in the round. Logs too large to stow could be carried on deck. A plank was a log sawn into two or more parts, and could be anything from three inches to eight, ten or twelve inches thick. Boards (i.e., sawn timber under 2 in. thick) were not commonly shipped, since they cost more in sawing charges and were prone to damage in transit, either through physical breakage or water staining. Planks were also of more use to the furniture maker, allowing him more discretion in cutting and using the timber. Slabs were irregularly shaped cuts of figured wood usually destined for veneers.

Compared with other West India goods the value of mahogany was relatively low and it was frequently awkward to stow. A common practice was to use mahogany to 'dunnage' the hold, that is, to fill the dead space in the bottom of the hull, thereby providing a foundation for the main cargo. The surviving log of the Lancaster ship *Dolphin* records four West India voyages in the mid-1770s. On one of the return voyages the captain described how he 'Denige'd the Hold with Mah' before stowing his sugar. This not only made use of otherwise redundant space but protected the sugar from damage by seawater. One or two letters reveal that Gillows were aware of these niceties of seafaring economy. In January 1777 Gillows told John Swarbrick that large logs would have to be sawn up the middle to 'accomodate the Ship Maria better in
Shipped by the Grace of God & well conditioned by Worswick and Allman, in an upon the good Ship or vessel call'd the Rawlins whereof is master under God for this present Voyage Thomas Tryers and now riding at Anchor in the Road of Basseterre and by God's grace bound for Lancaster today — Twenty one Loggs of Mahogany and four Planks of Yellow Sanders —

being marked & numbered as in the Margin & are to be delivered in the like good Order & well conditioned at the aforesaid Port of Lancaster (the Danger of the Seas only excepted) unto Messrs Rich, & Rob Gillow or to their assigns, they paying freight for the said Goods as Customary from the Leeward Islands —

Witness whereof the Master or Purser of the said Ship hath affirmed three Bills of Lading all of this Tenor and Date the one of which Bills being accomplished the other two to Stand void, and so God send the good Ship to her desired Port in safety.

Amen

Dated Saint Kitts, August 30th 1784.

Tho, Tryer

3. Contract of shipping for logs of mahogany and satinwood, per the Rawlins, August 1784.28

point of stowage', and in May 1784 they concluded another letter thus; 'We presume our Lancaster vessels wou'd rather bring a small Parcel [of mahogany] by way of Dunnage than a large one'.25 The point here was that careful stowage reduced freight charges which formed a large part of the cost of importation (Appendix).

Each consignment of mahogany was accompanied by a contract, of which an example is transcribed in figure 3. Three copies of the contract were made to guard against loss or forgery. Three invoices were also made out, specifying the number of logs, the quantity of feet contained in them, the cost per foot, charges and factor's commission. In the contract given above each log was marked RRG (for Robert and Richard Gillow), and numbered 1–26. The number of each plank or log was recorded in the invoices so that each could be checked by the consignee on arrival.26 In the event of a discrepancy, the buyer was able to identify the individual log or plank which was missing. Thus in October 1770 Gillows bought six Rattan planks from John Heard, a London timber dealer, but received only five at Lancaster; 'Have Annex'd a Copie of Mr Heard's Account to us of 6 Planks Ratt' and Capt' Tower who Brot 'em declares there weare only 5 shipp'd the one that is wanting is No 264. . .'.27

There were two regular routes used by vessels homeward-bound from Jamaica. The first was the most direct, by the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola. This passed perilously close to the Garda Costa base at Santiago de Cuba, and was impossible if the winds were adverse. The alternative was to head west around the extreme western tip of Cuba, along the north Cuba coast, and then out by the Florida channel. Either way, the voyage home took on average eight to nine weeks. Mid- to late summer was therefore the time when the West Indianmen arrived home in greatest numbers, and this was the time when the mahogany market in England was at its fullest.

Lancaster ships made landfall at the mouth of the Lune, and dropped anchor at the offshore Buoy. As they waited for the tide to carry them up to Lancaster, the ships were
searched by officers of H.M. Customs, and their cargoes checked against the captain’s manifest. A searcher or ‘tide-waiter’ remained on board each ship as it made its way up the Lune, in order to prevent any clandestine landing of goods. Once the vessel was safely moored at St George’s Quay, the master reported his arrival to the Customs House, where he swore to the particulars of his vessel — its name, burden, nationality and number of crew, the port whence it came and the details of its cargo. This was the notorious ‘Custom House Oath’, which in the 18th century was a byword for insincere or worthless testimony.29

In the Ware-room at Lancaster, Robert Gillow was almost certainly forewarned of the arrival of his cargo. Fast packet boats or naval sloops in the western approaches will have seen the ship and reported its position when they returned to port, and once the vessel dropped anchor at the Buoy of the Lune the news was in Lancaster within the hour. In order to take delivery of his mahogany, Gillow or his representative called first at the Customs House. Here the necessary port charges were paid and in return a warrant was issued which authorized the ‘land-waiters’ to land the cargo. As it was unloaded onto the quay, each plank or log was checked against the warrant to ensure the shipment corresponded with the captain’s manifest.

As well as importing mahogany on their own behalf, Gillows were often offered speculative shipments from other importers. Such ‘adventures’ in mahogany were not without risk. The Letter Books record a number of instances of mahogany being offered by speculative importers and refused on grounds of high price or poor quality. In October 1772 William Chambre, a merchant of Whitehaven, sent six logs of Bay mahogany to Lancaster in the hope that Gillows would buy it. Unfortunately for Chambre, the market at Lancaster was already full, and Gillows had themselves recently bought ‘a very large Quantity’. Gillows declined to buy, and furthermore pointed out that according to Lancaster measure, his logs were 29 feet short of the figure recorded on his invoice. In June 1773 the logs were still lying on Lancaster quay, and ‘must either be Remov’d or Sold wth will be attended wth further expenses’. Chambre eventually had to ship the logs back to Whitehaven, having failed to sell it, and having borne all the charges of shipping and wharfage himself.30

Gillows often had surplus mahogany in stock. They rarely refused an opportunity to buy mahogany on favourable terms, for even if none were required for the work in hand, they could sell it at a profit at Liverpool or London. In December 1773 they had a thousand cubic feet (25 tons) of mahogany at Liverpool which they wanted shipping to London, although it is not clear whether this was for resale or for use in the London shop.31 Gillows also sold quantities of timber to both private and professional customers on a wholesale basis. In these transactions the cost advantages of a primary over a secondary importer are readily apparent. In November 1778 the firm received an order for Honduras mahogany from a Dublin buyer. Gillows were happy to send it: ‘... if you think it will pay all Charges of Shipping from thence to your Address at Dublin & allow a Commission at each end & something more...’.32

Retail customers paid even more heavily. In the early 1730s Robert Gillow bought at around 3d. per foot but sold at 5d.33 This premium of 2—3d. per foot on the sale of small quantities was fairly consistent. It probably included a small profit for Gillows, but other costs were also involved. It was more expensive, for instance, to buy sawn
timber than a whole log. There was not only the cost of sawing — ½d. per foot for boards under 30 inches broad and ³⁄₄d. per foot from 30 to 36 inches — but there was also an element of financial risk for whoever opened the log, in case it should turn out bad. In 1800 Gillows told Robert Salvin, a joiner in the Yorkshire town of Richmond, that they could offer ‘good hard mahogany’ at 2s. per foot unsawn; ‘If it be sawn to your thickness & we run the risk of its opening Suitable for your purposes it would be 2s 3d pr foot’. Gillows themselves undoubtedly experienced the glum feeling of opening a bad log. In January 1803 they told William Sharples, a Liverpool timber merchant; ‘The last log of mahogany turns out bad for the money . . . wou’d wish you to Decline purchasing for the future’.

The mahogany market at Liverpool

In the late 1750s Robert Gillow began to turn to Liverpool timber merchants to supplement his own mahogany imports. There were at least two reasons for this. The first is that Lancaster’s own ships were not able to supply his increasing demand. In comparison with Bristol and Liverpool, Lancaster’s West India trade was small. A letter of 1775 lists only ten ships in the Jamaica trade, and these were necessarily small, since larger vessels drew too much water to navigate the Lune. The second reason is that during wartime trade became very difficult for small scale importers. Shortage of goods and rising prices favoured those with large turnovers and deep pockets. The wartime convoy system was linked to the larger West India ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool, so that vessels heading for smaller ports like Lancaster ran the risk of capture by enemy privateers. During the Seven Years’ War Gillows began increasingly to buy mahogany at Liverpool, where the market was bigger and supplies of timber more reliable. Moreover, as Gillows began to employ greater quantities of other imported timber, such as North American pine and oak, it made sense to buy it all at the same port.

The Liverpool trade was largely in the hands of timber merchants and general brokers. The brokers made their money by conducting auction sales and charging a commission of three per cent on the proceeds. Sales were advertised in the local newspapers a week or so in advance, and often on the day of the sale itself (Figure 4).

If the size of the sale justified it, catalogue handbills were printed by the vendor. The sales were generally held either in the merchants’ yards, as in the advertisement above,
or on the quay beside the ship. In the latter case, the labour of hauling and stacking the timber (the consequently the vendor’s expenses) was kept to a minimum.38

When buying at Liverpool, Gillows almost always did so through a timber merchant such as William Rathbone, Joshua Beetham or John Sharples. Of these, Rathbone was certainly the most prominent. His father Richard had been a West India seaman turned merchant, who established the business in the early 18th century. In 1766 William Rathbone was recorded as one of nine timber merchants in the port, and Perry’s map of Liverpool (1769) shows Rathbone’s yard dominating the South Dock. Rathbone was both an importer and a dealer in timber. As well as buying on his own account he acted on commission for customers such as Gillows, and examples of Gillows’ reliance on Rathbone’s judgement and experience abound in the Letter Books. In August 1771, for instance, Rathbone was asked to look at some mahogany in another merchant’s yard in Liverpool:

*Should be Extremely obliged to you for line... Signifying your Sentiments of the value of the whole together: & what kind it chiefly [sic] consists of... Pray is there any Clean Loggs or Plancks of good Jamaica or Spanish Wood, or Broad Rattan Planks amongst it...*

Having received Rathbone’s opinion, Gillows authorised Rathbone to buy on their behalf:

*shou’d be glad you wou’d take the Trouble to procure us anywhere from 20 to 40 pounds worth of good Ratan Mahogany. The longer the lengths the better for our purpose. If you can have a few Months C[redit] with it, without any Material Advance in the price, twou’d be more agreeable...*

Many letters to Rathbone contain requests for general market information. In this way Gillows were able to balance market forecasts against the projected needs of their business. The following letter of September 1765 is typical;

*Should be glad of a Line in Return mentioning the prices of the following sorts of Wood Viz* Jamaica Mahog in Plank D° in Loggs Rattan Mahog Fir Balk White Deals and Oak Billets & how you think Mahogany will run this year.*

Depending on Rathbone’s response, Gillows might buy immediately against a future rise in price or defer until the market turned down. The firm dealt in similar terms, though perhaps not quite so cordially, with John Sharples and Joshua Beetham, and less frequently with others at Bristol and London.42

### Shipping costs

The commercial viability of mahogany cargoes was often marginal, and the ratio of shipping costs to market price was a key determinant of the trade. Although this ratio improved as mahogany prices rose, the notion of mahogany as a cargo of last resort pervades the correspondence of Gillows and others involved in the eighteenth-century trade.

The multifarious costs involved in shipping mahogany from Jamaica to Liverpool are demonstrated by the following calculation in figure 5, taken from a Gillow memorandum book of 1777, which gives a breakdown of all expenses.

The calculation shows that the largest single component of shipping costs was freight. In theory freight rates were negotiable. Numerous letters survive from Gillow
Calculation of a Parcel of Mahogany Per the Sloop Nancy to Liverpool

| Cost at Jam* | 3376' at 70s per Ct | L118. 3. 2 |
| Commission 6 Pct | | 5.18. 2 |
| Warfage at 15s per M2 | | 2.11. 2 |

| Currency | L126.12. 6 |
| L S d | 90. 8.11 1/2 |
| Insurance on L100 about* | 13.15. 8 |
| Freight on Ditto | 3574 feet at 2d8 | 29.15. 8 |
| Porterage and other Charges at Lple compute measuring etc | | 2.10. 0 |
| Commission & Brokerage 3 Pct | | 4.10. 0 |

'twill Cost about 11½ pFt at Lple 
about 12½ pFt at Lancaster

L140. 9. 7

5. Calculation from Gillow Memorandum Book, 1777
Source: 344/179 Memorandum Book 1773-1778, f.120.
Notes: 1. Cost is given as 70 shilling per Ct or 100 feet, or 8.4d per foot.
2. Warfage is charged at 15s per M or 1000 feet.
3. Jamaica currency was worth about 40 per cent less than sterling, hence the conversion from Jamaican to English Currency
4. Wartime insurance rate of about 15 per cent, well above peacetime rates.
5. Wartime freight rates. The freight measure is actually in excess of the true measure at Jamaica (see Appendix).
6. The final cost per foot on the freight measure is actually closer to 9½d per foot at Liverpool. The figure given here allows a 20 per cent difference between freight and sale measure.

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to various of their West Indian factors enjoining them to agree 'as low a Freit as possible'. In practice the rates for mahogany remained fairly constant throughout the eighteenth century at 1½d. per foot. In wartime freights rose by a halfpenny to 2d. The increase, which affected all West India goods, was necessary to offset higher insurance, higher seaman's wages, and inevitable delays in loading and sailing.

After freight, insurance was the next greatest cost. The rate from Jamaica was routinely between between 2½ and 5 per cent of the value of the cargo. This was a necessary expense, since losses at sea were an inescapable part of the West India trade. In wartime insurance rates rose sharply, sometimes to more than 20 per cent. They also fluctuated markedly, as insurers reacted to the vicissitudes of naval warfare in the Caribbean. There was a rebate of 8 per cent if convoyed, or if the vessel was armed. Rises in freight and insurance were routinely passed on to mahogany buyers, and these account in part for the increased price of mahogany in wartime.

Factor's and broker's commission was standardised at 5 per cent in Jamaica and 3 per cent in England. The difference between the two is explained by the unfavourable
An account of sales of mahogany imported on the Sally by Thomas Hinde Esq, Viz:

For 30 Planks of Mahogany Sold Mr Jn° Bond.
Containing 1668Ft at 9d P[er] 62.11.11
To Cash Paid London & Warfage of the above 0. 8. 0
30 planks of Mahogany
Turning over & Piling 0. 8. 0
To Cash Pd rent of Ditto for 62 Weeks 0.17. 4
To Ditto paid for Measuring Ditto. 0. 7. 0
To Ditto Ditto Literage of Ditto 1. 8. 6

Cash Pd you at Lancaster 3.12.10
To Cash 50. 0. 0
Balance due 8.18. 2
82.11. 0

6. An account of sales of mahogany imported on the Sally by Thomas Hinde Esq.

exchange rate for Jamaica currency. In real terms, the two rates were roughly equal. Direct importations from Jamaica to an end-user avoided brokerage and most handling charges in England, and this gave Gillows, as both importers and furniture makers, the advantage of a few significant per cent over rival makers who had to buy through brokers and through secondary or tertiary ports. Entry duties, warfage, porterage, measuring and other incidental charges amounted to about 6 per cent of costs, and these remained roughly the same regardless of war or peace.

The remainder was accounted for by cost at source (purchase, commission, warfage). But this was at a time of relatively high prices, with Jamaica mahogany costing about 12d. per foot in England. In the 1730s, with mahogany as low as 3-4d. per foot, freight costs amounted to more than 60 per cent of the value. This is why importers were reluctant to bring in mahogany before import duties were abolished in 1721. A similar problem affected the importers of Honduras mahogany in the 1760s, when the market value of their timber was again as low as 4d. Because Honduras was technically a Spanish territory, Honduras timber paid duty as foreign wood, and only after intense lobbying was this duty removed in 1771.

Speculative cargoes with no predetermined consignee rapidly accrued further costs. In April 1779 Thomas Hinde, having imported 30 planks of mahogany into London, employed Gillows as brokers on his behalf. His costs are shown in figure 6.49

The costs involved in this transaction are something over 6 per cent of the value, which Hinde had to pay on top of the routine costs of importation. In many cases such additional charges will have wiped out any profit made on the shipment. However, mahogany was often carried when no other freight offered. In such circumstances the ship either came home empty or part freighted, or it carried mahogany. It is possible that in this case Hinde bore the cost of freight himself, and so an importation which on paper was unprofitable at least defrayed some of the running costs of the ship. This, after all, was the commercial logic behind the passing of the Naval Stores Act in 1721.50
Supply and demand — mahogany prices in peace and war

In 1732 Robert Gillow was able to buy mahogany in Lancaster at 3d. and even 2d. per foot, compared with 3d. or 3½d. for Danzig oak. But whereas Danzig oak rarely rose above 4½d. for the rest of the eighteenth century, the price of mahogany moved inexorably upward. By 1750 the price had more than doubled to 8d., and had doubled again by 1775. In 1800 good quality mahogany could not be had under 2s. per foot, an increase of 800 per cent since the 1730s. Among West Indian commodities, inflation on this scale was unique to mahogany. For instance, between 1713 and 1775 the price of sugar never rose more than 20 per cent above its starting price, and frequently fell below it. Since inflation was such a marked feature of the mahogany trade, and since its consequences were of fundamental importance for British furniture makers, it is worth examining its causes in some detail.

The fixed peacetime costs of shipping — principally freight — scarcely changed throughout the century. Therefore the causes of price inflation lay either at the point of production, in the West Indies, or in the home market. In the 1720s prime mahogany could be brought at Kingston for less than 1d. per foot. By the mid-1760s this had risen to 6d. Some of this increase was due to the rising cost of extraction. As the most easily accessible timber was felled, cutters were forced to move ever farther inland, steadily increasing the length and difficulty of transportation. In 1774 Edward Long, a former planter and author of the often-quoted *History of Jamaica*, wrote:

... mahogany is now grown scarce, within ten or twelve miles from the sea coast, and must every year become still scarcer, and consequently dearer, unless nurseries, or plantations, are formed of it in places where the carriage is more convenient for the market.

Long estimated that the difficulty of extraction added £6 sterling to the price of a ton of mahogany in the 1760s. This was a hefty premium, equivalent to 3d. per foot. But given that the price of mahogany in Kingston at this time was 6d. or more, there remained 3d. per foot to be accounted for. This was a rise in real terms, exclusive of extraction costs, of 300 per cent between the 1720s and the 1760s. This must imply that despite ever-increasing exportations, demand for Jamaica mahogany ran ahead of supply. The profits created by this demand went, not to the shippers, brokers or furniture makers, but to the planters.

Contemporary writers confirm that in the mid-eighteenth century mahogany became a valued commodity to the planters on whose estates it grew, not only as a cash crop but as a capital asset. Patrick Browne (1789) described mahogany as formerly furnishing a 'very valuable branch of [Jamaica's] exports'. Edward Long (1774) described one exceptional tree which 'cleared to the proprietor above 500l. currency' and asked why 'this graceful and valuable tree ... is not more cultivated on waiste lands, of which every proprietor has some within his range. Those particularly, who have families, might by these means apply the worst part of their estates to produce a handsome fortune for their younger children'.

Jamaica mahogany remained profitable to the planters so long as it was accessible to the cutters, and so long as there was no competition from other sources. The introduction of cheaper Honduras and Havana mahogany in the 1760s was a warning to the planters that profits could not be taken for granted. The rapid expansion of the
trade in Hispaniola mahogany in the 1780s was a more serious threat, which ultimately killed off Jamaica mahogany as a commercial article.

Wartime magnified the inflationary trends. Shipping insurance, freight rates and seamen’s wages all rose in wartime, and the convoy system resulted in delays which caused overheads to rise further. All these might add a penny or two to the cost of a foot of mahogany. The bulk of the increase, however, was caused by the drastic contraction of seaborne trade, which often resulted in often severe shortages of mahogany on the English market. At such times competition was fierce and prices were inevitably forced upwards.

The first leap from 3d. to 6d. per foot occurred at the beginning of the war against Spain in 1739, and for most of the 1740s the price stood between 6d. and 9d. At the end of the war in 1748, importations of mahogany quickly recovered and even increased, but prices did not fall back to their pre-war level. Wartime effectively established new base levels to which the market adjusted. Hence from 1748 to the beginning of the Seven Years’ War in 1756, 8d. per foot was the norm.

The Seven Years’ War began another inflationary phase. From 1759 onwards the Letter Books provide an increasingly detailed picture of the effect of the war on Gillows’ mahogany buying. From the beginning their primary concern was price, and the letters reveal a strong parsimonious streak which probably goes far to explain Gillows’ commercial survival. In a letter of January 1759 Robert Gillow wrote to his cousin complaining that ‘Mahogany Planks is very Dear...’ Towards the end of the year Gillow attempted to buy mahogany from William Rathbone at Liverpool, but was unable to find any at less than 12d. per foot. This he declined to buy: ‘With regard to mahog: as the price exceeds our expectation must deffer purchase’. A week later he got wind of the arrival of the Jamaica convoy, and wrote again to Rathbone:

... as you’ve a Quantity of Mahogany arrived wth you, hopes ‘twill be something lower, therefore if you can purchase us forty, fifty or 60 Pounds worth of Good Jamaica Wood at 12d or under desires you will — are not willing to give above 12d except if be a better Parcel than common.

Early in 1760 another Jamaica convoy arrived at Liverpool, and Gillow wrote to the Liverpool merchant Christopher Parkinson:

As the Jamaica Fleet is now mostly arrived wth you should be Glad to be informed as to the State of your Markett wth regard to Mahogany & if you expect it will Run.

An almost identical letter went to Rathbone, and the following week he wrote to the London importers Basnett and Hargreaves:

... have an Inclination to Try a small parcel of Mahogany from your place ... desires you’ll purchase us about 50–60–70- or 80 pounds worth of Plank of the best sort you expect to buy at 10d p ft, the breadth you mention from 2 ft or better being quite agreable as the Quality is more material than larger breadths.

As there is a good deal of Deception in this Article, we need not advise you to procure some good Judge to make choise of Right Jamaica Wood, & to see that proper allowances in Measure is made for deficiency.

Gillow clearly had the market well covered, but at the same time the importunate tone of the final paragraph suggests that business was difficult, and that ordering timber from unfamiliar suppliers was not without anxiety.
Later in 1760 the situation was slightly improved. In March Gillows bought 380 planks from Rathbone, and in April they heard of a large consignment of 520 planks which they hoped would lower the market price somewhat. However, wide planks were still hard to come by, and even poor quality Rattan mahogany was fetching up to 11d. per foot. Even in late 1763, when the war was at an end and mahogany importations to all ports had increased markedly, mahogany was still dear in Lancaster. In October Gillows wrote to Wilson and Brown in Jamaica, complaining that ‘The Prices of Mahogany here is about 10d or 11d very ordinary Jamaica and Rattan mix’d. We’ve no good Jamaica at Market at the Present, shou’d be glad to know how it is with you...’. Not until 1764 did the market return to some kind of normality.

The American Revolutionary War 1776–1783

The war between Great Britain and her North American colonies marked a watershed in the history of the mahogany trade. Not only did it bring the trade to a virtual standstill, resulting in the escalation of prices to unprecedented heights, but it caused a radical and permanent shift in patterns of trade which had been largely undisturbed since 1722. The Letter Books constitute a rich source of evidence for this period, providing an extraordinarily vivid and immediate impression of the effect of the war both on the mahogany trade and on British furniture makers.

In the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war importations of mahogany from the West Indies had actually fallen, as the home market attempted to absorb the glut of 1770–72. From the beginning of the war until 1778 the level of importations rose again, boosted by the prohibition of trade between the West Indies and North America after the Prohibitory Act of January 1776 — mahogany once destined for the American market now came to England instead. In defiance of the usual laws of supply and demand prices also rose. Part of the increase can be accounted for by routine rises in both freight and insurance. Further upward pressure was applied by increasing demand, as timber merchants and cabinet makers built up stocks. Anticipating future scarcity, Gillows bought heavily in 1775, and at the end of 1775 were fully stocked with Jamaica wood. The following year they had no difficulty in getting timber, although prices were ‘never so high other years as they are now’. Indeed, overstocking allowed Gillow to send 101 planks of mahogany for sale at Liverpool in June 1777.

The turning point of the war came on 6 February 1778, when France signed a treaty of commerce and alliance with the American rebels. Trade between Jamaica and the French colony of St Domingue ceased and within a month mahogany prices were moving upwards. In March Gillows were offering 22–26d. for ‘Table Planks’ and 13d. otherwise, and expected prices to rise higher still. By summer naval action between France and Britain had commenced, and the rate of shipping insurance rose immediately to over 20 per cent. The entry of Spain into the war in June 1779 completed the anti-British alliance. Mahogany importations from foreign islands into the Jamaican Free Ports, which had continued unaffected for the first three years of war, halved in 1778 and collapsed in 1779. Of even greater impact was the Spanish attack on Belize. On 15 September 1779 a strong Spanish force took the settlement by surprise, catching the mahogany cutters completely unprepared. The settlement was razed and all the
inhabitants taken prisoner. Cutters working in the interior of the country escaped capture but hastily decamped to Ruatan, leaving the Belize settlement deserted. As a result, no mahogany was shipped from Belize until 1784, a fact starkly recorded in the Customs returns (Figure 7). Some Honduras timber appears to have been still available in England during this time, but at hugely inflated prices. The Letter Books record a steady rise in the price of Baywood from 6d. per foot in November 1778, 7½d. in July 1779 and 8d. in September 1780. A year later Baywood reached the extraordinary price of 18d. per foot.

As Britain’s military and naval situation deteriorated, the shortage of mahogany began seriously to affect Gillows’ business. Their correspondence with John Swarbrick took on an importunate and often acrimonious tone. Repeated demands for mahogany were sent by every available outward bound ship, and for the first time there was no haggling over price: As to the Price of mahogany we cannot pretend to Limit you as it is much advanced at this Side most likely it will be higher with you but don’t fail sending us a Parcel.

This became a familiar refrain in the following months. Mahogany became more and more scarce, and by early 1782 Gillows began to worry about their ability to continue making furniture:

We hope you have complied ivith our repeated request of Shipping Mahogy for Land or Lple by various Vessels that we may not be disappointed of part at least to carry on our M[n]anufactory if you have not Enlarged in this Article we beg you wd or ive must pay thro the Nose for it.

In February the Lancaster-bound ship Debby was lost at sea, probably captured by enemy privateers. The loss of the mahogany she carried was a serious blow, particularly as Gillows had not received either an invoice or the bill of lading, without which they could not claim the insurance. In order to spread the risk of further loss Swarbrick was instructed to send small parcels of timber by various vessels destined for any British port. In May 1782 he was told not to wait for convoy but to send by any available ‘Stout Arm’d Ship’, since the insurance on such vessels was almost the same as by convoy. (Earlier, in 1777, Gillows had themselves armed a ship with ten four pounders and ten swivel guns in order to trade without convoy.) At the same time Gillows were trying every possible source, even, in May 1782, writing directly to a planter at Black River:

If you cannot Ship much please to Ship a little by every Oppr from your river till you have nearly Completed the above Commission as we are afraid of being Short in that Necessary Article to carry on our Extensive Manufactory.

By the beginning of 1782 wholesale mahogany prices had reached 19–20d. per foot in London. At Liverpool Gillow were paying 24d. in mid-February and 30d. a fortnight later.

The extraordinary price of mahogany inevitably raised the price of the manufactured article. At least one of Gillow’s sub-contractors, the Kendal upholsterer Richard Pedder, complained, drawing an immediate rebuke; ‘Mahogany is now Double the Price to what it was a while ago you need not wonder to find an Advance in the Price of Bed Pillars’.

Private customers too noticed the rise. The Revd Thomas Wilson of Carlisle protested at the price he had to pay for set of chairs, and the Bishop of Llandaff,
who wanted to extend a set Gillows had previously supplied, was told to expect an increase since ‘all sorts of Foreign Wood is much Advanced since that Time. . .’. However, the firm were either unable or unwilling to pass on the whole of the increased raw material cost to their customers, so that their margins were progressively squeezed as mahogany prices rose. They were also reluctant to make compromises in the quality or workmanship of their produce, but in time these became unavoidable. One of the economies which created dissatisfaction with customers was to make the tops of the end sections of dining tables half the thickness of the centre leaves. In doing so they used only half the timber, which because of its great width was in short supply. When challenged, the firm claimed that the underframe offered sufficient support to the thinner board, but some customers were not mollified.

The defeat of the French fleet at the Battle of the Saints in early 1782 removed the immediate military threat to the West Indian islands. Thereafter a palpable sense of relief entered Gillows’ correspondence, and by September 1782 business was looking up. In a number of petulant notes Gillow criticised Swarbrick for sending overpriced and poor quality mahogany:

_The Parcel of Mahog* we* you Shippd per the Rawlinson to Lple & Hinde to Lancast* is come to hand but we are sorry to Inform you that it proves a very bad Parcel from what we have Cut up it appears to be all Stain’d or the Colour faded wch we presume has been Occasion’d by its laying a long time after it has been fallen._

Talk of peace was in the air, and in the summer of 1782 a sizeable shipment of mahogany arrived in Liverpool. The rumour was that mahogany was coming into Kingston in neutral Danish ships plying between Jamaica and Hispaniola. In Kingston, John Swarbrick was finally able to procure a parcel of Baywood in mid-1782, which arrived at Lancaster in November. Some of this timber comprised roots and branches, which Gillows supposed would be ‘good for little’. They were right, since having cost £70 per thousand feet in Jamaica (equivalent to 16s. 8d. per foot or nearly £34 per ton, Jamaica currency, before shipping and other charges), this consignment was sold for only £9 sterling. Swarbrick was advised to stop buying until the outcome of peace negotiations was known.

_The Free Ports Act of 1766 and the end of the Jamaica trade_

With the conclusion of the American war the mahogany trade exploded into life. Between 1784 and 1790 over 124,000 tons of mahogany was imported into England, and in 1785 importations of mahogany from Jamaica alone reached a record 10,596 tons. However, these figures disguised a major shift in the structure of the trade, because by this time most of the mahogany exported from Jamaica originated in Honduras, Hispaniola and elsewhere. Since the Free Ports Act of 1766, foreign vessels had been permitted to import goods from foreign West Indian islands into the Jamaican ports of Kingston, Savannah la Mar, Montego Bay and St Lucia. The effect of the legislation was at first limited, but after the American war increasing quantities of foreign mahogany were imported into the Free Ports from Hispaniola and other foreign islands. In 1784, the first full year of peace after the Treaty of Versailles, more than 250 foreign vessels entered Jamaican ports carrying, at a conservative estimate, just under
4,000 tons of mahogany. Official figures also show that foreign mahogany was imported into Jamaica in British ships. The shipping register for much of this period is incomplete, but a Treasury document records 27,059 mahogany planks and logs imported by British vessels into Jamaica in 1783.

The effect of these importations was to render Jamaica’s remaining stands of mahogany commercially unviable. Immediately after the American war the extraordinary price of mahogany on the English market enabled Jamaican landowners to cut and ship previously untouched stands, but the steady fall in prices from 1784 onwards, as record quantities of foreign mahogany came onto the market, forced Jamaican mahogany from the market. This is illustrated by the following passage from a letter written by a planter in 1786:

*I believe the Price of mahogany will be so reduced owing to the quantity imported into Jamaica by the French and Spaniards, that I shall not cut much more, altho’ there is an abundance on my Land, having near five thousand Acres stored with Mahogany Trees, whilst the rest of the Island is mostly exhausted. The Reason that the Mahogany on my Land has been so long preserved, arises from the Difficulty in getting it out, as the rocky Precipices that surround it were deemed impervious untill these few years past...*

Bryan Edwards relates that even at the end of the eighteenth century, large tracts of Jamaica were still heavily wooded:

*but it frequently happens ... that the new settler finds the abundance of them [trees] an incumbrance, instead of a benefit, and having provided himself with a sufficiency for immediate use, sets fire to the rest, in order to clear his lands; it not answering the expence of conveying them to the sea-coast for the purpose of sending them to a distant market.***

By the early 1790s imports from Jamaica into England consisted almost entirely of foreign mahogany. When in 1795 import duties on mahogany were reintroduced, the Act listed only three sources of mahogany; Bahamas, Honduras, and ‘Mahogany being the growth of any other Country or Place’. Mahogany from the first two sources was considered British, and paid a duty of £1 10s. per ton, whereas mahogany from the last was considered foreign, and paid a heavier duty of £3. Imports from Jamaica were included in the third category, so that after 1795 all mahogany imported from Jamaica was deemed to be of foreign origin.

The demise of Jamaica mahogany as a commercial article is reflected in the Letter Books. The last specific reference to Jamaica mahogany is in October 1784. When in March 1796 Gillows enquired the price of Honduras and Spanish mahogany at Liverpool, they omitted to enquire after Jamaican. Later in the same year Gillows said they would ‘be glad to know the price of both sorts of Mahogany...’, implying that the third sort, Jamaican, was of no interest.

For a while Kingston maintained its position at the hub of the mahogany trade by acting as an entrepot for foreign mahogany. Increasingly, though, the balance of trade moved away from Jamaica to other islands. Jamaica’s share of total the mahogany imports into England fell from an average of 90 per cent between 1764 and 1774 to 57 per cent between 1784 and 1793. The shortfall was made up by increased imports from numerous sources, including Dominica, Grenada, Bahamas and some foreign islands. For Gillows the most important new source of mahogany was St Kitts, a small and hitherto insignificant British territory in the Leeward Islands. Here in the early
1780s Gillows established Thomas Worswick, the son of Robert’s sister Alice Gillow, as their factor. With the loss of British naval supremacy between 1779 and 1782, St Kitts had assumed unexpected commercial importance because of its proximity to the neutral ports of St Eustatius (Holland), St Bartholomew (Sweden) and St Thomas and St John (Denmark). At the end of the war imports of mahogany from Hispaniola and Puerto Rico flooded into St Kitts in British, Dutch and Danish bottoms. One of the Memorandum Books contains a copy of a bill of lading at St Kitts, dated 30 August 1784. It includes a computation of charges incurred at ‘Statia’, which confirm St Eustatius as the source. By 1790 almost all Gillows’ mahogany and satinwood was bought either at St Kitts or at Liverpool, and the firm’s long involvement in the Jamaica mahogany trade was at an end.

II. SOURCES AND VARIETIES OF MAHOGANY EMPLOYED IN GILLOW FURNITURE

The exquisite beauty of the finer kinds of mahogany, the incomparable lustre of which it is susceptible, exempt also from the depredations of worms, hard, durable, warping and shrinking very little, it is pre-eminently calculated to suit the work of the cabinet-maker. Accordingly, these admirable properties, added to its abundance, and the largeness of its dimensions, have occasioned it to be manufactured into every description of furniture.


The Letter Books record five different varieties of mahogany employed by Gillows in the eighteenth century — Jamaica, Cuba, Hispaniola (also called St Domingo and Spanish), Rattan and Honduras or Baywood. The first three were all varieties of *Swietenia mahogani* (now known as West Indian or ‘Cuban type’ mahogany). The last two were varieties of *Swietenia macrophylla* (Honduras or Central American mahogany). The nomenclature was initially derived from their geographical sources, but the different types were also considered sufficiently distinct in their main characteristics — density, colour, figure and ‘quality’ — to be regarded almost as separate products. The Letter Books leave no doubt that a knowledge of the character and properties of the different mahoganies was an essential part of the furniture maker’s skill. However, although it is clear that an eighteenth-century furniture maker knew his Baywood from his Jamaica, these identifications cannot reliably be applied retrospectively, since it is impossible to distinguish scientifically between the different varieties of West Indian mahogany or even between *S. mahogani* and *S. macrophylla*. The diagnostic value of the text that follows, in terms of its application to surviving eighteenth-century furniture, is therefore nil. On the other hand, because the Gillow archive contains so much information on the sources, types and uses of mahogany, it tells us a great deal about contemporary practice and attitudes. It gives the lie to many modern preconceptions about mahogany, and allows us to make a more informed and objective assessment of the role of mahogany in historic English furniture making.

**Jamaica mahogany**

It has already been remarked that until the last quarter of the eighteenth century Jamaica was the principal source of the mahogany used in Gillow furniture. This is
consistent with the statistical evidence of the English customs returns, which reveals Jamaica as the source of over 90 per cent of the mahogany imported from the West Indies into England. The second most important source was the Bahama islands, but the majority of Bahamian wood went to North America, whence a proportion of it was re-exported to England.115 There are no references to Bahama mahogany in the Gillow archive.

When other varieties of West Indian mahogany became available in the 1760s, 'Right Good Jamaica Wood' remained the benchmark against which they were measured.116 Gillows' preference for Jamaica wood was apparently shared by the trade at large. In 1837 James Macfadyen wrote '. . . the Old Jamaica Mahogany is still considered superior to any that can now be procured from any other country'.117 The Cabinet-Makers' Assistant (1853) reckoned that of all mahogany importations, 'Those from the island of Jamaica furnished a great proportion of the largest and most beautiful wood, of which we have seen several specimens in old furniture, marked by a wild irregular figuring and deep colouring, more resembling tortoise-shell than the mahogany in use at present'.118

Such statements, written several decades after the demise of Jamaica mahogany as a commercial article, have an elegiac quality which should arouse caution in the modern reader. As with all timbers, Jamaica mahogany varied greatly in those criteria which comprise quality — colour, texture, figure and density. In the 1740s Robert Gillow repeatedly enjoined his Jamaican factor to buy carefully and make sure the mahogany 'be good if possible'.119 At other times Gillows were careful to state that they wanted 'fine' or even 'extraordinary' wood. The implication is that much Jamaica mahogany was rather ordinary. Indifferent or average timber with respect to colour and figure was sometimes described as 'middling' or 'plain'.126 This sort of wood was suitable for general purpose work, such as chair frames, bed posts and mouldings: 'The last log of Mahogany turns out bad for the Money — It is not good enough for Tables but just so for chairwood'.127

The word 'quality' was often used, but the factors that constituted quality were rarely explicit, and one assumes therefore that the quality of mahogany was something well understood among those who dealt with it.120 At various times Gillows mentioned the desirability of colour and 'brightness' or lustre,121 and these qualities could be spoiled by careless handling or storage. In late 1782 Gillows were sent a parcel of mahogany which, they complained, 'appears to be all Stain'd of the Colour faded wch we presume has been Occasion'd by its laying a long time after it has been falled if it had been a good colour tho' plain it would have been worth near £100 more than it is'.122 Good figure was implied by the phrase 'well vein'd', and 'fine' quality timber possessed both colour and figure.123 The hardness of best Jamaica wood was undoubtedly desirable, from the point of view of both working and finish. It was favourably compared with 'soft mahogany' from Rattan or Honduras, and the difference in price between furniture in 'good hard wood' and inferior or 'softer' mahogany was often quoted in correspondence with clients.124 'Soundness' implied freedom from shakes or other faults, and hence a 'sound parcel' of mahogany was one in which working losses were minimal.125
Jamaica mahogany came in all sizes. Edward Long tells of trees discovered in the early days of the colony, 'of thirty six feet in girth, or about twelve feet in diameter'. These were exceptional. As a general rule, *Swietenia mahogani* did not grow as large as *Swietenia macrophylla*, and the very largest logs, the veritable giants featured in nineteenth-century press reports, came from Central America. Nevertheless, boards of 30 in. width and more are common in mid-eighteenth-century table tops. To produce these would require trees of at least three to four feet in diameter. On the other hand, small logs were imported even in the earliest days of the trade. The *Daily Journal* of 10 August 1724 advertised for sale 'About fifty or sixty Mohogany Timber Trees, about 12 inches square...'.

One of Gillows' specialities was the manufacture of sets of dining tables, and this required very particular attention to the choice of wood. Above all, timber destined for dining table tops had to be wide, and because planks or logs over 2 ft broad were scarce they fetched a premium price. This was a fact that Gillows repeatedly impressed on their suppliers; '...good wood suitable for large Tables &c. from 20 Inches broad up to 28 inches &c. upward is worth double the small wood & more', and; 'We need not repeat that Plank above 18 inches broad to 24 In are of far more Value than those under 18 Inches...'. All the boards for a dining table top were cut from the same plank or log to ensure uniformity of grain and colour. Because tables required relatively little making in comparison to the quantity of wood consumed, most of the price of dining tables was accounted for by the timber. The repeated emphasis on obtaining wide planks shown in the Letter Books of the 1770s and 1780s suggests that Jamaica wood of sufficient breadth to provide table wood became scarcer as time went on, resulting in an inevitable escalation of price. Width of plank combined with figure, colour and brightness constituted the acme of perfection. Such wood was described as 'fine table plank' and fetched the highest prices.

There is some evidence that the character of Jamaica mahogany changed during the sixty or seventy years it was commercially imported. All eighteenth-century authorities agree that the earliest shipments of Jamaica mahogany were those most easily accessible to the cutters. Mahogany grew plentifully in the savannah on the south side of Jamaica where the majority of plantations were initially established. This mahogany, raised in fertile, moist soils, was relatively fast grown, and may account for the fairly bland character of the wood used in some early mahogany furniture — the so-called 'red walnut' of the antique furniture trade. Fast rates of growth can occasionally be confirmed by examining the end grain of mahogany dining table boards, where the growth ring boundaries are clearly marked by pale lines of terminal parenchyma. Such timber, whilst lacking the glamour of better figured stuff, was nevertheless ideal for general joinery and furniture.

Mahogany trees were not replanted and the most accessible timber was inevitably soon exhausted, so the mahogany cutters moved gradually inland and to higher elevations. The mahogany grown on poorer, upland soils was notably harder and more richly coloured than the lowland variety. Robert Hodgson, Superintendent of the Mosquito Shore, wrote that the mahogany obtained from this 'dry, rocky ground' was of 'slow growth and close grain'. This accords with the impression given by other authorities such as Richard Browne and Edward Long, that the better quality Jamaica
wood was that obtained from the interior of the island. According to Long (1774), the chief difference between Jamaican wood and that from the Central American mainland and Cuba was that 'the former is mostly found on rocky eminences; the latter is cut in swampy soils, near the sea-coast. The superior value of the Jamaica wood, for beauty of colouring, firmness, and durability, may therefore be easily accounted for'.

The employment of harder, darker and denser wood from the island's interior coincides with the 'Chippendale' period of English furniture making, c. 1745–65. Authorities from Percy Macquoid onwards have assigned to mahogany a key role in the development of this style, on the grounds that the structural qualities of this wood made possible the light, elegant yet robust forms that epitomise the English rococo. In particular, comparisons have been made between the different physical characteristics of mahogany and walnut, invariably to the disadvantage of the latter. R. W. Symonds wrote:

[Mahogany] was a much stronger wood, a quality which the chair makers quickly realised, as it permitted them to make the legs, rails and backs of their chairs more slender in form and with more accentuated curves than was possible in walnut.

Mahogany, he argued, helped create the English rococo style:

As an example of how mahogany gradually changed the design of chairs, the solid splat-backed chair of George I's reign . . . should be compared with the well-known mid-eighteenth-century type as shown by Thomas Chippendale in his Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director. The backs of Chippendale's chairs with their finely interlaced splats were designed purposely for execution in carving.

At the heart of this argument is the assumption that it was a particular type of dark, hard and dense mahogany, which allowed the 'Chippendale' style to be developed. The gradual change from lowland to upland mahogany would seem to support this thesis, but the evidence of the Gillow archive suggests that this puts the cart before the horse. The use of this peculiarly hard and dark mahogany for chair frames and other carved work was less the work of nature than the result of careful selection. As a general rule, the densest mahogany came from small, slow grown trees, and such timber was clearly unsuitable for use as table tops or indeed any employment where width and stability were necessary attributes. On the other hand, there were many applications for which where wide boards were not needed. In 1768 Gillows wrote to Joshua Beetham in Liverpool to order 'little Jamaica Loggs, . . . especially if a part of it will be fitt for mouldings &c. . . .' Similarly, small logs of dark, hard wood were reserved for 'Chair Banisters and toprails.'

The same process of selection is noted by other authorities. The *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* (1829) describes how 'the dark-coloured, hard, and straight grained trees . . . are now used for chairs, and other articles, in which the solid timber is preferred'. Edward Chaloner termed such timber 'Chair and Hand-rail, or Joiner's Logs', and described how 'it is the plain wood which is applied to these purposes'. The Cabinet-Maker's Assistant (1853) concurred; 'Chair-wood logs require less attention to size in their selection than colour, straightness of grain, and firmness of texture'.

These nineteenth-century authorities confirm that the use of dense, hard mahogany had nothing to do with period or style, but was simply a prerequisite for making sound
chairs. The argument that the use of mahogany influenced or even determined the development of the 'Chippendale' style seems therefore to be spurious. Rather, particular styles or forms of furniture demanded special attention to the type of wood used. The fact that mahogany was well suited to the demands made on it was undoubtedly a boon to rococo furniture makers, but it did not in itself create stylistic change.

An analogous but equally spurious argument for materials determining style concerns the use of curl veneers (also called crotch, flame or feathered mahogany). Again, it has been assumed that the stylistic change manifested in the increased use of curl veneers after c. 1760 was the result of the introduction of a specific variety of mahogany (Symonds called it ‘Cuban’). In fact, virtually every tree contains curl timber, produced where a branch separates from the trunk or where the trunk itself forks into two. Spectacular curls can also be obtained from the base of the trunk, which in the mahogany tree is heavily buttressed where the roots merge with the trunk.

The widespread introduction of curl veneers seems to have been due to the coincidence of neo-classical fashion with the high timber prices caused by the Seven Years’ War. In the early days of the trade, when mahogany was both abundant and cheap, curl timber was ignored by the cutters. There seemed little point in expending time and labour on cutting out the buttresses and roots, or in hauling awkwardly shaped timber on bad roads. Anything other than a neatly squared log or plank took up extra shipping space and hence cost more to import. Moreover, curl timber commonly contained faults which caused waste and losses in working, particularly ‘inbark, or gall’ which ‘arises from the two centres forming the curl never having perfectly united’. Mahogany trees were therefore cross-cut above the buttresses and below the fork. The trunk was trimmed, squared and hauled away, and the remainder left to rot.

As the price of mahogany rose sharply in the 1750s, cutters and importers became less cavalier about discarding previously unprofitable wood, particularly when, with the advent of neoclassical styles in the 1760s, it became apparent that the decorative value or curl and root timber outweighed the cost of extraction and importation. When Edward Long left Jamaica in the late 1760s the full value of highly figured timber was just becoming apparent:

*In felling these trees, the most beautiful part is commonly left behind. The negroe workmen raise a scaffolding, of four or five feet elevation above the ground, and hack off the trunk, which they cut up into balks.*

*The part below, extending to the root, is not only of the largest diameter, but of a closer texture than the other parts, most elegantly diversified with shades or clouds, or dotted, like ermine, with black spots; it takes the highest polish, with a singular lustre, so firm as even to reflect objects like a mirror. This part is only to be come at by digging below the spur to a depth of two or three feet, and cutting it through; which is so laborious an operation, that few attempt it, except they are uncommonly curious in their choice of wood, or to serve a particular order.*

*Yet I apprehend it might be found to answer the trouble and expence, if sent for a trial to the British market; as it could not fail of being approved of beyond any other wood, or even tortoise-shell which it most resembles.*

In the 1760s a new annotation appeared in the customs returns and the shipping registers. As well as logs, planks and boards, mahogany ‘slabs’ began to be imported.
GILLOW AND THE USE OF MAHOGANY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

No fuller descriptions are given, but it is possible that these slabs are the sections of root or buttress timber referred to by Long. In the 1770s Gillows bought Baywood 'crutches' in Kingston, showing that Honduras was the source of at least some of their curl veneers.147

Rattan mahogany

The second variety of mahogany in Gillows' repertoire was called Rattan, after the island of Ruatan, about thirty-five miles off the Mosquito Shore in Central America.153 Early in the 1739-48 war this island was fortified as a refuge for the English settlers on the Shore, and it was here that mahogany cut on the opposite mainland was loaded and shipped to Kingston. Most of the mahogany was cut along the banks of the Black River, on the northern coast of the Shore. An account written in 1748 by Richard Jones, a military engineer, reported; 'The Land on each side [of] Black River is very Fertile; . . . great quantities of fine Mahogany, Cedar and Pine Trees'.154

The date at which Rattan mahogany first became available in England is uncertain, but from November 1745 shipments were made from Ruatan to Kingston on a regular basis.155 It is difficult to estimate the scale of the trade in Rattan mahogany, since it was entered with importations from Jamaica in the English customs returns, but in some years it might have amounted to twenty per cent of the total imported.156 The first record of Rattan mahogany in the Gillow archive is given in a letter of December 1759, when Gillows wrote to William Rathbone, asking him to buy 'a thousand feet of Rattan wood . . . at the Lowest Prize [sic] you can get it for'.157

Rattan mahogany was universally considered much inferior in quality to Jamaican (Sheraton called it 'a kind of bastard mahogany').158 In his survey of woods of the Mosquito Shore, Captain Robert Hodgson wrote:

. . . it is not reckoned as good as that of Jamaica, the reason probably is, that what is now got in that Island, grows in dry, rocky ground, where it has been preserved to the last by the Difficulty of transporting it, and for want of Soil is of a slow growth and close grain; but here it has been cut for convenience in low Land near the Water Side, from which situation its growth is quick, and its grain open; but some cut on the high Land is as good as any.159

The poor quality of Rattan mahogany did not necessarily affect its marketability. To begin with, it was cheaper than Jamaican by a good margin, and the disparity increased with time. In 1759 Gillows were paying 8–10d. per foot for Rattan wood and 11–12d. for Jamaican.160 By 1776 Rattan had fallen to 4d. but Jamaican had risen to between 12d. and 18d.161 Rattan mahogany tended to run large, and good breadth and light weight were desirable attributes for many uses. It was an ideal carcase timber (when ordering Rattan plank from William Rathbone in 1775, Gillows specified that 'plain Streight Baisted Wood will do best . . .')162, and also 'absolutely necessary for making coach panels of'.163 Thus the demand for what Gillows called 'good soft mahogany' was fairly constant, even for high quality work. Despite competition from Honduras mahogany from 1763 onwards, Gillows continued to employ Rattan wood at least until 1776.164 The Customs returns show that Rattan mahogany was regularly imported into England until at least 1780, although the trade eventually ceased after Mosquito Shore was evacuated in 1787.165
One significant consequence of the introduction of Rattan wood was that for the first time it was necessary to distinguish between Jamaican and other mahogany. Until the 1750s Gillows always referred to Jamaican mahogany simply as 'mahogany', but in December 1754, in an invoice for planks shipped to Dublin, the phrase 'Right Jamaica Wood' was used for the first time. Henceforth 'Jamaica' signified not only a place of origin, but also a standard of excellence and quality.

Honduras mahogany

Honduras mahogany or *Baywood* was cut along the rivers and lagoons of western Yucatan in the Bay of Honduras and exported from the port of Belize. Until the 1760s the primary export from Belize was logwood, the most abundant and economically important of the American dyewoods. In contrast to the extensive and well-documented trade in logwood, there is no evidence that mahogany was shipped from Belize before 1763. The reason was purely commercial; so long as the price of logwood remained buoyant in Europe it made little sense to bother with mahogany.

Until 1763 logwood cutting in Honduras was carried on in the face of persistent Spanish opposition, but in Article 17 of the Treaty of Paris (1763) the Spanish government conceded the right of the British logwood cutters to work unmolested in and around Belize. Freed from the threat of Spanish interference, and attracted by the high price of logwood on the European market, cutters from all over the West Indies descended on Yucatan. Record amounts of logwood were cut and shipped, so that by 1767 the market was glutted, and prices in Europe collapsed. With logwood fetching a mere £3 10s. per ton, and Jamaica mahogany fetching up to £36, there was for the first time a clear profit to be made in mahogany, even allowing for the lower quality of Honduras wood. The first shipments reached Kingston in November 1763, and direct importations into England commenced the following year (Figure 7).

Honduras mahogany was available at Liverpool by March 1765, when it was advertised for sale in *Williamson's Advertiser*, but the wood was not mentioned by name in the Letter Books until 1770. In 1771 the trade was given a tremendous boost by the Mahogany Act of that year, which allowed mahogany from Honduras and other foreign territories into England duty free.

There was a universally recognised difference in quality between mahogany from Honduras and that from Jamaica or other West Indian islands. Sheraton's remarks on the relative merits of Honduras and Spanish timber are well known but still worth repeating:

*The difference between Honduras and Spanish wood is easily perceived by judges, but not by others unskilled in wood. The marks of the former are, as to size, its length and width, which generally run much more than in the latter wood. We seldom import any much more than 2 feet 2 inches broad and 10 feet long, and generally not more than 21 or 22 inches broad. Honduras wood will frequently run 12 to 14 feet in length, and from 2 to 4 feet wide. In rare instances, there have been some 6 or 7 feet over. The grain of Honduras wood is of a different quality from that of Cuba, which is close and hard, without black speckles, and of a rosy hue, and sometimes strongly figured; but Honduras wood is of an open nature, with black or grey spots, and frequently of a more flashy figure than Spanish. The best quality of Honduras wood is known by its being free from chalky and black speckles, and
when the colour is inclined to a dark gold hue. The common sort of it looks brisk at a distance and of a lively pale red; but, on close inspection, is of an open and close grain, and of a spongy appearance.\textsuperscript{173}

According to George Dyer, agent for the British Merchants trading to Honduras, Baywood was 'of a middle quality . . . preferable to what grows on the Mosquito Shore but it must be allowed that for superior Cabinet work in general it is inferior to the Wood imported circuitously from Hispaniola'.\textsuperscript{174} The best Honduras timber tended to be that grown on high ground; Thomas Laslett reckoned 'the timber produced on low moist grounds is generally soft, spongy and inferior'.\textsuperscript{175}

The middling quality of Honduras wood accounted for its generally lower price, typically about half that of Jamaican or Spanish wood. This relative cheapness was of enormous benefit to the furniture trade, since it encouraged a much wider use of mahogany. As a result of the extraordinary rise in imports from Honduras from 1771 onwards, the overall production of mahogany furniture must have increased markedly in the 1770s and 1780s. In this sense, connoisseurs are correct in seeing this period as one of qualitative decline, since the large production of cheaper furniture must inevitably reduce the perceived average quality of late Georgian mahogany. But this is an elitist view. A more egalitarian interpretation might see Honduras mahogany as a great leveller, bringing fashionable furniture within reach of a large swathe of lower
middle class England. Certainly Gillows used large quantities of it, and their late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century furniture was better made as a result. The Estimate Sketch Books show Baywood used extensively as a carcase wood, for drawer linings, and as a bed for veneering. In all these respects it was superior to oak and, at times, almost as cheap. In the early 1770s Baywood cost 4–6d. per foot, and in the late 1780s a little as 3d. As well as being used extensively for secondary purposes, Baywood was sometimes offered as a primary alternative to more expensive Jamaican or Spanish mahogany. For instance, in a letter of 1771 Gillows wrote that a dining table of Jamaica wood ‘wou’d be about 55s but if made of a Softer Kind of Wood (but yet Sound) it might be made for 2 G’ or 45s’.  

Even allowing for its generally lower quality, Gillows purchased Baywood with their usual discrimination. In 1773 they offered the following advice to John Swarbrick in Kingston:

> The heavier this Wood is in General & the better; also for being Close and not soft and fuzzey at the Ends of each; Shakes, in all wood, running Oblique in the Ends, in generly much worse than when they Run Parrallel to the sides, that is, there is more waste. . .

In terms of size, Honduras mahogany had the advantage of the West Indian varieties. As Sheraton remarked, by 1800 very little Spanish or Jamaica wood was obtainable over two feet in width. In order to maintain the size advantage of Honduras wood, and to conserve stocks of young trees, the cutters prohibited the export of logs under 17 inches across.  

A small proportion of Honduras mahogany was ‘very fine wood’. George Dyer wrote of a single tree increasing the value of a whole cargo by £500, and suggested a range of prices from £6 to £180 per ton. An early nineteenth-century authority mentions the piano maker Broadwood paying £3,000 for three logs of Honduras mahogany, ‘each about fifteen feet long and thirty eight inches wide’. This was a good price for any mahogany. The logs were cut into veneers, and the result declared ‘peculiarly beautiful, capable of receiving the highest polish; and, when polished, reflected the light in the most varied manner, like the surface of a crystal; and, from the wavy form of the fibres, offering a different figure in whatever direction it was viewed’.  

Like Broadwood’s logs, the best Honduras wood was destined for the veneer saw, and according to Blackie, was used as much as Spanish veneers in the early part of the nineteenth century. In this respect the quality of early Honduras imports was notably better than those of the Victorian period, and contained a good proportion of ‘hard showy wood . . . well worthy of being used for veneering purposes’. Remarks like these illustrate the danger of forming dogmatic preconceptions about Honduras and other varieties based on subjective assessments of figure, colour or quality.  

**Cuban mahogany**

The idea that Cuban mahogany was used in the best English eighteenth-century furniture is a myth, propagated by early twentieth-century authors such as Percy Macquoid and Herbert Cescinsky, and since established as ‘fact’ by constant iteration. The statistical and other evidence housed in the Public Record Office shows that no
Cuban mahogany was imported either directly or indirectly into England before the Seven Years' War (1756–63). This is confirmed by the evidence of the Letter Books, which show not only that Cuban mahogany was an introduction of the 1760s, but that its quality fell far short of its modern reputation.

Cuban mahogany was first brought to England as a result of the capture of Havana by British forces in August 1762. This was the crowning achievement of what had been a very successful war. Hugh Thomas has commented:

...the capture of the city was the signal, as it had been in the case of the capture of Guadeloupe and Martinique, for an immediate descent on the island by English merchants... in the eleven months of English occupation of that city over 700 merchants ships entered the port which previously never in one year had been entered by more than fifteen.

Among the minor outcomes of this bonanza was the importation of small quantities of Havana or Cuban mahogany into England. For the period that Havana was under British occupation (August 1762–July 1763), mahogany and cedar were exported from Havana and entered Britain on the same terms as wood from other British possessions. Some of this windfall arrived at Liverpool, to where in July 1763 Richard Gillow wrote to John Rathbone to enquire the price of 'the Havannah Mahogany'. Other Havana timber was shipped via Jamaica, and later in the year Gillow made a similar enquiry of the Jamaican firm of Wilson and Brown, asking for prices of Jamaica, Havannah and Rattan wood.

Direct importats from Havana to England ceased in 1764 when the Spanish re-established control of the port, but once opened, the channels of commerce were never again closed completely. British ships continued to ply between Jamaica and the Cuban coast; an average of eight or nine vessels per year were recorded between 1763 and 1769. These vessels carried British manufactures and slaves into south and east Cuba, returning with hides, mules, cattle and mahogany. Gillows did not have a high opinion of Cuban wood, and avoided using it for veneers or quality work. In 1768 they wrote to Joseph Beetham seeking good quality mahogany, adding that Cuban wood 'won't do at all'. Gillows' opinion was shared by the trade at large, and was reflected in its market price. It was usually quoted a little above Baywood and well below Jamaica. In October 1770, for instance, prices at Liverpool were: Baywood 4½d., Cuban 6½ to 7d., Jamaican 12 to 16d. In 1776, at the beginning of the American war, Baywood was 4–5d., Cuba 8d., and Jamaica 12–18d. These price differentials were fairly typical, and consistent for the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Cuban trade with Jamaica was effectively curtailed by the American Revolutionary War (although some subsequently came indirectly via the United States), so that Cuban mahogany did not play a significant part in British furniture making until after the opening of direct trade between Britain and Cuba in 1808. Even then, it lagged far behind Hispaniola in importance until the second half of the nineteenth century.

**Hispaniola mahogany**

The trade in Hispaniola mahogany began as an adjunct to that in cotton. Prior to 1766 trade between Jamaica and Hispaniola was almost non-existent, but the passing of the
The 1766 Free Ports Act allowed French and Spanish vessels to trade from Hispaniola into Kingston for the first time. The island of Hispaniola was divided between the French colony of St Domingue in the west (now Haiti) and the Spanish colony of St Domingo in the east (now the Dominican Republic). Most of the cotton (about 85 per cent) came from the French colony of St Domingue, and this was initially also the main source of Hispaniola mahogany. The amounts imported were at first small, but after the end of the American War (1776-83) the trade grew rapidly. In 1784 at least 40 per cent of Jamaica’s mahogany exports originated in Hispaniola, and by the end of the decade Hispaniola mahogany had almost completely driven Jamaican from the market.

The first notice of Hispaniola mahogany in Liverpool can be found in Williamsons’s Liverpool Advertiser and Mercantile Register for 1 March 1766. Among several advertisements for mahogany planks and logs for sale was one for a particular cargo; ‘The greatest part of the Wood is the Produce of Hispaniola, and deemed equal to the best Jamaica Mahogany’. This brief notice heralded a trade which was of paramount importance both to Gillows of Lancaster and to the entire British furniture industry.

Gillows called the new mahogany by various names — Spanish, St Domingo or Hispaniola. They first began to buy it in 1768 or perhaps a little earlier, although at that time they were not certain of its source. In September 1768 Gillows wrote to Joseph Beetham in Liverpool in response to an offer of Spanish mahogany he had then in stock:

... wth regard to the Spanish Wood — it seldom comes here, but perhaps you may remember selling some plank & Loggs to Mr Jn Herd Joiner when he was working at Ashton Hall. He B’d it of you to fill up a vessel, Short Laden with Balk Br’d it to Lancaster & we purchased it of him, now if you have seen of this Parcel [of yours] open’d and be of Oppinion that these are good in Quality as those you sold to Mr Heard, would take 'em at the Price you've offer’d 'em at ... but if they are any thing like Cuba wood they won’t do at All [my emphasis].

The origin of this Spanish timber was apparently unknown to Gillows and to Beetham. The wood was similar in appearance and quality to good Jamaica wood, and was sometimes sold as such. Nevertheless, Gillows had their suspicions, as they wrote in a letter to the London branch of the firm in October 1770:

We mentioned in our last that we had brought a parcel of fine Jamaica plank but believe they are from a different Island we had some such Last year that proved full as well nay much better than Jam” Planks.

Despite Sheraton’s assertion ‘... the Cuba and Spanish mahogany are the same, as the island of Cuba is a Spanish colony’, it is clear from the Letter Books that this was not the case, and that a distinction was made between Spanish and Cuban wood:

... We think we have mentioned to you before that there is a great difference between what are called Spanish Planks & Cuba Mahog: the latter Generly coming in Short planks or Loggs perhaps worth about 7d to 9d a foot here — the other wth we call Spanish Planks are Commonly from 10 to 13 Ft long & from 16 to 26 Inches broad & from 3 to 4 \frac{1}{2} or 3 Inches thick & have Generly an Auger Hole bored thro the end of each Plank there. if sound & of the usual good Quallity are ivorth it- Per ft or more. Where they grow we cannot say but suppose that some of 'em come from St Domingo. ...

By the mid-1770s Gillows had developed a decided preference for Spanish plank as an alternative to Jamaica wood, and it became the standard against which other
mahoganies were measured. Hispaniola mahogany possessed qualities of colour, figure and lustre which only the best Jamaican timber could match. Moreover, as good Jamaican timber became increasingly hard to obtain, the more consistent quality of Hispaniola wood meant that it was ‘the safest Sort of Mahogany to turn out good’. This sentiment was reiterated more than once in 1784; ‘We need not repeat that the sort of wood we want comes from Hispaniola’, and ‘We have always found that the mahog’ that comes from Hispaniola turns out here the Best Quality’.  

Notwithstanding the caveat given earlier about the impossibility of retrospective identification of the various mahoganies, it is clear that the superb mahogany which distinguishes Gillows furniture made at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries must have originated in Hispaniola. Although the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1793–1802, 1803–15) caused some disruption in supplies, the opening of direct trade with St Domingo in 1808 ensured that Spanish mahogany dominated the upper end of the market in Britain until after 1860.

The demand for curl timber accelerated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by which time Hispaniola (a.k.a. St Domingo), rather than Jamaica, was the primary source. In 1853 Blackie described the St Domingo curl as follows:

... the curl, or that peculiar feathery marking, which is caused by the log being cut where it has diverged into two separate hearts, each forming the centre of a limb of the tree. The wood deposited between these two, before they finally separate into the forked shape, is often found very beautiful, and was, till lately, highly prized for veneering panels, sideboard backs and moulded fronts, for drawer fronts and round table tops, on which the curls radiated from the centre.

This was a fashion which prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic. In October 1818 the Charleston cabinet maker Robert Walker advertised ‘30 logs St Domingo Crotch MAHOGANY’. A few years later S. Davenport & Co. offered ‘58 Logs St Domingo MAHOGANY, several of which are Crotches’. 

The quality and potential size of a curl in the log was estimated by inspecting the end grain of a log or bark:

In selecting a log for curls, particular attention should be paid to the width between the two centres or hearts, with the view of ascertaining the probable length of figure. When the centres are unusually wide, a long length of curl may be expected suitable for the panels of wardrobes; and, on the contrary, when the centres are near, the curl is likely to be fit for short panels only, or for the star tops of tables. A defect in the quality of the curl is frequently caused by the ordinary circumstances of the growth of the tree, which go to form it. This is due to the partial detachments of the branches, at short intervals, before their complete divergence from each other at the top of the stem. The formation of in-bark at these points is destructive of the value of the curl. The external indications of this fault are generally not very decided. The most certain and conspicuous mark is when there is appearance of bark, imbedded or interposed between the concentric rings of the exposed sections of the several branches. 

Chaloner and Fleming reckoned that St Domingo logs produced the best curl and, ‘In point of value, Saint Domingo Curls rank after Table and veneer Logs’. In order to maximise the value of the curl it was recommended that the log be cross-cut, firstly at the point where the two branches meet the trunk, ‘taking care not to leave any inbark
CONCLUSION

Fashionable English furniture makers of the eighteenth century were almost entirely dependent on imported timbers, of which mahogany was by far the most important. It might reasonably be argued that without mahogany English furniture would not only have looked very different, but would never have developed into the great manufacturing industry it became by the end of the eighteenth century. Mahogany was a first class raw material, widely available, and imported in ever increasing quantities from the 1720s onwards. Its impact on English furniture making was analogous (though on a lesser scale) to the impact of cotton on English textiles.

From its modest beginning in the late 1720s, the rise of the Gillow firm was closely linked to the growth of the mahogany trade. The way in which the detailed evidence of the Gillow archive reflects the vicissitudes of the trade at large is extraordinary, and fully endorses the growing belief that the Gillow archive is the paramount surviving documentary source for English furniture history. As well as confirming and enlarging the story of mahogany which emerges from the statistical record, the Gillow archive gives the lie to many longstanding misconceptions about the sources, types and uses of eighteenth-century mahogany. It also reveals mahogany as a surprisingly volatile commodity, whose availability and price was dramatically affected by fluctuating supply and demand, and by the prevailing political and commercial conditions. Indeed, one of the most valuable aspects of the archive is the way in which it demonstrates the vulnerability of English furniture makers to events and circumstances beyond their control. Access to mahogany, their primary raw material was controlled and directed by government policy, specifically, the Navigation Laws, the 1721 Naval Stores Act, the 1766 Free Ports Act and the 1771 Mahogany Act. Even within the protection of this legislation, the mahogany trade was rarely stable. Momentous political events, and particularly the condition of peace or war, had a direct effect on the direction and volume of trade and these were ultimately manifested in the furniture of Gillows and every other English maker. At times, as during the American Revolutionary War, these events were so disruptive as to threaten the very existence of the firm. On the other hand, Gillows benefited from windfalls such as the capture of Havana, or from significant changes in imperial commercial policy such as the Free Ports Act. The fact that the impact of these events is so clearly recorded in the Gillow archive suggests that furniture historians need considerably to broaden their customary terms of reference. It is a moot question whether Chippendale's Director or the Seven Years' War had the greater effect on Gillows' furniture. The former was never mentioned in their correspondence, but the concerns arising from the latter run to many pages.

The extent to which Gillows' experiences can be extrapolated to include all English furniture makers can be overstated, however. Their activities in the mahogany trade reveal several aspects of the firm which were undoubtedly unusual and possibly unique. The most obvious of these was Gillows' wider involvement in West Indian trade. It is
unlikely that we shall ever fully record or quantify Gillows multifarious commercial activities outside their core business of furniture making, but enough is already evident to suggest that they played an important, possibly crucial role in Gillows’ commercial survival. The Achilles’ heel of many eighteenth-century furniture makers was cash-flow; 'ready money' was also a constant concern for Gillows, but the revenue from trade and shipping must have considerably mitigated the difficulties caused by late payers, defaulters and bankrupts.

So far as mahogany was concerned, it is clear that direct involvement in the trade gave Gillows several distinct advantages over competitors without such involvement. As direct importers Gillows paid less for their mahogany, because brokers’ commissions, handling and transport charges were reduced to a minimum. There were also financial benefits in part-ownership of the vessels in which the mahogany was shipped. When buying through third parties at Liverpool, Bristol or London Gillows had both the experience and the buying power to bargain hard and to buy with discrimination. They were able to play one market against the other, and to switch suppliers to obtain the most favourable terms. Through their extensive West Indian contacts Gillows kept in close touch with the mahogany market at source. The establishment of Thomas Worswick as agent at St Kitts is a clear example of Gillows moving with the market to exploit new openings. This was, moreover, a two-way trade, for as well as importing mahogany and satinwood, Gillows were able to tap into the growing entrepot at St Eustatius which gave vent to their manufactured furniture throughout the Caribbean and North America.

The advantages of a ‘primary’ mahogany importer were also manifested in other ways. Perhaps the most important of these was the control of quality. Because of the choice of sources and suppliers available to them, Gillows were able to pick and choose their mahogany. On the other hand, furniture makers operating at several removes from direct West Indian trade were necessarily at a disadvantage. By the time mahogany reached them the best had been creamed off and what remained was burdened with haulage costs and broker’s fees. The significance of this is evident today, when the high quality of timber is still apparent in surviving Gillows furniture. Of course, many other large firms, particularly in London, also had the pick of the market. What often sets Gillow furniture apart from the rest is the combination of quality and sobriety which not only reflects a shrewd assessment of most customers’ tastes but also represents a thoroughly successful business philosophy.

REFERENCES

References cited as P.R.O. refer to documents housed in the Public Record Office, London. They are identified by the following class prefixes.

Adm. Admalty
B.T. Board of Trade
C.O. Colonial Office
Cust. Customs
T. Treasury

2. 344/1 (Waste Book, 1731-43): The Waste Book was 'a register, containing an inventory of a merchant's debts and effects, with a record of his transactions, narrated in a plain, simple style, and in exact order of time as they succeed one another'. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Edinburgh, 1771, p. 582.

3. Adam Bowett, The English Mahogany Trade, pp. 53-58. The figures were obtained by analysis of government data housed in the Public Record Office. The most useful classes of documents are the yearly digest of customs returns (Cust. 3), the relevant Port Books (E 190), and the Jamaica Shipping Returns (C.O. 142). It should be noted that London's share of total importations was further reduced by re-exports of mahogany to other English south and east coast ports.


7. Thomas was the son of the Lancaster merchant, banker and clockmaker Thomas Worswick. Worswick senior was married to Robert Gillow's sister, Alice.


9. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillows to an unknown correspondent, December 1747.

10. Ibid., 26 January 1748.

11. 344/161 (Accounts), Gillow to Mr Wm. Fletcher, undated, 1749.

12. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 23 September, 10 November, 27 December 1782, 8 January, 26 February 1784.

13. Gillow to John Burrow, 3 May 1784; Gillow to William Yate, 19 January, 14 March 1784.

14. 344/171 (Letter Book), Gillow to Worswick, 22 April 1787.

15. 344/161 (Accounts), 7 November 1747.

16. Few eighteenth-century merchants owned ships outright. Ownership of a vessel was divided into equal parts or shares, usually divisible by factors of four into four, eight, sixteen or even thirty-two shares. In this way the capital investment and the risk was spread among a number of merchants. The ship might be managed by one or two active partners, so that the ownership and the management of ships were often disassociated. Davis, op. cit., p. 82.


18. Ibid., p. 96.

19. Ibid., p. 128. Ms Elder has shown that slaving was initially a marginal activity in eighteenth-century Lancaster. Those who engaged in it tended to be established tradesmen, such as linen-drapers, grocers and apothecaries, who 'used the African trade as a means of making exploratory investments in colonial commerce'. It was a way of making good profits with relatively small capital, though the risks were correspondingly high. Davis, op. cit., p. 280.


21. 344/171 (Letter Book), Gillow to Messrs Yate and Hinde, 5 May 1787.

22. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 February 1776. Goods were always cheaper when bought with ready money, and if bought on credit, as they often were, the shorter the credit the better the terms.

23. There are several contemporary references to this problem, including: P.R.O., Adm 2/1880, Captain Harris to the Navy Board, 30 December 1723; 344/170 (Letter Book) Gillow to Worswick & Allman, St Kitts, 25 January 1785.

24. Preston, Lancashire Record Office, DDX/22/68, Log Book of the Brig Dolphin, 1774-8. According to Benjamin Satterthwaite's letter books each of the cargoes he assembled between May and July in 1764 began with a loading of mahogany. Richard Pares relates that planters were reluctant to allow their sugar to be loaded directly into the 'ground tier' of the hold, for fear of the sugar becoming damaged by water. Loading mahogany first was a cost-effective way of overcoming this difficulty. Pares, A West India Fortune, p. 233. A letter of 1773, from Samuel Foster to the Duke of Portland, provides further confirmation of the practice of using mahogany to line the hold. Discussing the purchase of mahogany at Hull for use at Welbeck, Foster wrote: 'I know it is as cheap as can be bought at Liverpool. The man does not Deal in Mahogany. Only he buys it to board his ship with to bring his liquors upon'. Nottingham University, Portland Papers, DWF 3.956. I am grateful to Dr Ivan Hall for drawing this reference to my attention.

26. Other examples of this procedure can be cited. For instance, in 1762 Henry Baines wrote to William Rathbone asking him to look after a consignment of planks destined for Liverpool from Jamaica. There were thirty-four planks in total, and each was marked HB and numbered 1-34. 344/164 (Letter Book), Henry Baines to William Rathbone, 28 July 1762.

27. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Messrs Gillow 8c Taylor in London, October 1770.

28. 344/181 (Memorandum Book), fol. 22. The Rawlins was a Lancaster vessel, owned by the Lancaster merchants of the same name. The head of the firm, Steadm an Rawlins, had extensive interests in St Kitts. His daughter married John Satterthwaite, son of Benjamin, who returned to Lancaster from St Kitts in about 1777.


30. 344/167 (Letter Book), Gillow to William Chambre, Whitehaven, 31 October 1772, 15 June, 26 July 1773.

31. 344/167 (Letter Book), Gillow to Wm Strickland, 28 December 1773.

32. 344/169. Gillow to Mr Precious Clarke, Dublin, 24 November 1778.

33. 344/1 (Waste Book), various dates.

34. 344/167 (Letter Book), Gillows to Rowland Watson, coachmaker, 22 November 1773.


36. 344/175 (Letter Book), Gillow to Wm. Sharples, Liverpool, 1 January 1803.

37. Letter Book (344/168), Gillow to Swarbrick & Daltary, 1 August 1775.

38. For instance, in an advertisement of 1764 a mixed cargo of ivory, pimento and logwood was to be sold 'at Mr Doran's Warehouse in Lord Street', whereas the mahogany in the same sale was sold 'on the Quay opposite the Snow Ford'. Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser, 8 June 1764.

39. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 20 August 1771.

40. Ibid., 6 September 1771.

41. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 26 September 1765.

42. For instance, a letter to John Pedder, at Bristol, ran; '... if it won't be too much Trouble shd be glad to know the State of your Market, as to that Article at Present, & if any Qty of good Jamaica Plank be arrived this year & how that sort of Plank from 15 In: to 30 Inches broad sells in particular'. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to John Pedder, Bristol, 12 October 1768.

43. For instance, 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbrick & Daltary, 11 June 1775, 18 February 1776.

44. Pares, War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739–1763, London, 1963, p. 502; The Society of West India Merchants arranged convoy sailings with the Admiralty. Notice was given to traders and ship owners of the appointed places and times of departure from England.

45. Occasionally it was possible to avoid paying full freight. In dealing with the Liverpool merchants Basnett and Hargreaves in 1760, Richard Gillow was careful to specify he would pay freight 'Invoice Measure' only, i.e., only on the amount of workable timber specified on his buyer's invoice, and not freight measure (see Appendix). He also enjoined them to 'see that proper allowance in measure is made for deficiencies'. 344/164 (Letter Book), Gillow to Basnett and Hargreaves, 24 February 1760.

46. 344/170. Gillow to Swarbrick, Yate & Co., 15 February 1782.


48. Ibid. See also Gillow 344/169 (Letter Book), letter of 15 September 1778, giving exactly these figures.

49. This Thomas Hind is probably the Lancaster slave captain, Thomas Hinde. He was born in 1720, a yeoman's son from Caton, near Lancaster, and worked his way up from the deck of a Guinea slaver to become a slaver captain by 1748. He was four times a port commissioner, an alderman and twice mayor of Lancaster. By the late 1770s he had interests in slave ships clearing from both Lancaster and Liverpool, and died a rich man in 1799. The Sally was owned by (among others) John Satterthwaite, and was chiefly involved in the West Indian trade. She was captured by the French off St Kitts. Satterthwaite's share of the loss came near to £200 in 1782. Elder, op. cit., pp. 139–43, 190–191, and passim.


53. Davis, op. cit., p. 278.

54. When Joseph Waugh supplied mahogany prices to the Board of Trade in 1790, he obtained them from the cabinet maker George Seddon, 'an old and established dealer in the article'. B.T. 6/50, Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790.

55. 344/1 (Waste Book), various entries.

57. These are average figures. Freight ratios varied greatly according to market price.

58. The Liverpool port books (E 190) for the 1720s record the cost of mahogany in Jamaica below 1d. per foot. By contrast, Gillow was paying 9d. and upwards in Kingston in the 1780s.

59. Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, iii, London, 1774, p. 497. In another place (1, p. 497) Long remarked that mahogany was 'chiefly found in the deep recesses of St Anne, Clarendon, St James, St Elizabeth and Westmoreland'.

60. Ibid.


63. This was the Act of 11 George III cap. 41.

64. P.R.O., B.T. 6/50, Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 13 March 1790.

65. Pares, *War and Trade*, pp. 308, 495-500; *A West India Fortune*, p. 227. The rate of insurance from the West Indies in peacetime was ordinarily between 2½ and 8 per cent. From 26 July to 26 January, the rate was increased due to the risk of hurricanes. During the Spanish War (1739-48) the rate from Jamaica rose to 12 per cent and more before the entry of France into the war brought them up to 25 per cent. In the Seven Years' War insurance rates closely followed the progress of the naval war. They were 20 per cent in 1755 and 30 per cent in 1757. In the Napoleonic War rates went up to 15 per cent with convoy and 35 per cent without before Trafalgar.


67. 344/166 (Letter Book), 14 January 1759.

68. Ibid., 344/164 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 13 November 1759.

69. Ibid., Gillow to Rathbone, 20 November 1759.

70. Ibid., Gillow to Rathbone, 27 November 1759.

71. Ibid., Gillow to Parkinson, 15 November 1760.

72. Ibid., Gillow to Rathbone, 13 February 1760.

73. Ibid., Gillow to Rathbone, 9 March, 14 March, 6 April 1760.

74. Ibid., Gillow to Rathbone, 15 April, 2 December 1760.

75. Ibid., Gillow to Messrs Wilson and Brown, 9 October 1763.

76. The Letter Books contain ample evidence of the abundance of mahogany at this time, the firm having 'a great overstock' in October 1772, and even sending 1,000 cubic feet (25 tons) of mahogany on to London in December 1773. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Wm Chambre, Whitehaven, 31 October 1772; Gillow to Wm Strickland, Liverpool, 28 December 1773.

77. Insurance rates were initially doubled, from 2½ to 5 per cent. Freight rates rose from 1½d. to 2½d. per foot. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 20 September 1776. Writing to a customer near Peterborough, Gillows agreed to supply more furniture 'as near the same prices as the present advance of good mahogany will permit'. They blamed high insurance, due the activities of American privateers. Ibid., Gillow to Wm Peckard, 8 February 1777.

78. For instance, in January 1776 Gillows wrote to John Swarbrick asking for 'Good Jama Mahog: ... [it] is likely to run high this year...'. 344/168 (Letter Book), 26 January 1776. Later the same year they wrote; 'All kinds of Jama and Spanish Wood mahog' is in Demand...'. Ibid., Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 October 1776.

79. 'As Jama: mahog: is likely to be very Scarce and Dear You need not Purchase any on our Acct as we Bo' a large Parcel of Capt" Russel wch will keep us doing awhile'. 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbrick, 15 December 1775. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 9 October 1776. There was also plenty of choice, Gillows being able to ask for Jamaica, Spanish, Cuban and Bay wood in various lengths and breadths. 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbrick, 19 December 1775, 27 January 1777.

80. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 9 October 1776. There was also plenty of choice, Gillows being able to ask for Jamaica, Spanish, Cuban and Bay wood in various lengths and breadths. 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbrick, 19 December 1775, 27 January 1777.

81. Ibid., Gillow to Rathbone, 30 June 1777. The convoy system, introduced in 1776, restricted fleet sailings from Jamaica to twice a year, in February and July. As a result of this was to produce alternate episodes of scarcity and glut. In late summer/early autumn, when the July convoy arrived, the market price of mahogany fell, causing Gillow to instruct Swarbrick to send no more mahogany  'as a great plenty is come and expected'. Ibid., Gillow to Swarbrick, 6 September 1777. After the arrival of the autumn convoy in 1780 Gillow enquired of William Rathbone 'whether they have any Quantities on Board to lower your market'. 344/169 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 24 November 1780.

82. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 13 March 1778; Gillow to Wm Rowndell, 18 March 1778.

83. P.R.O., C.O. 142/19, fols 105-06.

84. P.R.O., Cust. 3.

85. 344/169 (Letter Book), various dates.
86. 344/169 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, Yate & Co., 11 July 1781. See also 5 September 1781, 15 & 28 February, 7 March 1782.
87. Ibid., Gillow to Swarbrick, 15 February 1782.
88. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, Yate & Co., 15 February 1782.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., Gillow to Swarbrick, 29 May 1782.
91. 344/179 (Memorandum Book), 22 January 1777.
92. Ibid., Gillow to Matthew Smith, Mount Libanon, St Elizabeth, 21 May 1782.
93. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, Yate & Co., 15 February, 28 February 1782.
94. 344/169 (Letter Book), Gillow to Richard Pedder, 10 November 1780.
95. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Thomas Wilson, 4 December 1782; Gillow to the Bishop of Llandaff, 31 December 1782.
96. Ibid., Gillow to Swarbrick, 28 July 1782.
97. For instance, 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 29 May 1782.
98. Ibid., Gillow to Swarbrick, 23 September 1782. Letters in a similar vein were sent to November, 27 December 1782.
99. 344/70 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 23 September 1784. "...I have been informed that good Mahogany may be procured in Neutral Bottoms from Hispaniola..." See also 344/70 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 31 October 1783. P.R.O., T. 64/72 clearly shows mahogany being imported into Kingston in foreign vessels during the war years.
100. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick 27 December 1782; 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 July 1783. In May 1784 Gillow asked John Burrows, a former cabinet maker and now merchant at Kingston, to advise them on buying timber. Ibid., Gillow to John Burrow, Kingston, 3 May 1784.
101. P.R.O., Cust. 3. The figures are compiled and interpreted in Bowett, The English Mahogany Trade, pp. 132-43.
102. This was the Act of 6 George III cap. 49.
103. P.R.O., C.O. 142/19, fols 105-06; another set of figures is given in T. 64/72, and reproduced below.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<td>229</td>
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It is not easy to extrapolate from these figures an idea of value. As a very general rule, the customs returns allow £1 per plank, and 480 feet to the ton worth a nominal £8. By applying these values to the above figures, the value of foreign mahogany imported into Jamaica in foreign bottoms in 1784 appears negligible, at about £520, and remained so until after the American War. In 1784, by contrast, imports of foreign mahogany in foreign vessels amounted to £11,901, or 38 per cent of the total exported from Jamaica to England in that year. This figure, which is almost certainly conservative, testifies to the very real importance of the Free Ports legislation to the mahogany trade.

104. P.R.O., T. 64/72.
105. For instance, in 1783 the Goshen plantation in St Elizabeth parish cut 3,782 feet of mahogany plank, 600 feet of bulltree boards, and 39 tons of fustic. The neighbouring Long Hill plantation cut 9,385 feet of mahogany the same year. B. W. Higman, Jamaica Surveyed, Kingston, 1988, p. 201.
108. The Act of 35 George III cap. 20 imposed a duty of 1/4d. per foot on mahogany imported into England and Scotland. This Act was amended the following year by 36 George III cap. 78, which imposed duty by ton weight rather than superficial measure.
109. 36 George III cap. 78. These three categories were maintained when duty was raised in 1803 (43 George III cap. 68), 1809 (49 George III cap. 98) and 1819 (59 George III cap. 52).
110. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Charles Udale, Uncrigg Hall, Cockermouth, 9 October 1784.
111. 344/173 (Letter Book), Gillow to Richard Edmundson, timber merchant, Liverpool, 22 March 1796; Gillow to Caleb Crokenden, timber merchant, Liverpool, 6 August 1796. In October 1789 Edward Saul, a Liverpool timber merchant, advertised 'Jamaica, Spanish, & Honduras Mahogany in Logs, Planks and Boards'. Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser, 26 October 1789.
113. The Danish islands had been declared free ports in 1764, St Eustatius in 1737, and St Bartholomew was ceded by France to Sweden in 1784 and immediately opened as a free port.
ADAM BOWETT 49

114. 344/181 (Memorandum Book), Worswick and Allman to Gillow, 30 August 1784.
115. For more details of the trade between Bahamas and North America see Bowett, The English Mahogany Trade, pp. 75-83.
116. The phrase occurs in various Gillows documents, for instance, Letter Book (344/164), Gillow to Rathbone, 13 November 1759.
119. 344/166 (Letter Book), 26 January 1748.
120. Edward Chaloner’s remarks on quality and colour are worth recording, and cast an interesting light on how the early Victorians expected their mahogany to look.

Quality, or the grain of the wood, is of the highest importance, because good or bad quality too often pervades a whole cargo. Good quality consists in the wood being close in the grain, and of firm texture; or fine, in contradistinction to coarse; and of a kind nature, as opposed to harsh and brittle hardness, which is frequently found in Mahogany. Bad quality is when the grain is porous, of a grey or smutty appearance... Mahogany is deficient in colour when its paleness approaches to that of fir or pine timber; and is too high coloured when of a deep red. It is of a good colour when between these two extremes, accompanied by a bright ruby appearance. The lighter Mahogany (but not pale) is preferred, unless the high colour has much life or brightness. Wood from the city [St Domingo] is usually the more valuable, and is chiefly of high ruby colour. Edward Chaloner, Remarks on the St Domingo Mahogany Import Trade, Liverpool (1837), pp. 4-5.

121. For instance, 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to Jos. Beetham, 9 September 1768.
122. 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 23 September 1782.
123. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to Beetham, 11 October 1768; 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Gillow and Taylor, 22 October 1770; Gillow to Swarbrick, 24 February 1775, 18 February 1776. 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbrick, 11 June 1775.
124. In 1786 one client was quoted eight and a half guineas for a table in ‘soft’ wood and twelve guineas for one in ‘good hard wood’. 344/171 (Letter Book), Gillow to Philip Saltmarsh, 13 January 1786; see also, Gillow to Mr Matt. Campbell, 16 May 1786.
125. 344/161 (Accounts), Gillow to Wm Fletcher, Jamaica, 1749(?); 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Wm. Strickland, Liverpool, 28 December 1773. Edward Chaloner defined soundness as ‘freedom from shakes, inbarks and similar defects’. Chaloner, op. cit., p. 55.
126. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to John Heard, 7 May 1769 — ‘We have opened very little of your Mahog: as yet it proves middling’; 344/167 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 20 September 1776 — ‘As to the Mahog: Plank they are of a pretty Size &: good breadth & thickness plain in Quality’.
127. 344/175 (Letter Book), Gillow to Henry Sharples, 1 January 1803.
129. 344/167 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, Jamaica, 18 October 1776; Gillow to Swarbrick, 14 December 1776.
130. In January 1786 Gillows told one client; ‘The Price of Dining Tables will depend more upon the quality of the Wood than any other Furniture’. 344/171 (Letter Book), Gillow to Phillip Saltmarsh, Esq., 13 January 1786.
132. ‘Trees, indeed, which have grown in low alluvial situations never give a rich hard wood.’ Macfadyen, op. cit., i, p. 176.
137. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to Jos. Beetham, 9 September 1768.
138. 344/169 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, Yate and Co, 11 July 1781, 28 July 1782; 344/170 (Letter Book), Gillow to Beetham, 20 September 1782; Gillow to Swarbrick, 26 February 1784.
141. Blackie, op. cit., p. 32. Blackie recommended (p. 34) logs of 16 inches as the minimum size for chair wood; ‘In the event of it turning out faulty in the centre, it may come in for bed pillars’.
143. This was still the case in the nineteenth century, when curls were routinely separated from the trunk for shipping. Edward Chaloner’s comments on this are instructive; ‘it may be acted upon as a general rule never to burthen the curl part with common wood, ... and if the wood be very finely figured, the curl will then act as a drawback on the veneer part’. Chaloner, op. cit., p. 8.
50 GILLOW AND THE USE OF MAHOGANY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

144. Ibid., pp. 9–10. Blackie described curls which were formed by the growth of a branch from the main trunk as 'a serious blemish'. Blackie, op. cit., p. 36.
146. P.R.O., Cust. 3; C.O. 142/17, 142/18.
147. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 February, 30 March 1776.
148. Blackie, op. cit., pp. 32–33. See also Laslett, *Timber and Timber Trees*, London, 1875, p. 261, on St Domingo mahogany: '... near the top of the stem, where it branches off, there is generally a rich and pretty feather or curl in it, which is much prized by cabinet-makers. ... It shrinks very little, and rarely splits externally in seasoning'.
152. Ibid., pp. 39–60.
156. P.R.O., C.O. 142/15.
158. 344/164 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 2 December 1760.
160. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 13 November 1779.
161. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 February 1776. See also the prices submitted to the Board of Trade by two correspondents in 1790, P.R.O., B.T. 6/50, William Ryder to Lord Hawkesbury, 16 March 1790; Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790.
162. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 23 June 1775.
163. P.R.O., B.T. 6/50, Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790. Breadth is something Gillow referred to more than once. For instance, 'Soft Mahogany ... generally runs broader'. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 26 October 1760.
164. 344/168 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 February 1776.

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<td>4050. 0. 0</td>
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<td>1778</td>
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After the Convention of London (1786), all British cutters were evacuated from the Shore in return for Spanish concessions in Belize, by which the area in which the mahogany and logwood cutters were allowed to operate was considerably enlarged.

166. 344/161 (Accounts), 28 December 1754.
167. Logwood, *Haematoxylin campechianum*. Also known as Campeachy wood and Blockwood.

... in general the Logwood resembles our Hawthorn both in size and colour, with this difference that the Logwood sometimes grows to an Ennamous [sic] size whereas the Hawthorn seems rather stunted in its growth. In the Logwood the bark in general is more rugged than in the Hawthorn but subject to fewer Spicula. The colour of the Leaf is a pale Green; the Honduras Settlers give the old tree the preference it being less Sappy and more easily cut up into Trunks fit for Carriage, the sap of the
tree is white and the heart a lively red which turns black when spilt open and exposed to the air the heart and Root are chiefly used as dye stuffs particularly the black and violet colours.


168. In 1764 at least 1,500 cutters were working from Belize, providing regular employment for 22 vessels from 50 to 500 tons burden. P.R.O., Adm. 1/238, *The Humble Representation and Petition of the Merchants of Kingston... etc., etc.*, 10 April 1764.


171. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 17 November 1770.

172. 11 George III cap. 41.


175. Laslett, op. cit., p. 263.

176. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to William Law, Swinithwaite, N. Yorks., 11 October 1771.

177. 344/162 (Letter Book), Gillow to Sparwick, 19 December 1775.

178. Hooker records two massive Honduras logs in his *Botanical Miscellany*. The first was imported into Glasgow in November 1827:

It was taken to the wood-yard on a four wheeled carriage, and there placed between two other logs, preparatory to being cut up, as no saw-pit was capable of containing it. The length was 16 feet, depth 5 feet 6 inches, and the breadth 4 feet 9 inches. It contained 418 cubic feet, 5016 feet of inch deal [board]; and the cost of sawing it at 3d a foot amounted to £20 14s. The value of the whole, estimated at 3s. 3d. per foot, was £321 12s., and it weight was 7½ tons, or at the rate of a cubic foot of 41½ lbs. Hooker, op. cit., p. 28, footnote.

The description was culled by Hooker from the *Glasgow Chronicle*. The second of Hooker's prodigies was a log measuring 17 feet by 57 inches by 64 inches, containing 5,168 feet, and weighing 15 tons. Ibid., p. 28.


180. P.R.O., B.T. 6/50, George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, ref. cit. The figure of £180 per ton is almost certainly an exaggeration, and Lord Hawkesbury pencilled a resounding NO in the margin of Dyer's letter.


182. Ibid.

183. Blackie, op. cit., p. 29.

184. Ibid.


187. P.R.O., Cust. 3. In 1765, £182 of cedar and £2,187 of mahogany were imported direct into London. A further £182 of mahogany and £12 of cedar came into outports. The following year Havana mahogany worth £234 10s. entered London, and £40 the year after.

188. 344/164 (Letter Book), Gillow to Rathbone, 31 July 1763. 'Havanna Wood, a kind of mahogany that grows in the island of Cuba, usually called Cuba wood... It is termed Havanna wood, because Havana is the chief town in the island of Cuba.' Sheraton, op. cit., ii, p. 251.

189. 344/164 (Letter Book), Gillow to Messrs Wilson and Brown, 9 October 1763.
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190. Thomas, op. cit., pp. 64-70; P.R.O., B.T. 6/185 records some direct trade between England and Havana until 1766, then nothing until 1794. The same source records trade via minor Cuban ports in the 1780s.


192. Ibid. According to Hugh Thomas, '[Jamaican] slave traders were able to take away from Cuba in their empty bottoms as much rum and some other commodities as they wanted, without payment of tax.' Thomas, op. cit., p. 70.

193. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to Beetham, 9 September 1768.

194. Sheraton described Cuban wood as 'close and hard, without black speckles, and of a rosy hue, and sometimes strongly figured', and 'A kind of mahogany somewhat harder than Honduras wood, but of no figure in the grain . . . it is pale, straight grained, and some of it only a bastard kind of mahogany. It is generally used for chair wood, for which some of it will do very well.' Cabinet Dictionary, 1, p. 184. For an extensive nineteenth-century commentary on Cuban mahogany see Blackie, op. cit., pp. 30–31; Chaloncr and Fleming, op. cit., p. 43.

195. Letter Book 344/166, Gillow to Gillow & Taylor, 22 October 1770; 344/168, Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 February 1776.


197. P.R.O., C.O. 142/20. Of 6,747 bags of cotton entered at Kingston in 1787, 5,748 came from St Domingue. Both cotton and mahogany were carried primarily in French ships, with the Spanish entering the trade in the 1780s.


199. 344/165 (Letter Book), Gillow to Beetham, 9 September 1768.


201. Sheraton did acknowledge a difference between the two; 'That, however, which is generally distinguished by Spanish mahogany is finer than what is called Cuba'. Cabinet Dictionary, 1, p. 184.

202. 344/166 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 26 January 1776. In the mid-nineteenth century the distinction between Cuban and Spanish wood was still recognised; 'Spanish or St Domingo mahogany is grown on the island of St Domingo or Hayti. . . Wood from the [St Domingo] city is chiefly of a rich generous hue, varying from gold colour to ruby; but its superiority over other importations consists principally in the transparency and beauty of figure by which it is distinguished'. Blackie, op. cit., p. 31. By the 1870s, however, ambiguity had crept into the nomenclature. Laslett described Spanish mahogany as 'the produce of a large Cedrelaceous tree found in Central America, Mexico, and the island of Cuba, and is indiscriminately called the Spanish or Cuba mahogany'. Laslett, op. cit., p. 258. The confusion probably arose from the tendency of Victorian timber dealers to play on the formerly high reputation of Spanish mahogany from Hispaniola.

203. 344/171 (Letter Book), Gillow to Swarbrick, 18 July 1783, 8 January 1784. Gillow to John Burrow 3 May 1784.

APPENDIX
WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

The issue of measurement was of supreme interest to every mahogany importer. In a trade whose profit margins were uncomfortably slender, the difference between profit and loss often depended on how accurately and fairly the timber was measured.

The largest traditional unit measure of timber was the ton. In most cases this was a unit of volume, not weight. Rough or unhewn timber was measured at 50 cubic feet to the ton, sawn or squared timber at 40 feet. Each cubic foot of squared timber contained 12 superficial feet (12 in. x 12 in. x 1 in.), and each ton of squared timber therefore contained 480 superficial feet. For importers, buyers and users of mahogany the ton was somewhat arbitrary and irrelevant. According to Sheraton, 'Measuring wood amongst cabinet makers, is generally by the rule of feet and inches, considered superficially, or in inch boards'. Wholesale mahogany prices were sometimes quoted as guineas or pounds per ton, but it was more usual to quote prices as pence per
superficial foot. Large quantities of mahogany were often quoted in shillings per hundred (C) or per thousand (M) feet.

Although the superficial foot was a universally recognised measure, difficulties arose immediately it was applied to a given piece of timber. In theory, measurement was relatively simple and according to agreed methods. Round logs were measured by the Hoppus Measure:

\[(\frac{1}{4} \text{ girth})^2 \times \text{length} \div 144 = \text{volume in cubic feet.}\]

This figure, if again divided by 12, gave the number of superficial feet contained in the log.  

To make measurement easier, and to save shipping space, logs were often squared, and their contents calculated by a more straightforward formula:

\[\text{breadth} \times \text{height} \times \text{length} = \text{volume in superficial feet.}\]

The content of a board or plank was measured in the same way. The invoice shown below for mahogany planks shipped from Lancaster to Dublin is typical. In this invoice the dimensions of each plank are given in inches and the volume — Cont[ents] — in superficial feet is arrived at by multiplying [length \times breadth \times thickness] and dividing by 12.

Even though the mathematics were simple, it is remarkable how often disputes arose. For one thing, mahogany logs and planks were rarely uniform in their dimensions. Should they be measured at their widest point, their narrowest, or somewhere in between? A squared but tapered log was measured at one third distance from its small end, and at the narrowest part of its thinner side. Crooked logs were measured not along the outside of their curve but by straight line drawn between their ends.  

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**Invoice of 15 Mahogany Plank Shipt on Board the Betty . . .
28 December 1754.**

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The above is invoice of 15 Mahogany Planks Right Jamaica
Wood Containing 1157 foot 6 inch in Measure.
more irregular the plank or log, the greater the probability of error and consequent discord between buyer and seller. In order to prevent disputes, each importing port appointed a measurer whose opinion was regarded as binding. The measurement of one port did not necessarily agree with that of another, however. In June 1777 Gillows shipped 101 mahogany planks to William Rathbone in Liverpool, amounting to 5,715 feet 8 inches ‘Lancaster Sale Measure’. Rathbone was asked to try selling at this measure, but ‘if you cannot sell it at that measure you’ll have to have it measured over again’.6

A second source of dispute was allowance for waste. The question that concerned the buyer was not ‘how big is the log?’, but ‘what will the log work to?’ — in other words, how much waste was there likely to be?7 The Hoppus measure allowed for 27 per cent waste in the log. Planks and boards were also measured with an allowance. In both cases the amount of allowance was often disputed, for this was a question not only of dimension but of working quality. Sapwood, shakes and other defects reduced the workable volume of timber. Different ports had different ways of allowing for waste, but the commercial dominance of Liverpool ensured that by the early nineteenth century the Liverpool measure became the accepted standard in the timber trade. This was a generous measure, allowing one eighth in every inch thickness and in breadth, or 12.5 per cent each way, ‘exclusive of other allowances for round-edged, decayed, shaken ended, or taper logs’.8 In terms of volume, this amounted to at least 25 per cent, so that for every 1,000 feet of mahogany imported into Liverpool, 250 feet were waste and only 750 feet were saleable. The two figures represented the difference between actual measure and ‘sale’ measure. Sheraton gave the following advice concerning these two measures:

A stranger, in purchasing mahogany, should take notice that he be allowed the broker's measurement, which always makes a considerable allowance for faults and waste, which the purchaser must run the hazard of, and consequently, has an undoubted right to demand it from the seller; except the log be partly opened, then the proportionable part of the hazard is over, in which case the overplus granted in the broker's measurement, is sometimes divided between the two parties; or if the merchant allow to the buyer the broker's measurement, he charges so much per foot more upon the wood, estimating the quantity by the said measurement.9

For importers and shippers, the most important measure of all was the difference between ‘freight’ or ‘extreme’ measure and sale measure. Freight measure was the volume of shipping space occupied by the log or plank and on which freight charges had to be paid. In many cases, an irregularly shaped log or plank took up space greater than its actual timber content, so that freight was effectively paid on thin air, but even with the best regulated cargoes the difference was uncomfortably large. According to Chaloner and Fleming, ‘the sale measure, as compared with the freight measure, may be rated as in the proportion of 2 to 3, that is to say, one-third off the latter gives the former’.10 In almost every surviving bill of sale this huge difference enters into the calculation at some point.

For anyone who entered the mahogany trade without fully understanding the distinction between the various measures the learning process was expensive. In March 1789 Gillows were sent 2,783 feet of timber from Thomas Worswick, the firm’s factor in St Kitts. When measured on arrival at Lancaster the timber amounted only to
Worswick had neglected to have the timber checked and had paid for full measure, inclusive of faults, rather than sale measure. Gillow wrote to Worswick: ‘We tried the measure over and it ought not to have been charged more than 1900 feet if any redress can be had shou’d be glad if not we must rest satisfied as it is.’ The loss must have been all the more galling for Gillow since a few years earlier he had taken particular trouble to instruct his nephew in dealing with precisely this problem. In April 1787 Gillow wrote to Worswick as follows:

Logs of such Quality as you have usually shipped (not Bay Wood) would be preferred to Planks, if they are all above 18 broad & from thence to 2ft or more would probably sell for 1/-p foot here, but if there are a number of Logs under 16 Inches broad amongst it, it might not sell for above 9d Pft or 1od — I hint this for your own government & also that our own measure may be 25 pC' less than yours and sometimes 30pC'. Therefore it must be laid in so as to pay a freight on the above terms, or you had better decline it.12

The difference between freight and sale measure introduced an unwelcome degree of uncertainty into the business of importing mahogany. In buying mahogany for shipment to Lancaster, Worswick had to take into account not only the purchase price and the potential selling price in Lancaster, but also the probable loss between freight and sale measure. In a parcel of good straight planks there might be very little waste, perhaps 25 per cent. In a bad parcel the waste might exceed 30 per cent. The buyer would not know which until he saw the timber for himself, and since the margins in the trade were so small, this could make the difference between profit and loss in the transaction. This was one of the reasons why an experienced and trustworthy factor was essential to commercial success.

In order to minimise the losses resulting from the difference between freight and sale measures the greatest attention was paid to careful stowage. Losses could be reduced towards the ideal minimum of 25 per cent by careful preparation. Edward Chaloner recommended that the log or plank be perfectly rectangular, and that ‘all superfluities be retrenched before shipment’.13 Any deviation from this shape incurred cost penalties, since the importer paid freight for unsaleable timber. Some eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements mention that the mahogany logs for sale were squared. Although it is difficult be specific, the impression gained is that large logs were squared to save space and weight but smaller logs were not. Large logs were also more likely to be planked before shipping, since they were thereby made easier to stow and to handle. Chaloner’s diagrams show first, the ideal log squared for shipment (Figure 8, 3), and then examples of irregularly cross-cut (Figure 8, 4), tapered (Figure 8, 5) and hollow-sided logs (Figure 8, 6), each wasteful of shipping space. Exceptions to this rigorous trimming were made for veneer quality logs. These were often left in the round since the value of well figured veneers on the exterior of the log outweighed any loss due to additional freight charges.14

Unusually large logs presented problems. Although broad timber fetched a premium price on the home market, it was awkward and expensive to carry. In January 1777 Gillows raised the problem with Swarbrick: ‘If you shou’d Purchase any large logs of Mahogany We presume twill accomode the Ship Maria better in Point of Stowage & enable her to make a better Freit to have ’em Sawn up the Middle into Plank’.15
There was no particular advantage in shipping logs longer than about fifteen feet for furniture manufacture.\(^{16}\) Above this length they became difficult to handle and stow, without any advantage in price. As Benjamin Satterthwaite told a disappointed Henry Cross, a planter who boasted of logs up to sixty feet in length, ‘the price is not directed by the qty of Feet but the breadth of the Plank’.\(^{17}\)

When in the nineteenth century mahogany began to be used extensively in for British shipbuilding, the length of logs became a matter of considerable importance, since ‘the longer the logs can be obtained, the more valuable they will be for planking’. Chaloner recommended that logs and planks destined for shipbuilding should not be shorter than 27 feet.\(^{18}\) To overcome the difficulties in stowing such massive timber, bow loading ports were introduced on Honduras ships in the early nineteenth century.
REFERENCES
1. The exceptions were irregularly shaped woods such as logwood, *lignum vitae* or rosewood. These were
difficult to measure accurately, and hence were both taxed and sold by the ton weight.
2. The ‘ton’ or ‘load’ of 40 cubic feet was established in medieval times, and was the standard measure quoted
in the Book of Rates (1660) and all subsequent legislation. It was originally based on the amount able to be
carried by a single cart, and was very roughly equivalent to a ton weight.
4. Applying the Hoppus measure was not job for the inexperienced. In *A Sure Method of Improving Estates*
(1728), Batty Langley included a 47-page appendix on the measurement of timber in the log.
5. Chaloner, *St Domingo Trade*, pp. 11–12.
6. 344/162 (Invoices), 30 June 1777.
10. Chaloner and Fleming, op. cit., p. 64.
11. 344/172 (Letter Book), Gillow to Worswick and Allman, St Kitts, 4 March 1789.
12. 344/171 (Letter Book), Gillow to Thos. Worswick, St Kitts, 22 April 1787.
13. Chaloner, op. cit., p. 11.
15. 344/162 (Invoices), Gillow to Swarbreck, 27 January 1777.
August 1764.