

# **The English Mahogany Trade 1700 - 1793**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**by**

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November 1996

## THE ENGLISH MAHOGANY TRADE, 1700-1793: a commercial history.

### ABSTRACT

This thesis describes the origins and development of the English mahogany trade from its origins to the beginning of the French Revolutionary War. It is based primarily on statistical and commercial information, most of which is drawn from government and other official sources. The bulk of the text is a chronological account, charting the growth of the trade from its small beginnings in Jamaica after 1700 to its late eighteenth century heyday. It considers the effect of economic conditions, shipping costs, government commercial policy and imperial colonial strategy, and shows how these had a direct bearing on the scale and direction of the trade. The various sources of mahogany are discussed, together with the characteristics and uses of the timber. Popular conceptions about the various types of mahogany used in 18th century furniture making are discussed in the light of statistical and other contemporary evidence.

The thesis also considers the effects of the introduction of mahogany on furniture manufacturing in England. It investigates the cost of mahogany relative to other furniture woods, and suggests that its chief appeal in the initial years of importation was its low cost. This suggestion is born out by the early use of mahogany as a joinery rather than a cabinet wood. The thesis goes on to argue that the cost of mahogany was often a primary determinant of stylistic and technical development. As demand for the wood grew, so costs rose and inflation became at times a notable feature of the mahogany market. The effects of this inflation are recorded in the archives of contemporary furniture makers and are apparent in extant 18th century furniture.

The most important single finding of the thesis is the paramount role of government in determining the scale and direction of the mahogany trade. In this respect mahogany reflects the historical development of British West Indian commercial policy. Mahogany was not merely an art-historical phenomenon, but a symbol of Britain's rise to commercial dominance in the 18th century.

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## Acknowledgments

Research is essentially a solitary business, but this thesis could not have been written without the encouragement and assistance of many individuals and institutions. Foremost among the those I wish to thank is Hew Reid, together with the departmental staff at Buckinghamshire College. Others among the many individuals who have helped, sometimes unwittingly, are: Susan Cleaver and the staff at Houghton Hall, Sebastian Edwards, David Fletcher, Terry Friedman, Christopher Gilbert, Ivan Hall, Richard Hewlings, David Jones, Natalie Palk, Christopher Claxton Stevens, Susan Stuart. I am very grateful to all the long-suffering staff at the following institutions: Public Record Office, Kew; Public Record Office, Chancery Lane; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; The British Library; Cambridge University Library; Lancaster University Library; Liverpool Public Library; Manchester University Library; National Library of Scotland; Trinity House, Aberdeen. Finally, I wish to record the assistance of the staff of Bedale Public Library. The national inter-library loan scheme has been of inestimable value to me - long may it continue.

## Abbreviations

Adm	Admiralty
BT	Board of Trade
CO	Colonial Office
Customs	Cust
Port Books	E 190
Treasury	T
Calendar of State Papers, America and West Indies	CSPAWI
Calendar of State Papers, Colonial	CSPC
Calendar of State Papers, Foreign	CSPF
Dictionary of English Furniture Makers	DEFM

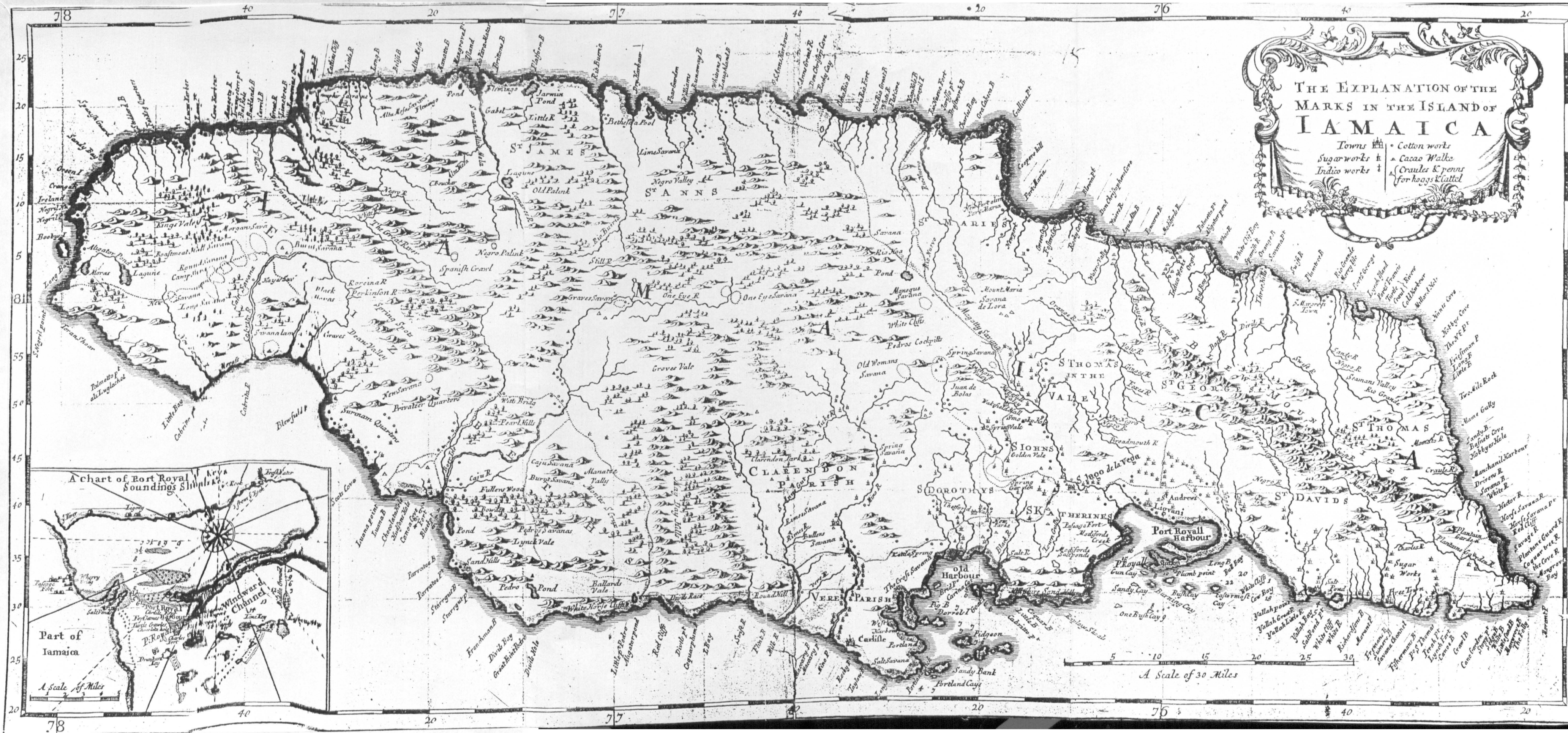
All government documents cited are held at the Public Record Offices, Kew and Chancery Lane, unless otherwise stated. References to the Gillow Archive are to the Letter Books unless otherwise stated.

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Figure 3.1: Jamaica before 1700, published by P. Lea, London.  
 Source: CO 700 Jamaica 6





## INTRODUCTION

When Percy Macquoid published the *Age of Mahogany* in 1906, he gave public and scholarly expression to a singular art-historical phenomenon. This was, that fashionable furniture making in Georgian England was dominated by the use of one imported wood - mahogany. From its introduction in the 1720s, mahogany gained favour so rapidly, and was imported in such large quantities, that it quickly relegated all other furniture woods to supporting roles. The use of mahogany set English furniture makers apart from their counterparts in continental Europe. In no other part of the world, except in Great Britain and its American colonies, was mahogany used so extensively, so comprehensively, and with such technical virtuosity. And in no other country was a single furniture timber so closely linked to the nation's economic, social and imperial fortunes.

These facts give mahogany a uniquely important role in the decorative arts of eighteenth century Britain. Blackie's *Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* (1853) described how from introduction of mahogany arose 'a most extensive branch of British commerce, and a complete revolution in the manufacture of cabinet furniture.' Early twentieth century historians of mahogany furniture - Percy Macquoid, Herbert Cescinsky and R.W. Symonds - all concurred with this assessment of mahogany's importance, ascribing to mahogany a major role in the development of English furniture styles. In particular, mahogany is closely associated with the style which, more than any other, epitomises 18th-century English furniture in the popular imagination. The 'Chippendale' style is both uniquely English and virtually synonymous with mahogany.

Despite the acknowledged importance of mahogany, almost nothing is known of the trade which brought it to the hands of England's furniture makers. Published works on mahogany furniture - Macquoid's *Age of Mahogany*, Cescinsky's *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, and many subsequent works - contain abundant assertions about the nature of mahogany and its impact on English furniture design, but almost nothing on how or why the wood arrived in this country. The sources of the first mahogany importations are variously cited as Central America, Jamaica, Cuba and St Domingo. The date of its first commercial or large scale introduction has been suggested as 1715, 1722, 1724, 1733 and 1748. The wood has been characterised both as a 'prohibitive luxury' and as 'relatively cheap'. Some historians, such as Herbert Cescinsky, have attributed dramatic stylistic changes to the use of mahogany, others have disagreed. No author has offered much substantive proof for his opinions, and none really knew how, why or how much mahogany was imported for furniture making. The absence of clear answers to these basic questions leads one to doubt whether much credence can be given to furniture history built on such insubstantial foundations.

The impetus for this thesis arises, therefore, out of a complete absence of accurate historical information about England's most important furniture timber. Its primary aim is to answer some straightforward questions. Where did the mahogany used in English 18th-century furniture come from? How much was imported, to where, and at what date? How much did it cost? Did the price change, and why? Did the sources of timber change over time, and what impact

did this have? Hopefully, it will be possible to replace the many myths, suppositions and half-truths that presently constitute the published knowledge on the subject with a coherent, accurate and straightforward historical account.

A second objective is to study the trade in mahogany within the wider context of colonial, and especially West Indian, trade. When furniture historians write about mahogany they usually do so in an art-historical context, without reference to the underlying commercial and political infrastructure which supported its importation. The mahogany trade was not carried on in a vacuum. It was part of the great expansion of trans-Atlantic commerce which underpinned the rise of England as a commercial power in the 18th century. This rise was driven by the twin commodities of slaves and sugar, carried in the same ships which also brought mahogany to England. Mahogany therefore was both a consequence and an emblem of economic growth. When Edwin Lascelles employed Thomas Chippendale to furnish his new house at Harewood, he paid him with money generated in West Indian trade. The furniture itself was largely made with West Indian woods, including mahogany. The coincidence was more than symbolic. It was a manifestation of the direct commercial links between mahogany, West Indian trade and the economic development of 18th-century England. Few middle class homes in late 18th-century England were without sugar, or rum, or cotton, and neither did they lack a mahogany dining table.

A third objective is to consider, through the history of mahogany as a commercial article, the impact of mahogany on 18th century furniture making. The furniture historian is traditionally an art historian, considering furniture as a branch of the arts, and concerned with understanding furniture in its relation to other arts. The studies of Macquoid and his successors are essentially of this nature. They were not concerned to represent 18th-century mahogany furniture in general. Rather, they put forward a particular art-historical viewpoint. Their standpoint is the idealised one of the 20th-century connoisseur/collector, rather than the pragmatic one of an 18th century furniture maker. They describe the development of mahogany furniture largely in terms of the progression of styles, and their assessment of individual pieces is based on the twin criteria of aesthetic merit and technical virtuosity. They consider structure only insofar as it relates to design, and materials principally in relation to their aesthetic potential. Such a study is liable to be both subjective and anachronistic. To give one example; for Herbert Cescinsky the word 'Cuban' described the acme of excellence in mahogany. To this one variety of mahogany he attributed not only the glorious colour and patination sought after by connoisseurs, but the structural qualities which led to the creation of 'lion mask mahogany' and ultimately to the English rococo. At the time Cescinsky was working, Cuban mahogany was indeed the best available. But in the 18th century very little Cuban wood was imported, and such as was available was held in low esteem, with a market value well below that of Jamaican or Hispaniola mahogany. If it seems otiose to refer to authors long dead and books almost a century old, it should be remembered that both Cescinsky and Macquoid are still regularly cited in books, articles and auction catalogues. Their books remain standard works of reference.

The error here is not merely one of fact, but of attitude and perception. Because 'Cuban' wood is endowed with wondrous properties of density,

hardness, lustre, and colour, furniture supposedly made from it automatically acquires value by association. Conversely, furniture made from poor quality 'Honduras' mahogany is automatically considered second rate (this is in spite of the fact that it is impossible to distinguish, on any scientific basis, one variety of mahogany from another). But what historian has actually attempted to consider the real importance of Honduras wood to contemporary furniture makers? This thesis will show that in some years of the late 18th century Honduras wood accounted for 80 per cent of all the mahogany imported into England. It cannot therefore be written off as unworthy of notice merely because it does not meet the aesthetic standards of connoisseurs.

At the root of the problem is the premise, common to many furniture historians, that furniture is primarily a form of art rather than a branch of manufacturing. Whilst it is unquestionably true that some furniture can attain that degree of technical and aesthetic excellence which transcends function and becomes art, it is also true that the majority does not. One only has to glance at the Gillow Estimate Sketch Books to understand that to an 18th century business man and furniture maker like Robert Gillow, the value of an article of furniture was arrived at by adding the cost of materials to the cost of labour. Aesthetic merit was largely a question of using better materials or adding more labour. Any change in the cost of either or both of these elements had a direct bearing on the selling price, and since furniture making was a competitive business, this had obvious consequences for a maker's commercial survival. It is reasonable to propose that when 18th century furniture makers adopted mahogany they did so for sound commercial reasons. And it seems logical, therefore, to suggest that in order to discover the real impact of mahogany on 18th century furniture making the first question to be asked is - how much did it cost? The answer to this question will immediately tell us more about the status and value of mahogany furniture than any other single factor. Mahogany as a *raw material* is therefore the prime concern of this study. In this way many key developments of style and construction can be seen in a new light, and one which, it is argued, more clearly illuminates the concerns of 18th century furniture makers.

It has been both instructive and intriguing to investigate the various country-house myths which surround mahogany and its use. From an early date mahogany has been associated with a certain nationalistic pride; it has been popularly invested with honorary Britishness, and placed second only to the native oak in the hierarchy of noble woods. Blackie called it 'the chief of furniture woods' and described the tree as 'a most magnificent and splendid object, compared with which the largest oak, the king of our forests, dwindles into insignificance.' Such hyperboles, and the myths they generate, are indicative of the degree to which mahogany has permeated the national psyche. This almost certainly has its roots in England's fierce 18th century colonial rivalry with France and Spain. Sir Walter Raleigh's emergency rudder repair at Trinidad is almost certainly apocryphal, since mahogany trees were not indigenous to Trinidad, but it was typically Victorian to link one of our greatest naval heroes with our greatest furniture-making tradition. This is a common theme in the historiography of the subject. In 1816, J. Norris Brewer related with relish and amusement how the mahogany floors at Marble Hill House in

Figure 3.7: The Mosquito Shore, by William Faden, 1787.



- Notes:
1. The island of Ruatan or Rattan is between latitudes 16 and 17, longitude 87.
  2. The English settlement at Black River is shown near latitude 16, between longitudes 86 and 85. Another important English settlement is at Bluefields Lagoon, latitudes 12 to 13, longitude 83.

Twickenham were made from trees stolen from the King of Spain. As with many myths, there is a kernel of truth in this. The Colonial Office archives are full of accounts of the long struggle between British mahogany cutters and the Spanish authorities in Central America.

There are other, equally potent myths, still widely believed today. The story of Dr Gibbons's candle-box, made from mahogany planks rejected by his housecarpenters, is almost certainly the source of the idea that mahogany was too hard to be worked by conventional tools. The sheer scale and bravura of Houghton Hall, and the reputation of its owner Sir Robert Walpole, England's first 'Prime Minister', gave rise to the idea that it was Walpole who almost single handedly inaugurated the trade in mahogany. This has been superceded by a new and eminently plausible myth which offers a more 'scientific' explanation for the introduction of mahogany. The Great Frost of 1709 and the consequent walnut 'famine', is regularly cited as the cause of the first mahogany importations, despite published evidence to the contrary. The destruction of these myths will no doubt disappoint those for whom mahogany is of symbolic rather than historical interest. But there is no reason why history should be dull. The true story of mahogany is as rich, complex and eventful as any the 18th century has to offer.

## CHAPTER ONE - THE ORIGINS OF THE TRADE

The tree grows tall and strait, often rising sixty feet from the spur to the limbs; the foliage is a beautiful deep green; and the appearance, made by the whole tree, so elegant, that none would be more ornamental for an avenue, or to decorate a plantation. It generally bears a great number of *capsules* in the season. The flowers are of reddish or saffron colour; and the fruit, of an oval form, about the size of a turkey's egg. It is easily propagated from the seeds, and grows rapidly. Some of them have reached to a monstrous size, exceeding one hundred feet in height, and proportionately bulky.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, 1774.

### Nomenclature and early botanical history

The mahogany employed by 18th century British furniture makers was the product of trees of the genus *Swietenia*. The natural range of these trees covers most of tropical America from Florida to Peru. In the 18th century the area of their commercial exploitation extended from Florida southwards through the Bahamas and Caribbean islands to the Spanish Main. It also included parts of Central America, specifically, the Mosquito Shore, now divided between Honduras and Nicaragua, and the province of Yucatan, later known as British Honduras or Belize (Figure 1.3).

The early historiography of mahogany, both as a plant and as a traded commodity, is one which is confused by problems of nomenclature. Until the 1760s mahogany was classified by botanists as one of the genus *Cedrela*, or more colloquially, cedar. True cedars (*Cedrus spp.*) are not indigenous to the Americas, but the name cedar has nevertheless been applied to many types of West Indian timber. These divide into two main families; the first are gymnosperms or softwoods of the *Juniperus* family, of which there are many species. They have a natural range extending from Virginia in North America to the West Indian islands and Central America. Although an important article of commerce, these timbers are outside the scope of this study.<sup>2</sup> The second

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, London 1774, II, p.842. Edward Long (1734-1813) came to Jamaica on his father's death in 1757. The Long family had held estates on the island since the 17th century, and Edward inherited one of them, Lucky Valley, and had shares in several others. In 1758 he married Mary Ballard Beckford, sole heiress of Thomas Beckford. As well as being an important landowner, Long was prominent in Jamaican politics and sat as a judge in the Vice-Admiralty Court. In 1769 Long returned to England due to ill health and there published his famous *History* in 1774.

<sup>2</sup> Both the Virginian and Bermudan varieties (*J. virginiana*, *J. Bermudiana*) were imported into England in the 17th and 18th centuries. These species comprised the raw material of most late 17th century 'cedarwood' furniture, and in the 18th century were used mainly as secondary woods. In the late 18th century their most common employment was for the linings of small drawers on high quality furniture. A common

Figure 1.1: A young mahogany tree, *Swietenia mahogani*, Jamaica.



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trade name for these woods is *pencil cedar*, so called after another of their principal uses.

family are *Meliaceae*, numbering many hundreds of species, and found throughout the West Indies, South America, Africa and Asia. Of these the genus *Cedrela* is most numerous in the West Indies and South America.<sup>3</sup> These are angiosperms, or hardwoods, and were termed cedar by the early European settlers because of their aromatic scent. The best known of these is the Cuban, Havana or cigar box cedar, *Cedrela odorata*. Mahogany is a member of the *Meliaceae* family, and the tree is very similar in appearance to cedrela. Both species grow to a good size, with a buttressed bole and pinnate leaves. The timber of cedrela species is also superficially similar to mahogany; it is reddish brown in colour and frequently has an interlocked grain, producing a stripey figure on radial surfaces. Cedrela is usually considerably lighter, softer and coarser than mahogany, and is quickly distinguished from it by microscopic analysis.<sup>4</sup>

When in the late 17th century Europeans began tentatively to classify the West Indian timbers, the name Cedrela included both mahogany and cedrela species. This classification was still in general use a century later when Edward Long described mahogany as *Cedrela, foliis pinnatis, floribus sparsis, ligno graviori*. Long also described what he called the Barbados cedar (the modern cedrela), and designated it *Cedrela foliis majoribus pinnatis, ligno levi odorato*.<sup>5</sup> These classifications are instructive, because the timber of the two trees is clearly distinguished by weight and scent. The latter is particularly important, since smell is the common attribute of all the cedars, whether true cedar, juniper or cedrela.

Some English authorities continued to use the designation cedrela up to the end of the 18th century, but in 1759 Linnaeus first used the vernacular name mahogany as a botanical definition, reclassifying the tree as *Cedrela mahogani*.<sup>6</sup> In 1760 mahogany was again reclassified by N.J. Jacquin as *Swietenia mahogani*, and this was the name subsequently adopted by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae Regnum Vegetabile* (1767), where it first appears in its modern form as *Swietenia mahogani* Jacq.. Jacquin based his classification on plate 81 of Catesby's *Natural*

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<sup>3</sup> Some species are found elsewhere, such as the East Indian *C. toon*.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the distinguishing features of Cedrela see B.J. Rendle, 'Commercial mahoganies and allied timbers,' *Forest Products Research Bulletin*, 18, HMSO 1938, pp.20-21, and Record and Hess, *Timbers of the New World*, 2nd ed., New York 1972, pp.363-4. The use of *Cedrela spp.* in English furniture is characteristic of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when it was employed chiefly for drawer linings and other carcase work. As well as having a fragrant scent, it was generally soft, straight grained and easily worked, making it ideal for these purposes.

<sup>5</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, Book III, p.842. This classification is also given by Patrick Browne, in *The Civil and Natural History of Jamaica*, London 1789. p.158. Mark Catesby gives mahogany a different classification; *Arbor foliis pinnatis nullo impari Alam claudente*. See *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, London 1754, Vol.II, p.81,. He remarked: 'The Excellency of this Wood for all Domestic Uses is now sufficiently well known in England: And at the Bahama Islands, and other Countries, where it grows naturally, it is no less Esteem for Shipbuilding, having Properties for that Use excelling Oak, and all other Wood, viz., Durableness, resisting Gunshots, and burying the Shot without Splintering.'

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Browne, *op.cit.*, p.158, in which he calls mahogany *Cedrela 2*.



*History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (1754) which portrays leaves, fruits and flowers of a mahogany tree from the Bahamas (Figure 1:2). The generic name was given in honour of the Austrian physician and botanist Gerard von Swieten, who died in 1772.

Until 1836 all American mahogany was regarded as one species, but in that year specimens from the Pacific coast of Mexico were reclassified as *S. humilis*.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1:2:**

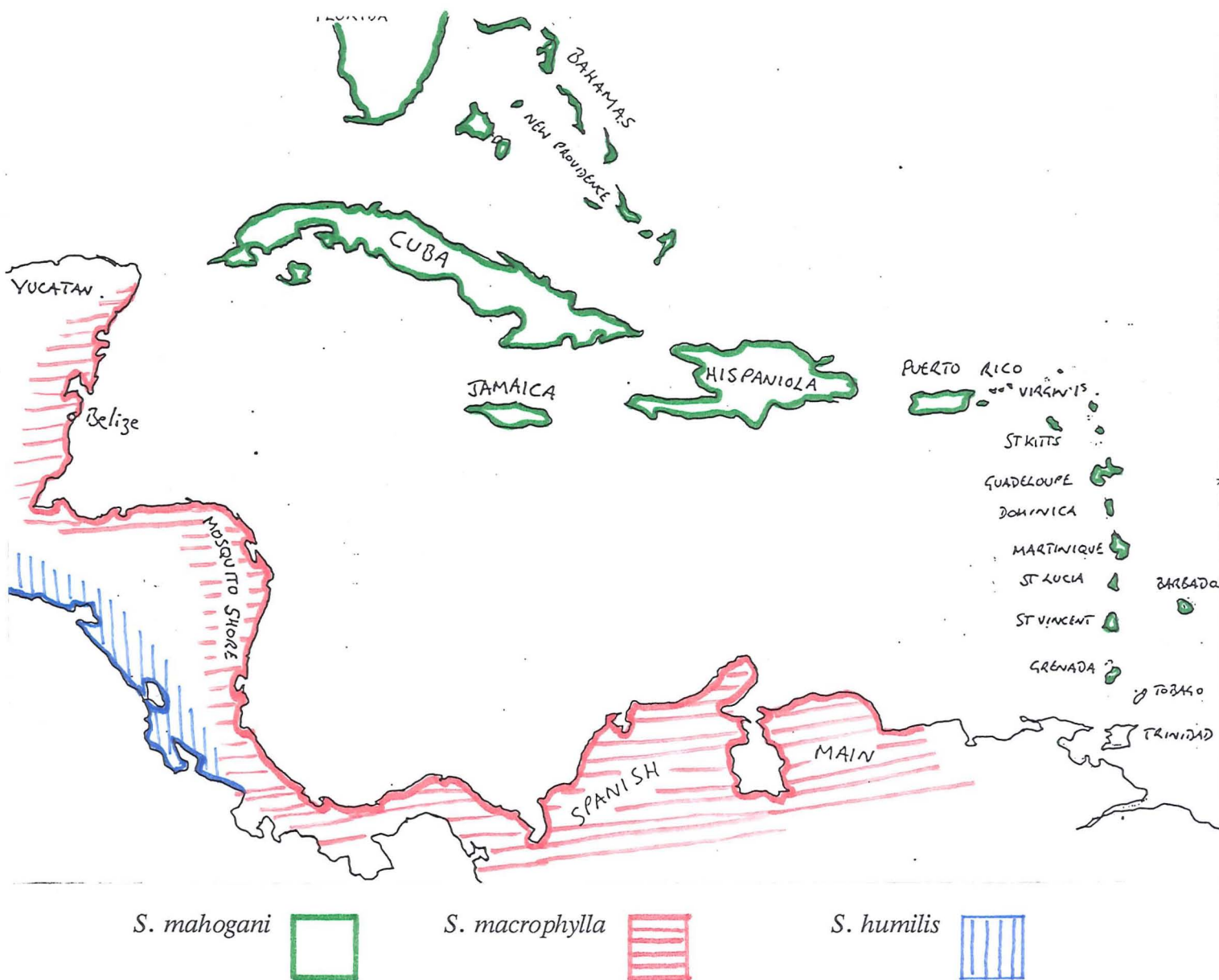
The flowers and fruits of the mahogany tree, from plate 81 of Catesby's *Natural History* (1754)



Photo: Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

<sup>7</sup> A succinct account of the classification of the *Swietenia* spp. can be found in R.A. Rolfe, 'The True Mahoganies', *Kew Bulletin*, 1919, Vol. 4, pp.201-207. The separate classification of *S. macrophylla* had been anticipated since the late 18th century. Browne's *History of Jamaica* drew attention (p.159) to the differences between the Jamaican mahogany tree and that of Honduras. In 1830 Sir William Hooker published an account of the mahogany tree, in which he remarked: 'If this be what we call the Honduras Mahogany, and different from that of Jamaica, it is much to be lamented that its botanical characters are not yet known to us.' Hooker, *Botanical Miscellany*, Vol.I, pp.21-32.

Figure 1.3: The West Indies and Central America, showing the natural distribution of *Swietenia* species.



This species, although accepted by botanists as distinct, is of little commercial importance.<sup>8</sup> In 1886 the dominant mainland variety of *Swietenia*, usually called Honduras mahogany, was reclassified as *Swietenia macrophylla*. The designation was given by Sir George King, having examined several trees grown in the Botanic Garden, Calcutta, from seeds said to have come from British Honduras. The leaves of this tree were consistently larger than *S. mahogani*, with five or six pairs of leaflets instead of four. The seeds were also larger. These trees flowered

<sup>8</sup> Record and Hess, *op.cit.*, p.366. Further details of this classification can be found in Rolfe, *op.cit.*, p.204.

earlier and grew faster than *S. mahogani* which was also planted in Calcutta.<sup>9</sup> From 1886, therefore, the true mahogany of commerce was divided into West Indian mahogany (*Swietenia mahogani* Jacq.), and Honduras, Central and South American mahogany (*S. macrophylla* King).<sup>10</sup> In the 18th century *S. mahogani* grew in southern Florida, the Bahamas and throughout the West Indian islands with the possible exception of Trinidad. *S. macrophylla* grows on the American mainland from southern Mexico through Central America to Colombia, Venezuela, the Guianas and northern Brazil, eastern Peru, Ecuador and northern Bolivia (Figure 1.3).

The origin of the vernacular name mahogany is obscure. Some authorities derive it from an African word *Oganwo* or *M'Oganwo*, meaning 'King of Trees'. It is assumed that the negro slaves captured during the English conquest of Jamaica (1655-1660) gave this word to the English language. Other authorities (e.g. Webster's Dictionary) suggest an indigenous Arawak derivation. Neither of these is certain. Whatever its origin, the name mahogany was initially confined to the English speaking islands.<sup>11</sup> The Spanish adopted a vernacular Indian word *caoba* to describe both cedar and mahogany species, and this term was in general use among the Spanish by 1600. A French dictionary of 1617 defined it thus: "*Caoba, caobana, sorti do boise rouge qui s'apporte des Indies, du quel se font plusieurs ouvrages exquis.*"<sup>12</sup> Wood designated *caoba* became a royal monopoly at Havana in 1622, reserved for shipbuilding purposes.<sup>13</sup> The use of all cedrela varieties for shipbuilding is well attested, and indeed was its most important role in the 17th century. In the 19th century botanists working in central America encountered the words *caoba* and *cobana* applied to trees which were identified as *Swietenia* spp., and the *Flora Cubana* of 1873 gives *caoba* as

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<sup>9</sup> Rolfe, *op.cit.*, p.205.

<sup>10</sup> Some varieties of *S. macrophylla* are sometimes considered separate species, e.g., *S. candollei*, Venezuelan mahogany; *S. Tesmannii*, Amazon mahogany; *S. macrocarpa*, Peruvian mahogany. These designations are not universally recognised, however, and are of dubious value to the botanist or the historian. 'For commercial purposes... all of the Mahogany of continental North and South America can be considered as of one botanical species, *S. Macrophylla* King.' Record and Hess, *op.cit.*, p.368.

<sup>11</sup> The name mahogany was in time adopted by several European nations, viz; German, *mahoganiholz* and *echtes mahogani*; Dutch, *mohor*; Portuguese, *mogno*; Italian, *mogano*. In the 1650s Richard Ligon described, among the various tree species of Barbados, both *cedar* and *redwood*. This last, which may have been mahogany, he said was 'good for posts and beams... accounted very lasting, and good for building.' *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*, London 1657, p.41.

<sup>12</sup> Caesar Oudin, *Le Tresor des Trois Langues*, Cologne, 1617. Such a definition includes many more than mahogany and cedrela species, for instance, Amazonian bulletwood (*Mimosupps* spp.), Locust wood (*Hymenaea courbaril*), and Crabwood (*Andiroba* spp.).

<sup>13</sup> The shipbuilding monopoly was long lived. A mid-18th century Spanish warship, taken as a prize, was described as being built 'with her lower parts one enormous mass of solid mahogany'. H Raikes, ed., *Memoir of the Life and Services of Sir Jaheel Brenton, Bart., K.C.B.*, London, 1846. This monopoly probably accounts for the relative scarcity of Spanish mahogany furniture in the 18th century.

the common name for *Swietenia* on Cuba.<sup>14</sup>

French 17th and 18th-century texts use the word *acajou*, derived from the native *acajoba*, to designate West Indian cedars or mahoganies used in shipbuilding. *Acajoba* and *caoba* probably have the same derivation.<sup>15</sup> Describing the island of Hispaniola in the 1670s, the buccanneer John Esquemeling wrote:

Such are the Cedars, which trees this part of the world produces in prodigious quantity. The French nation calls them Acajou; and they find them very useful for the building of ships and canoes. These canoes are like little wherry boats, being made of one tree only, excavated, and fitted for the sea.<sup>16</sup>

John Evelyn used *acajou* in the same sense in 1664: '... there are many kinds of wood in the Western-Indies (besides the Acajou) that breed no worms... proper enough to build ships.'<sup>17</sup> Resistance to worm (although not to the notorious *teredo navalis* or ship-worm) is a desirable quality in any timber, and shared by both cedrela and mahogany species, although mahogany is superior. Besides *acajou*, Evelyn mentioned two sorts of cedar from Jamaica. One, a species of juniper, he described as 'little inferior to the Bermudas'. The other 'is a spurious sort, and the wood so porous, that wine will soak into it.'<sup>18</sup> The latter, being porous, was probably a hardwood, perhaps *Cedrela odorata*, which suggests that Evelyn made a distinction between that wood and *acajou*. *Acajou*, as used by Evelyn, probably meant mahogany. In the 18th and 19th centuries *acajou* was the term used by French *ebenists* for what the English called mahogany.<sup>19</sup>

In the early 19th century the name mahogany began to be applied to timbers other than *Swietenia*. The first of these was one of the North American birches, *Betula lenta*, also known as mahogany birch, mountain mahogany and sweet birch. According to Blackie's *Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* (1850), certain specimens

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<sup>14</sup> Rolfe. *op.cit.*, pp.204-5. F.A. Sauvalle, *Flora Cubana*, Havana, 1873.

<sup>15</sup> Hinckley gives a different derivation, 'from the Portuguese *acaju* or *caju*, and is of Tupian origin, apparently through the northern culture of these tribes.' No authority is given, however. F. Lewis Hinckley, *Directory of the Historic Cabinet Woods*, New York 1963, p.132.

<sup>16</sup> John Esquemeling, *The Buccaneers of America, A true account of the most remarkable assaults committed of late years upon the coasts of the West Indies by the Buccaneers of Jamaica and Tortuga (both English and French)*, London 1684, reprinted London 1893, p.26.

<sup>17</sup> John Evelyn, *Silva, or a Discourse of Forest Trees*, London 1664, Book III, Ch IV, p.235.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, Chap.1, p.7.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that *Acajou* was also applied by the French to another West Indian tree, the Cashew *Anacardium occidentale*. Record and Hess, citing a French authority, attribute the name *Acajou* as applied to mahogany to the practice of coating the ends of mahogany logs with resin from the Cashew tree. Record and Mell, *op.cit.*, p.37. However, the use of the name *Acajou* for various *Meliaciae* species predates the commercial importations of mahogany into France, which makes Record and Hess' attribution unlikely.

of this wood 'rivalled in beauty the finest mahogany'.<sup>20</sup> At about the same time the west African timbers of the Meliaceae family, principally *Khaya spp.*, began to be marketed in Britain as African mahogany. *Khaya* is generally a larger tree than the *Swietenia*, and some early specimens were recorded with a bole up to twelve feet in diameter and clear of branches for a hundred feet. The *Khaya* of modern commerce tends to be of more modest size. The fruits, foliage and flowers are very similar to *Swietenia*, and so *Khaya* was originally classified in 1789 as *Swietenia senegalensis* by the French botanist Desrousseau. In 1830 this was changed to *Khaya senegalensis*, and several more species (e.g., *K. ivorensis*, *K. grandifolia*) are now recognised.<sup>21</sup> When first commercially introduced in the 1830s *Khaya* was regarded as a fit substitute for *Swietenia* but: 'A very short experience of its qualities ... served to drive it out of the market'.<sup>22</sup> Whilst superficially similar in colour and figure, *Khaya* was found to be less stable than *Swietenia* and liable to lose its colour and lustre. Consequently, commented Blackie, 'furniture made from it gave general dissatisfaction'.<sup>23</sup> Importations rapidly fell off and the wood did not become an important article of commerce until the 1880s.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the 19th century the *cachet* of mahogany had spread to many more species in Africa, Asia and Australasia. Chaloner and Fleming (c.1850) give three species of mahogany: '1st, *Swietenia*, being the common Mahogany, known to the Wood Trade; 2nd, the *Febrifuga*, and 3rd, *Chloroxylon*'.<sup>25</sup> This is a very idiosyncratic interpretation. Both the second and third species are East Indian timbers unrelated to *Swietenia*, and the wood of *Chloroxylon* 'chiefly found in Bengal' was quite unlike mahogany, being described as deep yellow in colour, 'nearly the same as boxwood'. The second species, *Soymida febrifuga*, became one of the staple Indian 'mahoganies' of the later 19th century. Thomas Laslett, timber inspector to the Admiralty, recorded in 1875 the name mahogany being applied '... to many different timbers in different parts of the world'. Among these were *Cedrela toona* (India), *Soymida febrifuga* (India), *Betula lenta* (North America) and several species of *Eucalyptus* (Australia).<sup>26</sup> In the 20th

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<sup>20</sup> Blackie, *The Cabinet-Maker's Assistant*, Edinburgh, 1850, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> According to Bryan Latham, the name *Khaya* derives from a West African word meaning 'I don't know'. The nomenclature presumably arose as follows; European botanist/explorer - 'What's this tree called?' Denizen of West Africa - 'Khaya - I don't know'. Latham, *Timber: Its Development and Distribution*, London 1957, pp.170-1.

<sup>22</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Howard, *Timbers of the World*, London 1948, pp.169-172. Thomas Laslett, *Timber and Timber Trees*, 2nd Ed., London, 1894, pp.256, 299.

<sup>25</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree in the West Indies and Central America*, Liverpool 1850 p.39.

<sup>26</sup> Laslett, *op.cit.*, p.257.

century the number of would-be mahoganies has grown greater still. Almost any red-brown tropical hardwood showing a stripe figure on radial surfaces was regarded as worthy of the name, and there are now at least sixty different kinds of wood from four continents marketed as mahogany.<sup>27</sup> Among the more important are *Cedrela* (Spanish cedar), *Carapa* (Andiroba or Crabwood), *Khaya* (African mahogany), *Entandrophragma* (Sapele), *Lovoa* (African walnut), *Trichilia* (Bosse), *Toon* (Indian cedrela, Calantas), *Dysoxylum* (Rose mahogany), *Azadirachta* (Neem), *Melia* (Persian lilac), *Chukrasia* (Chittagong). The application of the name to such diverse timbers is a tribute to the quality and reputation of the original, *Swietenia*, which for nearly two hundred years was the mainstay of the British furniture trade.

### The earliest mahogany furniture<sup>28</sup>

The use of the name *Cedrela* to describe both mahogany and cedar species has resulted in confusing speculation about the date of the first use of mahogany in England. In *Timbers of the New World* (1943) Record and Mell stated: 'No-one knows when Mahogany was first introduced into England, but it was probably used in shipbuilding long before it became fashionable for furniture, its identity concealed under the nondistinctive name of Cedar.'<sup>29</sup> This view has since been widely repeated, and has given rise to a general assumption among British furniture historians that 17th-century references to cedar may in fact be mahogany.<sup>30</sup> For instance, the panelling installed at Nottingham Castle in 1680, which unfortunately did not survive a fire in the 19th century, was described in its original invoice as cedar; some authorities, including Record and Mell, cite this as an early use of mahogany.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst it is certainly possible that mahogany could have been brought to England at any time subsequent to the discovery of the New World, there is no

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<sup>27</sup> Record and Hess, B.J. Rendle, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> This section is concerned only with British furniture. In Spain and Portugal there were a number of 16th and 17th century employments of mahogany, most notably at the Escorial Palace in 1584. This is reputedly its first use anywhere in Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Record and Mell, *Timbers of the New World, 1st Ed*, New York 1943, p.369.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, and, for instance, M. Jourdain and F. Rose, *English Furniture: The Georgian Period, (1750-1830)*, Batsford 1953. Bryan Latham gives an unhelpful account of the early employment of cedar and mahogany which serves further to confuse this problem of nomenclature. B. Latham, *op.cit.*, pp.156-7. Sir Walter Raleigh is often credited with being the first Englishman to make use of mahogany, employing it in replacing the rudder of his ship at Trinidad in 1597. However, according to most botanical authorities, mahogany is not indigenous to Trinidad.

<sup>31</sup> Latham, *op.cit.*, p.39. Hinckley, *op.cit.*, p.129. Record and Mell, *op.cit.*, p. 369. These last authorities state that the original invoice describes the timber used at Nottingham as Cedar, but nevertheless insist that 'contemporary evidence of the hardness and beauty of the wood leaves no room for doubt that the wood was Mahogany'. The location of the invoice is at present unknown.

evidence other than Record and Mell's assertion that mahogany was imported and used under the name of cedar. The ambiguities of botanical classification were of little concern to those mariners and merchants who traded in the New World, nor to those who employed tropical woods in furniture making. Cedars of whatever family or genus are distinguished by their smell; this constituted their greatest attraction and differentiated them from other timbers.<sup>32</sup> Fragrant cedars and cypresses, whether from the New or the Old world, had long been in demand in England, and were well known in the 17th century. Authorities such as John Evelyn (1664), Sir Hans Sloane (1688), Henry Barham (c.1720) and Patrick Browne (1789) routinely comment on the fragrant scent of cedrela as a distinguishing feature.<sup>33</sup> Thus, whilst the botanists argued, the layman followed his nose. In modern day Brazil illiterate mahogany cutters have no difficulty in telling cedrela from mahogany. They simply hack off a lump of bark with a machete and smell it.

It is significant, moreover, that the name mahogany was in vernacular English usage from c.1670, and clearly distinguished that wood from varieties of cedrela. In the first English accounts of Jamaica, those published by John Ogilby (1671) and Richard Blome (1672), mahogany and cedar are mentioned separately among the exports of the island.<sup>34</sup>

There are a great variety of woods for Dyers, as Fustick, Red-wood, a kind of Logg wood, etc., also Caedar, Mothogeney, Brasiletto, Lignum-

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, in 1680 Samuel Richardson, a London joiner and father of the 18th century novelist, advertised 'the best and choicest Cedar for both Colour and Scent.' *London Gazette*, 31 May-3 June 1680. Richardson later became 'a considerable importer of mahogany' before his death c.1736. *Universal Magazine*, 1786. Celia Fiennes commented on the scent when she saw the altar overmantel in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford, calling it 'fine sweet wood, the same which that the Lord Orfford brought over when High Admiral of England and has wanscoated his hall and staircase with, it is sweet like Cedar and of a reddish colour, but the grain much finer and well vein'd.' This overmantel survives, and has been identified as *Cedrela odorata*.

<sup>33</sup> John Evelyn, *op.cit.*, London 1664, Vol.II p.37. "...it has a reddish...odiferous wood." Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, St Christophers, and Jamaica.*, Vol.II, p.128; "... the wood is soft like deal, but reddish, having a very pleasant smell", Henry Barham, *Hortus Americanus*, c.1720, published Kingston, 1794., pp. 36-7. "...the timber, however, has a pleasant smell; it is full of a dark resinous substance, light, porous and easily worked." P. Browne, *op.cit.*, p.158.

<sup>34</sup> John Ogilby, *America, Being the Latest and Most Accurate Description of the New World*, London 1671; Richard Blome, *Description of the Island of Jamaica*, London 1672. Both of these books were based on the reports of Sir Thomas Lynch, second Governor of Jamaica, and other early Jamaican residents. Either Ogilby or Blome was almost certainly the authority for Edward Long's account of the conquest of Jamaica in 1655, in which he described mahogany, fustic, ebony and *lignum vitae* as established trading commodities.

It must be said that earlier English accounts of the West Indian islands do not mention mahogany by name. However, where the accounts are full enough, it is usually possible to determine whether cedrela or mahogany is meant. For instance, on Barbados Richard Ligon describes *cedar* as 'without question the most useful timber in the Island; for being strong, lasting, and not very heavy, 'tis good for building, but by reason of the smoothness and fairness of the grain, there is much of it us'd in Wainscots, Chairs, Stools, and other Utensils within doors'. This is probably a member of the Meliaceae, since its leaves were 'just like those of the Ash in *England*, but somewhat bigger'. However, as with Long's classification of cedrela, Ligon mentions light weight as one of its attributes, and so this is unlikely to be mahogany. Richard Ligon, *op.cit.*, p.73.

vitae, Ebony, Granadilla, and many other excellent Sweet smelling and curious Woods, fitt for choice Works, whose names are as yet not known, nor indeed their excellences, but are exported in great quantities.<sup>35</sup>

The evidence of Ogilby and Blome, although important in establishing the currency of the name mahogany by c.1670, creates confusion of another kind. The claim that 'great quantities' of mahogany were exported from Jamaica at this early date has given rise to the common belief that mahogany was already in use as a furniture wood in the seventeenth century. For instance, in *Furniture Making in 17th and 18th Century England* (1955), R.W. Symonds stated that 'mahogany had probably been imported into England for more than a hundred years' before c.1715.<sup>36</sup> This is a view shared by many, and Ogilby's famous passage has been quoted by several authorities, including the *Dictionary of English Furniture* (eds. 1924 & 1954).

Neither John Ogilby nor Richard Blome ever went to Jamaica. Their writings were compiled second-hand from the reports of Sir Thomas Lynch (second Governor of Jamaica) and other early residents, and must be treated with great circumspection. There is no hard evidence either for a trade in mahogany or for mahogany furniture in England prior to 1700. The 1660 Book of Rates, which lists all commodities commonly imported into England at that date, includes several West Indian timbers - brazeletto, ebony, fustic, *lignum vitae*, sweetwood (cedar), speckled wood - but not mahogany (Figure 1.4).<sup>37</sup> The Book of Rates was compiled whilst Jamaica was still in the throes of military conquest, and conditions were hardly favourable to trade. Nevertheless, in the years following mahogany is not recorded among the growing volume of Jamaican exports. When Charles Modyford, the first governor, reported to the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations in 1670, he listed the produce of Jamaica as follows; cocoa, indigo, pimento, sugar, cotton, fustic, tortoiseshell, braziletto, tobacco and ginger.<sup>38</sup> Thirty years later, the range of produce had

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Blome, *op.cit.*, p.11. Brazeletto was a red dyewood, variously attributed to *Caesalpinia*, *Guilandina* and *Brasilettia spp.*, imported from most West Indian islands. Fustic was a yellow dyewood, *Chlorophora tinctoria*, was also imported from most West Indian islands. It was later (1760s onwards) used in furniture making as an alternative to satinwood. West Indian ebony was not a true ebony (*Diospyros spp.*), but is variously attributed to *Brya ebenus* (cocuswood) and *Tecoma leucoxyton* (Green Ebony). Logwood, *Haematoxylon campechianum*, was the most important of the dyewoods, imported principally from Central America. *Lignum vitae*, *Guaiacum officinale* and *G. sanctum* were imported from the West Indies and Central America. It had many quasi-industrial uses, due to its extreme hardness, but was also thought to have medicinal qualities, hence its classification as a drug until 1724. Red wood was a generic name for red dyewoods of several species other than logwood. Granadilla was applied to several woods, including cocus wood (q.v.) and a variety of partridge wood, *Caesalpinia granadillo*.

<sup>36</sup> R.W. Symonds, *Furniture Making in 17th and 18th Century England*, London 1955, p.116.

<sup>37</sup> 12 Charles II cap.4. The *Book of Rates* was drawn up to assist customs officers in the calculation and collection of customs duties at English ports of entry. It gave a *rate* or average value to every commodity commonly imported, and import duty was charged (in 1660) at 5% of that rate.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Modyford to Lord Arlington, 22 January 1670. *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies, 1699-1674*. At this time only twenty ocean going vessels per annum were trading to Jamaica.



Figure 1.4:

The *Book of Rates*, 1660, showing the rateable values of commonly imported woods, including those imported from the West Indies.

160 C. 4. Anno duodecimo

-W-

	Wadmoll, the yard	ix. d.
	Wainecots, the hundred, cont. six score	x. l.
	Wax } the hundred weight, cont. 112 pound	ij. l.
	} vocat. hard wax, the pound	iiij. s. iv. d.
e5 Car. 2. c. 7.	Whale Finns of English fishing, imported by English in English shipping, directly from the Place, by the Tun	j. l.
	Whale Finns not of English fishing, by the Tun	c. l.
	Whet-stones, the hundred stones, cont. five score	xvj. s. viij. d.
	Whipcord, the pound	viiij. d.
	Whistles, Cocks, or Bellows, the groce	j. l. iv. s.
	Whistles, Cocks, or Birds of stone, the small groce, cont. 12 dozen	iiij. s.
	Woad } Islands or green-woad, the Tonne, cont. twenty hundred weight	xv. l.
	} Tholose woad, the hundred weight, cont. 112 pound	j. l. xiiij. s. iv. d.
	Worm-feed, vide Drugs	
	Worsted } vocat. S. Omers narrow, or half worsted, the piece	j. l.
	} vocat. Ruffels worsted, or broad worsteds, the piece	ij. l.
	Wood } Box-wood for Combs, the thousand pieces	j. l. xiiij. s. iv. d.
8 Geo. 1. c. 15.	} vocat. Brazeil or Farnambuck wood, the hundred weight, cont. 112 pound	j. l. xv. s.
	Brazeletto or Gemeaco wood, the hund. weight containing 112 pound	j. l. j. s. viij. d.
	Ebonie wood, the hundred weight, containing 112 pound	ij. l.
	Fustick, the hundred weight, cont. 112 pound	v. s.
	Lignum vitæ, vide Drugs	
	Wood vocat. } Planks of Ireland, the foot	j. d. ob.
	} Guinea wood, the Tonne	xxx. l.
	} Speckled wood, the hundred weight, cont. 112 pound	xiiij. s. iv. d.
	} Sweet wood of West-India, the hundred weight, cont. 112 pound	j. l. v. s.
	} Timber of Ireland, the Tonne or load	xiiij. s. iv. d.
	Wool } Bever wool, free	
	} Cotten wool, not of the growth of the English plantations, the pound	iv. d.

The Subsidie of Tonnage upon all Wines to be Imported into the Ports of England, and Dominion

7 & 8 W. 3. c. 21.	GAscoigne and French wines brought into the Port of London, the Tonne to pay	iv. l. x. s.
	Brought into all other Ports; to pay	iiij. l.

Photo: The author.

actually decreased to sugar, indigo, pimento, ginger, cotton, annotto, and fustic.<sup>39</sup> Sir Hans Sloane's exhaustive survey of Jamaican trees, compiled in 1688 but not published until 1725, records all woods of commercial interest, but makes no mention at all of mahogany.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> BT 20. 20 April 1700, and *CSPCAWI*, Vol. XVIII, p.347.

<sup>40</sup> Sloane, *op.cit.* Sloane left England in September 1687 and returned in 1689. His book was published in two volumes, the first in 1707, and the second, which concerns the trees of Jamaica, in 1725. The omission of any mention of mahogany is curious. Not only does Sloane not mention the timber as an article of commerce, but he does not record it at all. Either he assumed that it was the same tree as *cedrela* (Vol II, p.128), or he recorded it under another name, where it has remained unrecognised to this day. One possible candidate is the tree which Sloane designates *Euronymo affinis arbor spinosa, folio alato, fructa ficco pentagono* (Vol.II, p.28). This Sloane describes as 'for Bigness and Heigth [sic] one of the largest and tallest

The Jamaica shipping returns survive for most of the period December 1680 to March 1692, during which time sugar, dyewood, cedarwood and ebony were all cleared outwards for England, but no mahogany.<sup>41</sup> This evidence, or lack of it, is corroborated in part by John Houghton's *Letters for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*. These were published monthly between c.1682 and c.1692, and some issues contained lists of all the goods imported into London in the previous month. From the West Indies Nicaragua wood, logwood, brazaletto, grenadilla, cedar and box are all recorded, but no mahogany.<sup>42</sup> Each of these sources is incomplete and no doubt fallible, but their collective implication is that so far as mahogany is concerned, Ogilby and Blome's claims are unsupported by the available statistical evidence.

Some furniture historians claim to have seen mahogany used in a sparing fashion as facings, split baluster decoration and other detailing on mid- to late 17th century furniture. None of these claims has been supported by documentary evidence or substantiated by microscopic analysis. Considered objectively, these are trivial and unlikely employments for a tree producing lumber on the scale of mahogany.<sup>43</sup> Where red-brown tropical woods are found used in this fashion on 17th century furniture, snakewood, granadillo and brazaletto are the more likely candidates. These woods were imported on a large scale in the second half of the 17th century, and indeed some have been positively identified in late 17th-century furniture.<sup>44</sup>

From time to time various candidates for the earliest British mahogany furniture come to light. Some authors have assumed that the "... Two Tables and Two pairs of stands of Jamaica Wood..." supplied by Thomas Malin to Hampton Court Palace in 1661/2 were mahogany.<sup>45</sup> However, in the 1660s *gemeaco* or

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Trees in the Island.... It is one of the best Timber Trees of the Caribe Isles...' , This has subsequently been classified, from Sloane's evidence, as *Zanthoxylon* spp. (aka Satinwood), but the timber is described by Sloane as red, rather than yellow.

<sup>41</sup> CO 142/13.

<sup>42</sup> John Houghton, *A Collection of Letters for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, London, c.1682-92. Bishop Marsh's Library, Dublin. Houghton's lists cover the first quarter of 1682 and the second quarter of 1692. I am grateful to Peter Brown of York Civic Trust for drawing this source to my attention.

<sup>43</sup> Percy Macquoid, *The Age of Mahogany*, London 1906, p.48; Macquoid and Edwards, eds., *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, 2nd Ed., London 1954, Vol.II, p295; Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture - The British Tradition*, Woodbridge, 1979.

<sup>44</sup> Snakewood, *Piratinera guianensis* (syn. *Brosiumum aubletti*) came chiefly from Surinam (Dutch Guiana) on the north coast of South America. In the 17th century it was known as speckled wood or letter wood. This timber was the most commonly used tropical wood in English furniture making c.1651-1670, and is frequently found employed for facings on geometrically moulded chests of the period. See J. Darrah, 'Furniture Timbers', *Conservation Journal*, July 1992, pp.4-6.

<sup>45</sup> LC5/39.

Jamaica wood was the usual name given to brazeletto (Figure 1.4).<sup>46</sup> The term Jamaica wood was not applied to mahogany until the middle of the 18th century, when it became necessary to differentiate between Jamaica mahogany and other varieties on the market.<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 1.5:**

Bulletwood chair made for Nicholas Roope, c.1617.



Photo: Victor Chinnery.

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<sup>46</sup> *Book of Rates, 12 Charles II cap.4*. In *Furniture Making in 17th and 18th Century England*, Symonds noted the Hampton Court reference, and whilst acknowledging the fact that *Jamaica wood* was applied to Braziletto, nevertheless inferred that Malin's furniture was mahogany. Symonds, *op.cit.*, p.116.

<sup>47</sup> R.W. Symonds unwittingly propagated the myth of Jamaica wood in 'Early Imports of Mahogany for Furniture', *Connoisseur*, XCIV, July-December 1934, pp.213-220. The Customs returns were compiled under subsections for each *colony* - Jamaica; *category* - Wood; *type* - Braziletto, Fustick, Logwood, Mahogany, etc.. Symonds paraphrased this to read;

JAMAICA  
Wood mahogany

Figure 1.6:

The Flesher's Chair,  
Trinity Hall, Aberdeen,  
dated 1661.

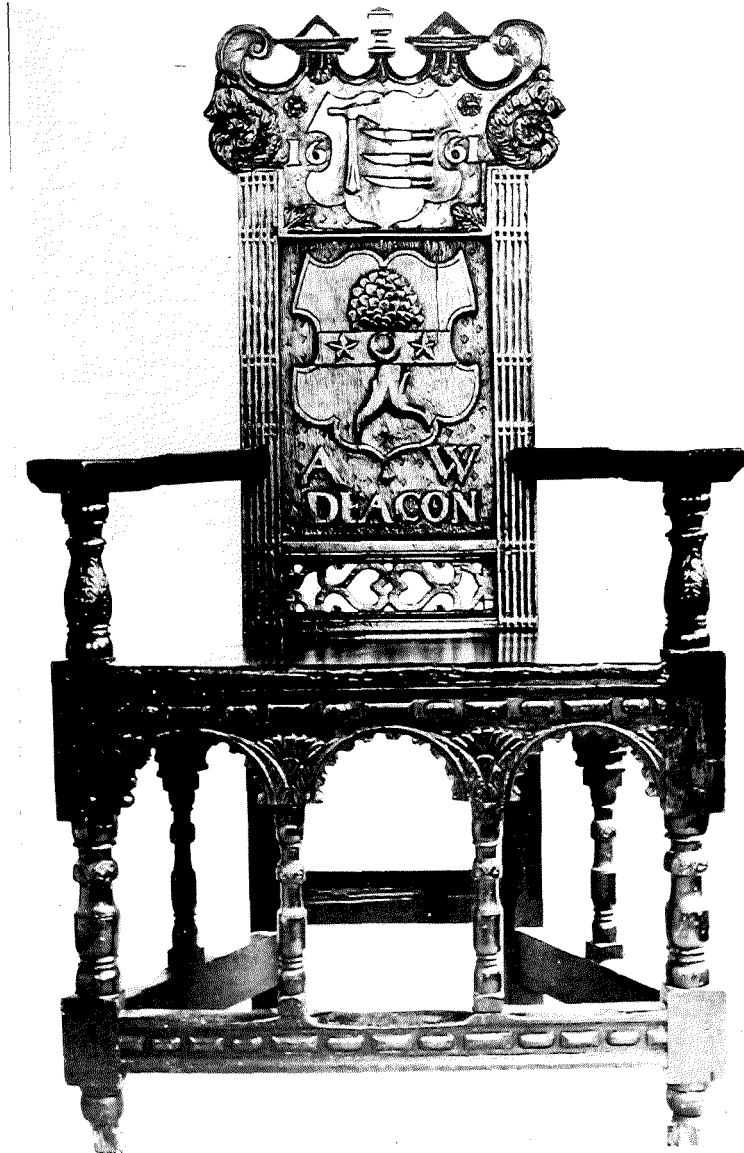


Photo: David Learmont

Malin's tables and stands have long since disappeared, but some putative 17th century mahogany furniture is still extant. A chair made c.1617 for the Dartmouth merchant Nicholas Roope (Figure 1.5) was once thought to have been made of mahogany, but was subsequently identified by microscopic analysis as Amazonian bulletwood (*Mimosupps spp.*).<sup>48</sup> The Flesher's chair in Trinity Hall, Aberdeen, dated 1661 (Figure 1.6), is made from a wood which certainly resembles mahogany, but in the absence of microscopic analysis this

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<sup>48</sup> Victor Chinnery, 'The Earliest Mahogany Chair?' *Antique Collecting* November 1982, pp.6-7. The chair was sold at Sotheby's on 22nd October 1982, lot 8, and is now in a private collection. It should be noted that there are African varieties of *Mimosupps*, but given Roope's known trading connections with Portugal and with the Amazon, an Amazonian provenance seems plausible.

identification remains speculative.<sup>49</sup> It is pertinent to note that an inventory of 1696 describes the chair as brazil wood.<sup>50</sup> At the time of writing there is no known positively identified British mahogany furniture surviving from before 1700.

### The beginnings of trade, 1700-1721

The first official English record of mahogany as a traded commodity appears in the Customs returns for 1700. Between that year and 1721 sporadic importations were recorded, growing in frequency and scale (Figure 1.7).

**Figure 1.7:** Importations of mahogany into England, 1700-1721.

Year	Source	Value	Year	Source	Value
1700	Jamaica	5. 0. 0	1717	Jamaica	48. 1. 0
1710	Jamaica	2. 8. 0	1718	Jamaica	53. 7. 6
1711	Jamaica	3. 4. 0	1719	Jamaica	57.10. 0
1713	Jamaica	28. 0. 0	1720	Jamaica	42.13. 0
1716	Jamaica	43. 0. 0	1721	Jamaica	174.14. 0
	'West Indies'	1. 0. 0		New England	46. 5. 0

Source: Customs 3<sup>51</sup>

**Note:** The values given in the customs returns at this date are those declared on oath by the importer, usually based on the purchase price at source, and not the rateable or market value of L8 per ton established in 1724.

The majority of importations were from Jamaica, establishing a pattern that was to continue for the next eighty years. One importation, in 1721, came via North America, a route which was to carry a good proportion of all mahogany imported into England until 1775. It is worth noting that most of these early importations came into ports other than London. As we shall see in the following chapter, the provincial outports played a key role in the rapid adoption

<sup>49</sup> David Learmont, 'The Trinity Hall Chairs, Aberdeen', *Furniture History*, XIV (1978), pp.1-8. Victor Chinnery, *op.cit.*, p.465.

<sup>50</sup> Brazil wood usually designates *Caesalpinia spp.*, an important class of dyewoods. However, between 1651 and 1667 a British colony was established in Surinam, and this part of South America was known loosely as the Brazils. Among the more commercial mahogany-like woods of the area are Bulletwood (*Mimosupps spp.*), Wamara (*Swartzia tomentosa*) and Courbaril or Locust wood (*Hymenaea courbaril*).

<sup>51</sup> These figures are partly corroborated by documents prepared for Sir Robert Walpole and retained amongst his papers in the Cholmondeley MSS. 'Goods imported from Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, Mountserat, Nevis & St Christopher' covers the years 1715-1719 inclusive. It differs from Customs 3 in showing mahogany worth L35.7.6 imported in 1718. This latter figure is probably correct, and the figure of L53.7.6 given in Customs 3 is an error of transcription. Cambridge University Library, Cholmondeley (Houghton) MSS, *Domestic Papers*, 37.

of mahogany on a national scale.

The English customs returns for this period are at odds with the evidence of the Jamaica shipping returns; these latter do not show any mahogany cleared from Kingston until 1720, when 119 planks were cleared in four vessels for Bristol and London between March and June.<sup>52</sup> The discrepancy might be due to administrative omissions (the shipping returns were always completed and signed 'errors excepted'); alternatively it is possible that previous shipments were cleared out of minor ports such as Savannah la Mar or Montego Bay and hence went unrecorded. Whatever the reason, it demonstrates the inadvisability of placing too much credence in individual sources.

At about the same date that mahogany first entered the statistical record, it appeared also in the London newspapers. The earliest published record is that discovered by R.W. Symonds in the London *Gazette* of 25 February 1702:

On Wednesday the 3rd of March next, at 9 in the morning, will be exposed to publick Sale by the Candle, at Salters-Hall in St Swithern's Lane, London, a Parcel of Damag'd Cocheneal, out of the Mary Man of War; together with the remaining Goods of the Little Galeon, call'd the Mary's Prize, consisting of 4 bags of Cocheneal, some Calcin'd Earth, Pictures, Lackered Tea Tables, Chocolat-mills, White and Brown Sugar, Molosses, Nicaragua and Mahogany-wood, West Indian Box, etc. Allotments of all which goods are disperced this day, being Thursday the 25th Instant February. And on Wednesday the 17th of March, at 9 in the morning, will likewise be exposed to publick Sale by the Candle, at the said Hall, the Cargo of the Galeon called the Tauro, of the Somerset's Prize, consisting of Snuff, Tobacco, Sugar, Cocoa, Venelles, Cocheneal, Cafia, Hydes, China Wares, Silk Grass, Brazelletto, Mahogany, Ebbone, and Logwood, etc. Allotments whereof will be timely disperced, and all the Goods may be viewed at the Prize Office Warehouses at Buttolph-Wharf, 3 days before the respective days of Sale.<sup>53</sup>

Both these vessels were Spanish prizes, and judging by the quantity of West Indian goods on board, must have been on their way from Spanish America to Spain when they were captured.<sup>54</sup> The advertisement suggests that mahogany was familiar enough to be recognised among the captured cargos and identified by name - this may not have been the first time that the Commissioners of

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<sup>52</sup> CO 142/14

<sup>53</sup> First quoted in R.W. Symonds, 'Early Imports', pp.213-214.

<sup>54</sup> At this date half the value of prizes taken by H.M. men of war went to the crown, and half to the crew of the man of war. For details of the naval campaign against French and Spanish trade during the war of Spanish Succession see G.N. Clark, 'War Trade and Trade war, 1701-1713', *Economic History Review*, I, 1928, pp.262-80. These newspaper advertisements prove that the Spanish were importing mahogany before it was generally available in England. However, there are no records of mahogany being imported from Spain into England. Spanish colonial trade was tightly restricted and overburdened with duties, which ensured that very few Spanish colonial goods found their way to England from Spain itself.

Prizes had seen the wood.

Mahogany was also imported into the British North American colonies, and it is conceivable that at this early date these importations exceeded those into England. In September 1709 the sloop Thomas cleared Kingston for Philadelphia with 1000 feet of mahogany and 212 feet of manchineal among its cargo.<sup>55</sup> The following year the sloop Adventure, also bound for Philadelphia, carried among her cargo of molasses, sugar and rum, 200 feet of 'Mohogany wood'.<sup>56</sup> Philadelphia inventories show mahogany timber listed amongst the stock of both cabinet-makers and joiners of the town around this time.<sup>57</sup> Mahogany furniture is also recorded in the houses of several Philadelphia citizens in 1721 and 1722.<sup>58</sup>

These sporadic and scattered importations into England and North America, whilst significant in establishing the possibility of a limited employment of mahogany in the first twenty years of the 18th century, do not amount to a regular commerce. In the 1720s, however, mahogany importations began to increase with great rapidity, a development graphically illustrated by figure 1.8, which shows the value of imported mahogany recorded in the English customs returns between 1700 and 1740. This phenomenon, which was to have such momentous consequences for English furniture making, has long been the subject of interest and speculation.

In the early part of this century furniture historians such as Percy Macquoid, Herbert Cescinsky and R.W. Symonds suggested that mahogany first began to have a significant impact on English furniture making between the years 1715 and 1730. They arrived at these dates by stylistic analysis of extant mahogany furniture.<sup>59</sup> However, a tradition already existed within the woodworking and

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<sup>55</sup> CO 142/14, Jamaica shipping register. Manchineal (*Hippomane mancinella*) is a West Indian timber well known in the 18th century but little recognised today. Manchineal trees were very widespread in the Caribbean. They grew in lowland Jamaica, predominantly along the sea shore. The wood is fairly coarse textured, pale to mid-brown, with darker veining. It is usually mistaken for faded rosewood or padauk. Manchineal was imported in small quantities to England, beginning in 1719, when 60 planks went to Bristol and 91 to Liverpool. The famous Powderham Bookcases, supplied by John Channon to Powderham Castle, Devon, in 1740, are made of this wood. See Christopher Gilbert and Tessa Murdoch, *John Channon and Brass Inlaid Furniture, 1730-1760*, Yale 1993, p.49.

<sup>56</sup> CO 142/14.

<sup>57</sup> In 1707 or 1708 the stock in trade of Charles Plumley, cabinet-maker of Philadelphia, included '2 Mohogany Plank .... 36 1/2 foot at 16d,... 3 Inch Board ditto... 48 foot at 6d.' Quoted in Hinckley, *op.cit.*, p.131.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* A New York escritoire in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dated on stylistic grounds to c.1690, is apparently made partly of mahogany. If so, this piece pre-dates any known English example. Neil D. Kamil, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Disappearance and Material Life in Colonial New York', *American Furniture*, 1995, pp.191-249, Fig.11.

<sup>59</sup> Percy Macquoid, *The Age of Mahogany*, London 1906, p.48. Herbert Cescinsky, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1912, Vol II, pp.12, 24, 27. R.W. Symonds, *The Present State of Old English Furniture*, London, 1923, p.75, *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, London 1928, p.138-143, *Furniture Making in 17th and 18th Century England*, London 1955, p.115.

timber trades, giving a precise date for the introduction of mahogany into England. Thomas Tredgold, writing in 1840, stated emphatically that 'Mahogany was first brought to London in the year 1724.' This was also the year given by Chaloner and Fleming (c.1850) and Thomas Laslett (eds. 1875 & 1894).<sup>60</sup> The origin of this tradition is unclear. What is clear is that little more than a hundred years after the event, all memory of the real circumstances behind the commercial introduction of mahogany had entirely faded. In their place arose a number of anecdotal hypotheses advanced by successive generations to explain this most significant event. The first of these was popularized by Lunan's *Hortus Jamaicensis* (1814):

The first use to which mahogany was applied in England, was to make a box for holding candles. Dr Gibbons, an eminent physician in the latter end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, had a brother, a West India Captain, who brought over some planks of this wood as ballast. As the doctor was then building him a house in King-street, Covent Garden, his brother thought they might be of service to him. But the carpenters, finding the wood too hard for their tools, they were laid aside for a time, as useless. Soon after, Mrs Gibbons wanting a candle-box, the doctor called on his cabinet-maker (Wollaston, in Long-Acre) to make him one of some of the wood that lay in his garden. Wollaston also complained that it was too hard - The doctor said he must get stronger tools. The candle-box was made and approved; insomuch, that the doctor then insisted on having a bureau made of the same wood, which was accordingly done; and the fine colour, polish, &c. were so pleasing, that he invited all his friends to come and see it. Among them was the Duchess of Buckingham. Her Grace begged some of the wood of Dr Gibbons, and employed Wollaston to make her a bureau also; on which the fame of mahogany and Mr Wollaston was much raised, and things of this sort became general. This account was given by Henry Mill, Esq., a gentleman of undoubted veracity.<sup>61</sup>

This explanation of the introduction of mahogany remained popular for many years. It was repeated in Heal's *Book of English Trades* (1823) and other 19th century texts and even introduced into 20th century accounts.<sup>62</sup> Although a

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<sup>60</sup> Laslett, *op.cit.*, pp.241, 262; Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, p.38.

<sup>61</sup> John Lunan, *Hortus Jamaicensis*, Kingston 1814, p.472. The origin of this story is difficult to locate. Brad Rauschenberg has found two references that predate Lunan, in the *Maryland Journal & Baltimore Advertiser* for 3 March 1786, and in the *Encyclopaedia; or, a Dictionary of Arts Sciences etc*, Thomas Dobson, Philadelphia 1798. See Rauschenberg, 'Timber Available in Charleston, 1660-1820', *MESDA Journal*, XX, No.2, November 1994, p.71 and note 6.

<sup>62</sup> Heal, *The Book of English Trades and Library of the Useful Arts*, London 1823; Thomas Tredgold, *Elementary Principles of Carpentry*, London 1840, p.241, in which he states 'Mahogany was first brought to London in the year 1724.' Chaloner and Fleming reproduced the story in *The Mahogany Tree in the West Indies and Central America*, p.38. For 20th-century examples see Latham, *op.cit.*, p.157, and James Yorke, *English Furniture*, London 1990, p.59.



flimsy rationale for a trade which came to be worth at least half a million pounds *per annum* before the end of the century, the story contains some interesting and probably authentic details. The *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* records a cabinet-maker named Wollaston at Long Acre c.1690-1720.<sup>63</sup> The fact of mahogany being carried as 'ballast' also rings true. Technically speaking, a vessel returning in ballast carries no cargo at all. A covering of stones in the hold was all that was required to burden the vessel sufficiently to make it seaworthy.<sup>64</sup> Timber, being generally less dense than water, is hardly an ideal material for ballast, but was carried on many freight routes to make up freight. As we shall see, the problem of excess shipping capacity on the return voyage from the West Indies was central to the question of the commercial viability of mahogany cargos. The mahogany first being given to carpenters rather than a cabinet-maker, also has, in the light of the analysis contained in the ensuing pages, a ring of truth about it. The influence of the Duchess of Buckingham might be apocryphal, but it does reflect the very rapid adoption of mahogany by the furniture making trades in the 1720s and 30s.

A second story, which alleged that Sir Robert Walpole was somehow responsible for the introduction of mahogany, is still popular. The origin of this myth is uncertain, but Macquoid states that Walpole reduced the import duty of mahogany in 1733, and it is usually assumed that this was to facilitate its extensive employment at Houghton Hall. However, no such legislation was introduced in 1733, and the mahogany employed at Houghton was imported in 1725 and 1726.<sup>65</sup>

A more recent theory proposed that mahogany was imported to make good the deficiency of walnut resulting from the great frost of 1709 and the subsequent French government export ban of 1720. This myth probably originated with J.C. Loudon in the *Arboretum at Fruticetum Britannicum* (1838). Loudon wrote: 'It is a remarkable fact in the history of this tree [the walnut], that, in the winter of 1709, the greater part of the walnut trees of Europe... were killed;... In the year 1720, an act was passed, in France, to prevent the exportation of walnut timber...'<sup>66</sup> Loudon's statement was taken up and amplified in the late 19th century by G.S. Boulger in *Wood*. It was Boulger who first made the connection between the frost of 1709 and the subsequent importation of mahogany, suggesting that the scarcity of walnut after 1720 caused mahogany to be imported from Holland and Spain.<sup>67</sup> Boulger's theory was lent considerable weight by its inclusion in the first edition of the *Dictionary of English Furniture*

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<sup>63</sup> *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, C. Gilbert and G. Beard, eds., Leeds, 1986.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of ballasting and other shipping matters in the 18th century, see Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Newton Abbot, 1972, pp.178-80.

<sup>65</sup> Macquoid, *op.cit.* p.69, Cescinsky, *op.cit.*, p.27. For discussion of the employment of mahogany at Houghton see below, chapter 3.

<sup>66</sup> J.C. Loudon, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum*, London 1838, Part III, p.1426.

<sup>67</sup> G.S. Boulger, *Wood*, 2nd Ed. London 1908, p.295.

(1924) and in R.W. Symonds's *English Furniture from Charles II to George II* (1929).<sup>68</sup> In fact, the customs returns show that despite the French export prohibition, importations of walnut from elsewhere in Europe actually increased after 1720 and furthermore were greatly augmented by the importation of American walnut from 1722 onwards. These facts were pointed out by Edward Joy as long ago as 1953, but the myth was nevertheless repeated in the 1954 edition of the *Dictionary* and is now one of the most widely accepted factoids of furniture history.<sup>69</sup>

### The 1721 Naval Stores Act

In an article written for the *Connoisseur* in 1934, R.W. Symonds first noted the relevance of the Act of 8 George I cap.8 (1721) to the trade in mahogany.<sup>70</sup> This Act, known as the Naval Stores Act, stipulated that from June 1722 all timber imported from the plantations in British America came in free of duty. Symonds did not immediately appreciate the significance of this discovery, and it was left to Edward Joy to point out, in his all too brief article of 1953, the importance of the 1721 Act. Using the evidence of the customs returns he showed how importations of mahogany into England, which in the first two decades of the 18th century were extremely desultory, increased markedly after 1721. 'It is obvious, therefore,' he wrote, 'that the complete freedom from duty given to British colonial timber by the Act of 1721... was very appreciable, and its effect on mahogany imported was immediate and unmistakable.'<sup>71</sup> The circumstances surrounding the introduction of the Naval Stores Act have been discussed in detail elsewhere by the present writer; what follows is a brief recapitulation of the main points.<sup>72</sup>

The Naval Stores Act was an extension of a policy introduced in the reign of

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<sup>68</sup> Edwards and Macquoid, *op.cit.*, Vol.III, eds. 1924 & 1954. R.W. Symonds, *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, p.34.

<sup>69</sup> The fallacy of the Great Frost theory was first exposed by Edward Joy in 'The Introduction of Mahogany', *Country Life*, 12 November 1953, pp.1566-7. His analysis of the official import figures showed that more and not less walnut was available in England after the French ban of 1720, and that this event can have had no substantive effect on quantity of walnut furniture made after 1720. For more recent discussion of this topic see A. Bowett, 'After the Naval Stores Act: some implications for English walnut furniture', *Furniture History*, XXXI (1995) pp.116-123. *Factoid*: a factoid is defined by Dr Oliver Rackham as looking like a fact, being accepted as a fact, and having all the properties of a fact except that it is not true. Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, London 1983, p.23.

<sup>70</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'Early Imports'; 'The New Wood', *The Antique Collector*, July-August 1949, pp.138-144.

<sup>71</sup> E.T. Joy, *op.cit.*, p.1567.

<sup>72</sup> The effect of the Act was discussed by Edward Joy in 'The Introduction of Mahogany', 1953, and again in 'The Advent of Mahogany', published posthumously in *The Antique Collector*, July 1977, Vol. 48, No.7, pp.38-39. The Act itself, and the circumstances leading to its introduction, are discussed in A. Bowett, 'The 1721 Naval Stores Act and the Commercial Introduction of Mahogany', *Furniture History*, XXX (1994), pp.42-56.

Queen Anne to promote the importation of naval stores - iron, turpentine, pitch, tar, hemp, masts, spars and yards - from North America. The policy's objectives were threefold: to promote the production of naval stores in the colonies, and thereby to reduce England's dependence on the Northern Crowns - Norway, Sweden, Russia and Prussia - for these vital strategic supplies; to encourage trade and shipping to and from North America; and to redress the economic imbalance between Great Britain and North America by boosting North American timber exports.<sup>73</sup> The policy was inaugurated in 1704, but the legislation at first affected only the North American colonies, and its results, for various reasons, were limited. Towards the end of the second decade of the 18th century, merchants involved in the North American trade lobbied the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations for an extension of the policy to include North American timber of all types. It was argued that in this way the imbalance of Atlantic trade, which weighed heavily in favour of England, could be redressed. The imbalance was especially marked in the northernmost colonies (Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts), which had little else but timber to export in return for the British goods they imported. However, because of the greater cost of transatlantic freight, North American timber (principally oak and various softwoods) was undersold in England by timber imported from the Northern Crowns. The merchants therefore asked the Lords Commissioners to encourage the North American trade by removing the import duties on American timber. At the same time, they argued, this measure would benefit trade with the more southerly colonies (Virginia, Maryland and Carolina) whose principal export was tobacco.

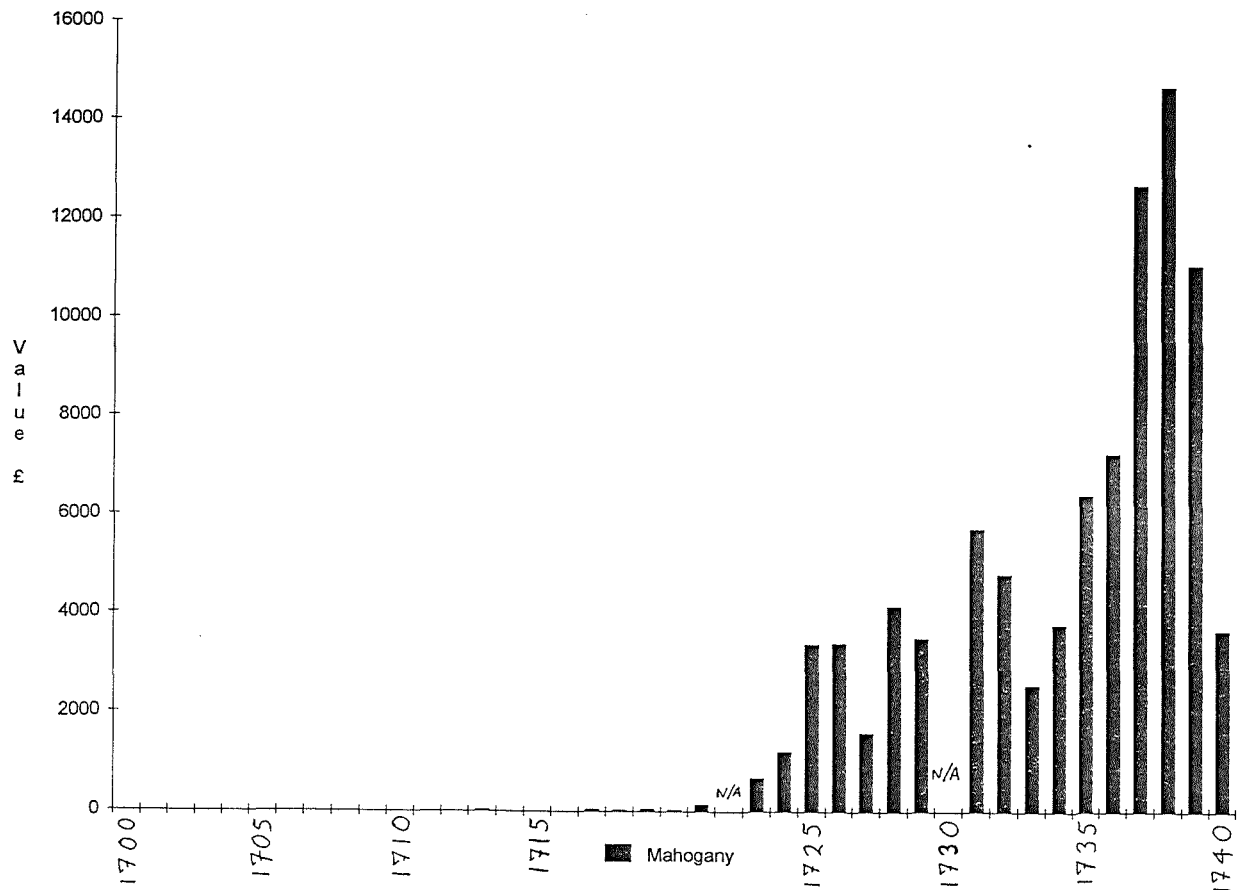
The problem for the tobacco colonies was that tobacco was a crop whose yield was subject to marked fluctuations from one year to the next. In a good year all the ships came home fully loaded and the shippers made a handsome profit. In a bad year many ships could not get freight, and so came home in ballast and at a loss. If the duty on timber were removed, it was suggested, these vessels, if disappointed of a tobacco freight, could always bring home timber instead. The same arguments applied in the case of shipping from the West Indies, where the staple export crop, sugar, was also subject to fluctuations in yield. The whole problem was compounded by the fact that there was a perennial oversupply of shipping capacity in the Atlantic trade, so that shippers were engaged in a perpetual search for freight. The Lords Commissioners were convinced by the merchants' reasoning, and the Naval Stores Bill, removing all duties on timber imported from the British colonies in America, was introduced into Parliament

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<sup>73</sup> 'An Act for Encouraging the Importation of Naval Stores from Her Majesty's Plantations in America' 3&4 Anne cap.10 (1704). This act allowed a bounty of L1 per ton on all masts, yards and spars imported from British colonies in America. Other bounties were allowed on hemp, pitch and tar. The Act was followed by 8 Anne cap.13 (1709), which provided a grant of L10,000 to employ men and materials in the production of American naval stores. The Act of 12 Anne Stat.1 cap.9 (1713) continued the Act of 1704 and extended it to include naval stores from Scotland. For a comprehensive account of the naval stores policy as it related to North America see Herbert L. Osgood, *The American Colonies in the Eighteenth Century*, Gloucester, Mass., 1958, Vol.I, pp.495-524, Vol.II pp.311-46. A short summary may be found in Curtis P. Nettels, 'British Mercantilism and the Economic Development of the Thirteen Colonies', *Journal of Economic History*, XII, Spring 1952, No.2, pp.105-114.

in 1721. It took effect from the end of June 1722, with results which, in the case of mahogany, were little short of spectacular (Figure 1.8).<sup>74</sup>

**Figure 1.8:** Value of mahogany importations into England, 1700-1740.



**Source:** PRO Customs 3.

**Note:** Before 1724 the figures were compiled from estimates of value given by the importer. After 1724 they were based on the rateable value of L8 per ton established by the Additional Book of Rates, *11 George 1 cap.7*.

### The question of commercial viability

If the effect of the Naval Stores Act is clear, it is not immediately obvious why it was so dramatic. Statistics on their own explain nothing, and the real puzzle

<sup>74</sup> 'An Act giving further Encouragement for the Importation of Naval Stores', *8 George 1 cap.12*.

is why mahogany, apparently unviable as a transatlantic commodity before 1722, suddenly became merchantable thereafter. Clearly, the removal of import duty was a vital factor in this, but how precisely did it affect the issue? More puzzling still, why were other West Indian timbers regularly imported before 1722, but not mahogany?

Of the many factors influencing the viability of imported commodities, three can be identified as crucial. These are; the cost of freight, the rate of import duty, and the market price. Either individually or collectively, these factors determined whether a particular commodity was worth importing or not, and in the case of mahogany, each one had a bearing on the question of commercial viability before and after the Naval Stores Act.

Unlike land carriage, seaborne freight was charged by volume and not by weight. Very dense cargos, such as pig iron, were carried cheaply, and light, bulky cargos, such as cork, or raw cotton, or tea, were expensive. However, if the market price were sufficiently high, as was the case with cotton and tea, then the commodity was still worth importing. In broad terms, the relative viability of seaborne cargoes can therefore be expressed in terms of freight costs as a percentage of market value. The higher this percentage or 'freight factor', the less profitable the cargo was to carry.<sup>75</sup> Viewed in this way timber, high in bulk but generally low in value, was not an attractive cargo, and mahogany was not excepted from this fundamental law of 18th-century seaborne commerce.<sup>76</sup> A detailed analysis of shipping costs is given in chapter six; for the present it is sufficient to note that in the 18th century mahogany was routinely carried from the West Indies to England for 1 1/2d per superficial foot, or L3 per ton of 480 feet.<sup>77</sup> On top of this must be added insurance, lighterage and port charges which meant that each ton of mahogany cost a minimum of L4 to import. With an average market value of L8 per ton (sometimes less) in the 1720s, the freight factor for mahogany was at least 50 per cent. This compares unfavourably with other West Indian commodities such as sugar (9-26 per cent, depending on market price), and cotton (about 15.5 per cent).<sup>78</sup> It also compares very poorly with other West Indian timbers which were regularly imported prior to 1721. Logwood, brazeletto, fustic, nicaragua and ebony were carried at L1.10. 0 to L1.15. 0 per ton.<sup>79</sup> At 1700 market prices these give freight factors of between

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<sup>75</sup> For further information on this see Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.178-199; D.C. North, 'Ocean Freight Rates and Economic Development 1750-1913,' *Journal of Economic History*, Vol.18, No.4, 1958, pp.538-555.

<sup>76</sup> 'In some cases, such as the timber trade, the freight factor has actually been in excess of 50 per cent of the delivered price.' North, *op.cit.*, p.538.

<sup>77</sup> The superficial foot was the standard measure of sawn timber boards and planks, measuring 12"x12"x1". 480 superficial feet made a nominal ton of 40 cubic feet.

<sup>78</sup> The market price of mahogany is discussed in detail in chapter two. The average value of important West Indian commodities in the 18th century is given in Davis, *op.cit.*, p.177.

<sup>79</sup> The rates of freight for West Indian commodities are given in Long, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, p.591. All these woods are listed in the 1660 Book of Rates except Nicaragua, which appears in the additional Book of Rates of 1724. Nicaragua wood, a dyewood, was imported from the Mosquito Shore, modern Nicaragua. Species

3.7 and 25 per cent.<sup>80</sup>

The reason these timbers were carried so cheaply was that they were small and dense, and prepared for shipping by cutting into billets for easy stowage amongst the other cargo. In the jargon of the time, they were used to take up the 'broken stowage', and in this way the shipper overcame the difficulties usually associated with timber cargos. With mahogany, or for that matter any timber destined for structural uses, it was obviously not possible to save space in this manner, and so the high freight cost remained. However, it should be borne in mind that while the cost of freight was (except in wartime) more or less constant, the freight factor varied according to market value. If the value of mahogany were to rise, then the freight factor would fall in proportion, and consequently be less of a disincentive to trade. Ultimately, therefore, it was not freight cost but market value which was the decisive factor.

Market value also impinged on the second factor in commercial viability, namely the rate of import duty. In theory the English duty system was a simple one, but by the early 18th century its operation had grown exceedingly abstruse. Its foundation was the Book of Rates (Figure 1.6), introduced in 1660 to consolidate and rationalise all the customs laws up to that date.<sup>81</sup> In the Book of Rates many thousands of commonly imported commodities were each given a *rate*, or average value, on which duty, a percentage of that value, could easily be calculated. Certain commodities whose value varied greatly were not rated but taxed 'At Value'; i.e., according to how much the importer declared they were worth.

The 1660 Book of Rates established a general import duty of 5 per cent of the rated value; this came to be known as the *old Subsidy*. From 1690 duties on many commodities began to rise sharply, in order to pay for the expenditure of King William's war against the French. In 1699 the *new general Subsidy* of 5 per cent was introduced, bringing the total to 10.<sup>82</sup> In 1703 and 1704 two more Subsidies were introduced which together amounted to a further 5 per cent.<sup>83</sup> A number of dyewoods were excepted from these duties, so that by the time of the Naval Stores Act the total of import duties on colonial timber ranged between 5 and 15 per cent.<sup>84</sup>

Thus far the calculation of duty was relatively straightforward. Customs officers simply charged the appropriate percentage of the rateable value established in

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unknown, but probably a variety of *Caesalpinia* or *Haematoxylon*.

<sup>80</sup> These prices were; logwood, L16-18 per ton; brazeletto, L11; fustic L6-7; nicaragua, L40; ebony, L18. Source: Cust 3.

<sup>81</sup> 12 *Charles II cap.4*

<sup>82</sup> 9&10 *William III cap.23*.

<sup>83</sup> 2&3 *Anne cap.9*, 3&4 *Anne cap.5*.

<sup>84</sup> European timber paid an additional 10%, imposed in 1690 by 2 *W&M Sess.2 cap.4*. For a detailed breakdown of the manner in which import duties were levied see Charles Carkesse, *The Act of Tonnage and Poundage and the Book of Rates; with several statutes at large relating to the customs etc.*, London, 1726.

1660. This meant that timber rated at L10 per ton and subject to a duty of 15 per cent paid an import duty of L1.10.0. However, rateable values were fixed, but market prices were not. For instance, brazeletto, which in 1660 was rated at L21.13. 4. per ton, was in 1700 selling for L11. Since duty was still charged on the 1660 rate, the effective percentage of duty increased in proportion as the market price fell, and by 1700 was nearer 30 per cent than 15 (As a dyewood, brazeletto was exempt from the Subsidy of 1699). On the other hand, if a commodity increased in value over the same period, the effective rate of duty fell. In 1660 fustic was rated at L5 per ton, but in 1700 had increased to about L6.10s. The rate of duty therefore fell proportionately from 15 to just under 11 per cent. The half-dozen most frequently imported West Indian timbers - *lignum vitae*, logwood, brazeletto, fustic, nicaragua, and ebony - were subject to effective rates of duty between 10 and 40 per cent.<sup>85</sup> Mahogany was an unrated timber, and until 1722 mahogany paid a duty of 15 per cent on its declared value.<sup>86</sup> It is important to note that the declared value was *not the market value in England* but that paid by the importer at source. According to the Liverpool Port Books, the cost price of mahogany at Jamaica in the 1720s was just under a penny per foot, which meant that the duty on a ton of mahogany was less than six shillings.<sup>87</sup> Why was it that this small amount of duty effectively prevented a trade in mahogany before 1722, when other West Indian timbers paid much higher rates and yet were regularly imported?<sup>88</sup>

The explanation lies partly in the method by which import duties were paid. Import duties on all imported goods had to be paid before they were landed.<sup>89</sup> For the shippers of sugar, tobacco, cotton or dyewoods - in other words goods with established markets - this caused little difficulty, since buyers were usually waiting to receive them. In such cases the buyer paid the import duty, not the shipper. Speculative cargoes were more problematic, however. These were cargoes usually taken on the shipper's own behalf, and the shipper therefore paid the

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<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Schumpeter's analysis of the difference between market prices and that set by the Book of Rates revealed that in 1700 only one out of 23 specified imported commodities had the same valuation. E. Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics*, Oxford, 1960, p.2. The introduction to this book, by T.S. Ashton, contains a useful account of the methods of collection, collation and measurement of trade statistics by the Commissioners of H.M. Customs.

<sup>86</sup> The amount of duty charged on mahogany prior to 1722 is given in Cholmondeley MSS, *loc. cit.* In 1724 mahogany was rated at L8 per ton in the *Additional Book of Rates*. Any mahogany imported from foreign colonies or from Europe paid a duty of 20 per cent on this rate, amounting to L.2.0.0 per ton. Carkesse, *op.cit.*, p.900.

<sup>87</sup> Port Books E190 1403/12. Shipments of mahogany dated 1 February, 20 August, 29 October 1723.

<sup>88</sup> An even more telling comparison can be made with European walnut. All European timbers paid an additional 10% duty after 2 *William & Mary Sess.2 cap.4*. French walnut paid an additional 50% per cent on top of this, after 4&5 *William and Mary cap.5* and 7&8 *William III cap.20*. Despite these duties, amounting to nearly 85%, France was the most important source of imported walnut (in peacetime) until 1720.

<sup>89</sup> John Cross, 'The Changing Roles of the Timber Merchant in Early Eighteenth Century London', *Furniture History*, XXX (1994), p.61 and footnote 19.

duty. If the cargo was both speculative and unfamiliar, the shipper might have to pay duty before he had a sale for the goods. This posed a serious problem of cash flow. If he was lucky he could obtain credit from a Customs Officer, but this was actively discouraged by the Commissioners of Customs.<sup>90</sup> If not, he had to make a quick sale to realise his investment. The last thing a shipper wanted was to pay import duty on a cargo he could not sell.

As the rate of duty on colonial timber rose from 1692 onwards, so the system of immediate payment became more and more of an impediment to speculative timber cargos. This difficulty had already resulted in the decline in importations of some North American timbers, even though they had established markets. In 1716 Richard Beresford, a member of the South Carolina Assembly, sent a memorial to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations complaining that the planters used to be able to export cedar and cypress from Carolina to England, 'but the Importers being obliged to pay duty for it as Sweetwood amounts to a Prohibition the further Importation thereof has been quite discouraged'.<sup>91</sup> The discouragement was probably very much greater in the case of unfamiliar timber such as mahogany. This is why, despite the relatively small sums involved, the Naval Stores Act had such a great effect on the viability of mahogany cargos.

All these various considerations - the 'freight factor', the rate of duty, the problem of cash flow - were ultimately dependent on one thing, which was market value. The higher the value of a given imported commodity, the less significant either freights costs or duty became. High value implies high demand and hence a ready market, a quick sale and improved cash flow. The fact that before 1722 both freight and import duty were real impediments to mahogany importations suggests that the market value of mahogany was not considered sufficient to bear the charges of importation. Additionally, the importers' reluctance to ship mahogany in the face of the system of immediate payment strongly suggests they were not confident of a sale for it. The collective implication of this is that before 1722 there was no perceived demand for mahogany in England. There can be no clearer testimony to this than the fact that despite the often dire commercial circumstances of many West India traders in the early 18th century, many preferred their vessels to come home half-

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<sup>90</sup> The *Customs Officers Instruction Book* contains the following minute, dated July 1731: 'You are to give no credit on any entry without a sufficient deposit, nor without the consent of one of the Land-surveyors, signed under his hand in your book; which credit is to be registered truly the same day, in the proper book kept in the Land-surveyors Office for that purpose; But you are to take especial notice, that even under these conditions that the Board do not approve of any credit being given, and therefore whenever you shall take upon you to do so, it is at your own risque; and you will be surcharged there with, and immediate payment required from you, even before the month expired for jerquing your books, if the Commissioners observe any improper credit given to a considerable or suspicious amount.' Quoted in John Cross, *op.cit.*, footnote 20.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Rauschenberg, *op.cit.*, pp.53-54. Sweetwood was rated in 1660 at L25 per ton. In 1698 sweetwood was imported from Carolina and other colonies at L18-20 per ton, thereby raising the effective rate of duty by at least a quarter. The relatively high rate of duty on cedarwood (*Juniperus spp.*) might explain the decline in its popularity in England after its heyday of c.1660-1685.



freighted or in ballast rather than carry timber.<sup>92</sup>

In the light of the remarkable success of mahogany in future years, this may seem extraordinary, but the shippers were not clairvoyants. In the first two decades of the 18th century there was no real need for mahogany. This was in marked contrast to the commercial importance of other West Indian timbers. Logwood, fustic, nicaragua and brazeletto were dyewoods, in constant demand since the late 16th century for the cloth industry.<sup>93</sup> Ebony was employed for a variety of purposes, including musical instrument making. *Lignum vitae* was widely used as a drug, and had a number of industrial uses, such as making pulley blocks for the Royal Navy. Mahogany, on the other hand, had no obvious role that was not already performed by other woods. In the West Indies it was used as building timber, but in England the carpentry and joinery trades had all the fir timber, deal and wainscot they wanted from Scandinavia and Holland. Furniture makers employed Norwegian deals and Dutch wainscots as their carcass woods, and for veneering they had olive wood, walnut, and various indigenous woods for marquetry. Those West Indian woods commonly employed in furniture making were by-products of the established trades in dyewoods and drugs. They tended to be chosen for dramatic impact - *lignum vitae*, cocu (a.k.a. ebony), and granadillo all have a striking heartwood/sapwood contrast - and used sparingly. Small amounts of prince's wood and rosewood were also available, imported via Portugal at a high price.<sup>94</sup> In the absence of unequivocal demand it was not clear to shippers where the market for mahogany might lie, and to import it was therefore something of a gamble.<sup>95</sup> The issue of commercial viability devolved therefore onto a simple question - Was there a market for mahogany in England? The passing of the Naval Stores Act made it worth the risk of finding out.

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<sup>92</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, pp. 192, 282.

<sup>93</sup> The importation of logwood had been prohibited by Elizabeth I in 1581 to protect the home dyeing industry. Consequently, the logwood carried by British shippers went abroad until 1661, when the prohibition was lifted by Charles II. 23 *Elizabeth cap.9*, 13&14 *Charles II cap.11*.

<sup>94</sup> Importations of olivewood from Spain, Portugal, Italy and Turkey exceeded those of walnut at various times in the late 17th century. Around 1700 olivewood averaged L10 per ton at source (i.e., before freight costs and import duties), which was relatively cheap, and goes some way to explaining its popularity. Prince's wood, a.k.a. violet wood (*Dalbergia spp.*) was imported in limited quantities from Brazil and the Guianas via France and Portugal, and cost L20-30 per ton at source. By the time charges and duties had been paid this price was doubled. Another type of prince's wood (*Cordia gerascanthus*) came from Jamaica and other islands in the late 17th century. Prince's wood was typically employed as 'oyster' veneer on cabinets of the period. Very few importations of this timber are recorded after 1710.

<sup>95</sup> The inherent conservatism of the markets is a constant theme of 18th-century trade. In the early 1760s the Lancaster firm of Gillows were offered fustic wood by a London merchant. They reluctantly decided to give it a trial, 'but how it might take w<sup>th</sup> us is Uncertain...' Gillow to Thomas Powell, Letter Book 344/165.

## CHAPTER TWO - THE IMPACT OF MAHOGANY, 1722-1740.

### The advent of mahogany

Within a year of the Naval Stores Act taking effect, the value of mahogany importations into England had risen by nearly 450 per cent, from L115.13.0 in 1721 to L695.2.1 in 1723. By 1730 a total of more than 2,000 tons of mahogany had been imported.<sup>1</sup> The sudden and dramatic advent of mahogany on the London timber market is reflected in the evidence of contemporary trade inventories. The first published record of mahogany in the stock in trade of any London woodworker occurs in the inventory of Lazarus Stiles, a joiner who died in 1724. This included '338 ft of 4 inch Mahoganies 1240 ft of 1" ditto...'.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter such references become increasingly common, and by 1732, when the inventory of the joiner Samual Jakeman was drawn up, large amounts of mahogany were on hand. Jakeman's stock contained over 3000 feet (almost 7 tons) of one-inch mahogany board.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary London newspaper advertisements add to the impression of a rapid adoption of mahogany by the woodworking trades. The first of these specifically mentioning mahogany furniture was published in the *Daily Courant* in November 1723.

#### *To be Sold by the Maker*

At the Looking Glass and Cabinet Ware-house, at the Golden Cup against the Royal Exchange in Cornhill, and at his House in Lincoln-street, alias Little Wild-street, near Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, all Sorts of Looking-Glasses and Cabinet Work, both Walnut-Tree and Japann'd; and all Sorts of Tables, as Writing-Tables, Wist-Tables, Ombre-Tables, Gilt-Tables, and Mahogeny Dining Tables, Beaufets, curious Wallnut-Tree Cabinet Beds, Desks and Bookcases, with Clocks, both Wallnut-Tree and Gilt, and fine Chairs.

*The Daily Courant*, 15 November 1723.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The true total was rather more, since figures for 1722 and 1730 are missing. The customs valuations are based on a rateable value of L8 per ton, and did not take into account fluctuations in market price. The recorded value of importations therefore provides a direct correlation with the tonnage of timber imported.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in John Cross, *op.cit.*, p.60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> This was first quoted by R.W. Symonds in 'Early Imports', p.376. Other advertisements published by Symonds:

*To be Sold together, or in Parcels* About fifty or sixty Mohogany Timber Trees, about 12 Inches square, and 12 Foot long, being very sound, and fine colour'd, fit for Cabinet-Makers or Turners, for Tables or Stands, at Mr Naylor's Toy-Shop in King Street, Covent Garden. *The Daily Journal*, 10 August 1724.

In 1724 the purchase of mahogany furniture was first recorded in the accounts of the Royal Household, when the London cabinet-makers John Gumley and James Moore supplied the following articles:

*4 walnuttree & 2 mohogany Desart Tables upon brass  
Wheels L31:10  
2 Mohogony Cloths Chest, L16  
a Mohogony Supping Table, L4*

Three years later in 1727, the Royal Household took delivery of several 'fine large Mohogany dining tables', supplied by Elizabeth Gumley and William Turing at L3 and L4 each, and three further tables in 1728 and 1729.<sup>5</sup> Other London makers are recorded as supplying mahogany furniture to various noble houses both in the capital and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> R.W. Symonds has published London newspaper entries advertising the sale of second-hand mahogany furniture even in the 1720s. For instance, in 1726 the Earl of Peterborough sold off three mahogany tables, and in 1727 the household furniture of Dr Wellwood, deceased, included 'Walnut-tree and Mahogany Book-cases, Burows, Tables, &c'.<sup>7</sup>

### **The historiography of early mahogany furniture**

Within a few years of its advent mahogany had acquired considerable *eclat*. It was described in a newspaper advertisement of May 1724 as 'the Famous Mahogany'<sup>8</sup>, and one contemporary poet was sufficiently moved by its advent to break into verse:

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*To be SOLD by AUCTION* On Thursday the 10th Instant, the Shop Goods of John Cracherode, at the Tea Table, in Henrietta-street, Covent-Garden, being all New, and consisting of Peer-Glasses, Chimney-Glasses, and Sconces, India Skreens, and Chests, Tea-Tables, Hand-Boards, Bottle-Stands, Burows, Tables of several Sorts both Walnut-tree and Mahogany, Lanthorns for Halls and Stair-cases, with all other sorts of Cabinet-Maker's Goods. *The Daily Courant*, 3 December 1724.

*To be sold Cheap* All Sorts of Chairs and Couches, Mehogenny Wood, Virginia Walnut, English Walnut, and Walnut-Tree Wood for Gun Stocks, by the Widow Jamidge, at the Sign of the Crown the East-End of St Paul's Church-Yard; she designing to leave off Trade. *The Daily Courant*, 13 March, 1725.

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'Early Imports', Part II, p.377. Joy, 'The Advent of Mahogany', p.38.

<sup>6</sup> The makers are John Boson, John Crackerode, William Gomm, Peter Hasert, James Moore, Thomas Nash, Joseph Patterson, Jeremiah Surman, Henry Williams. These can all be found in the DEFM. Details of Boson's work in mahogany before 1730 are discussed below, pp.59-63.

<sup>7</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'Early Imports', Part II, p.377; 'The New Wood', p.141.

<sup>8</sup> *St James Evening Post*, 24 May 1724. For further details of this shipment see pp.43-44 below and note 70. As early as 1734 house painters were advertising ready-mixed mahogany colour for wainscotting. William Salmon, *Palladio Londinensis: or, the London Art of Building*, London 1734, pp.57-58.

*Say, thou that dost thy father's table praise  
Was there Mahogena in former days?*

Bramcher, *Man of Taste*, 1733.

Nearly two hundred years later, early twentieth century furniture historians shared Bramcher's enthusiasm, and their appraisals of early mahogany furniture were strongly tinged with the glamour and mystique of the new wood. The study of English mahogany furniture has been dominated in this century by three men, whose collective works on the subject were published between 1906 and 1955. The bulk of this work was produced before the Second World War, beginning with Percy Macquoid's *Age of Mahogany* (1906) and Herbert Cescinsky's *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century* (1912). In 1923 R.W. Symonds added to and revised the work of these two authors with the publication of *The Present State of Old English Furniture*. He followed this with *English Furniture from Charles II to George II* (1929), which remains the most authoritative, lucid and best written book on the subject. Although Symonds extended considerably the analysis of English mahogany furniture, and in particular exposed and refuted many of Cescinsky's more ill-considered notions, he inherited and indeed reinforced most of the preconceptions on which their work was based.<sup>9</sup> These preconceptions remain substantially unchallenged, and underlie the mainstream of English furniture scholarship even in the present day.

Despite their very different backgrounds and characters, Macquoid, Cescinsky and Symonds shared many attitudes and values. All three writers began their respective works on mahogany furniture with a set of assumptions which determined both their approach to the furniture and the inferences they drew from it. The most important of these was that, at least in the early phase of its introduction, mahogany was a luxury commodity. This was by no means a new idea, but a generally held dogma, dating back at least as far as Lunan's 'candle box' story of 1814. The assumption of luxury was articulated in James Macfadyen's *Flora of Jamaica* (1837), when he wrote that mahogany 'has been employed for every costly article of furniture, and occupies a place in the drawing rooms and dining halls of royalty itself.'<sup>10</sup> The furniture studied by Macquoid, Cescinsky and Symonds seemed to justify this belief, since it was found principally in the royal palaces, in the houses of nobility and of wealthy collectors. Supporting documentary evidence came from very similar sources - the archives of the Crown and of great houses. This bias towards the high status end of the market was inherent in the nature of art historical scholarship. The selection of evidence and consequently the evidence itself arises from the initial preconceptions of the historian. In this way the established historiography of early mahogany furniture has been a self-fulfilling thesis. The connoisseur-

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<sup>9</sup> Symonds discussed Cescinsky's theories on a number of occasions, most completely and damningly in 'Herbert Cescinsky and English Eighteenth Century Furniture', *Connoisseur*, September 1958, pp.18-23. The fact that this article was published after Cescinsky's death suggests that Symonds felt he had still not satisfactorily refuted Cescinsky's undoubtedly influential ideas.

<sup>10</sup> James Macfadyen, *The Flora of Jamaica*, Vol.I, London 1837, p.176.

historians of the early 20th century found that which they wished to find, and the result was an elitist and highly selective history of English mahogany furniture.

The general tone was set by Macquoid in 1906: 'Although from 1715 to 1720 comparatively little mahogany furniture was made, it was all of high quality, proving that the wood must have been considered valuable, and used only by the best makers.'<sup>11</sup> In 1912 Cescinsky took up Macquoid's lead in characteristically emphatic style, working up early mahogany furniture into what he called a 'prohibitive luxury'.<sup>12</sup> The two men certainly had their differences, most famously in the Shrager vs Dighton trial of 1922, but where mahogany was concerned these differences were ones of detail rather than substance.<sup>13</sup> Macquoid proposed an initial phase of expensive, high quality mahogany furniture lasting until 1733, in which year he believed the import duty on mahogany was removed by Sir Robert Walpole: 'Up to this time mahogany had of necessity been used with caution, but the great amount imported by Walpole for the decoration of Houghton, and the removal of the tax on imported timber, no doubt suggested a more lavish use of the wood.'<sup>14</sup> Cescinsky differed in believing that import duty was not removed until 1747, and therefore considerably extended the period during which mahogany furniture should be viewed as a luxury article. Until this date, he wrote:

...the tax, either on the log or plank, was at the rate of L8 per ton of 2,240 lbs., a formidable sum when it is remembered that during this period the wages of artisans had from three to two and a half times the purchasing value of the present day. Reckoning from present-day measures and values, with an average weight of mahogany of about 4 1/2 lbs to the square foot, this duty is equivalent to about 10d per square foot in the inch, or nearly the actual price now paid for wood of approximate quality.<sup>15</sup>

If this was the amount of duty, Cescinsky argued, what must the wood itself have cost?

Cescinsky's reasoning and his mathematics were equally poor. He was unaware of the Naval Stores Act, and he mistook the rateable value of mahogany given in the Additional Book of Rates for the amount of duty payable. He believed

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<sup>11</sup> Percy Macquoid, *op.cit.*, p.48. Macquoid's influence persists into the 1990s. See, for instance, Lanto Syngé, *Mallet's Great English Furniture* London 1991, p.104.

<sup>12</sup> Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, p.77.

<sup>13</sup> This was the celebrated trial in which Shrager, a wealthy collector, sued Basil Dighton Ltd for selling him fake antique furniture. Cescinsky acted as witness for the prosecution, and Macquoid for the defence. Shrager lost his case.

<sup>14</sup> Macquoid, *op.cit.*, p.69.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Cescinsky, *op.cit.*, pp.24-27. Cescinsky's many followers include most of the antiques trade, since the value of their stock is undoubtedly enhanced by the notions of expense and luxury attached to mahogany furniture. See, for instance, Lanto Syngé, *op.cit.*, pp.103-4.

therefore that the Act of 1748, which actually increased import duties on dutiable goods by 5 per cent to meet wartime expenditure, constituted a reduction in duty.<sup>16</sup> This misunderstanding was compounded by mathematical error, since L8 per ton, at 480 superficial feet to the ton, is equivalent to 4d per foot, not 10d.

Cescinsky's fixed belief in the high cost of mahogany timber caused him considerable difficulties when confronted with many examples of early mahogany furniture. For instance, he proposed that early Georgian japanned chairs with mahogany frames must have been decorated at a later date, reasoning that 'Mahogany was far too valuable a wood before 1747 for this to have been done in the original instance.' He also maintained that in furniture of the Palladian style (which he designated 'architects' furniture'), wherever the carcass was found to be of solid mahogany 'in nearly every instance, new backs and sides have been added at a later date, when the duty on mahogany had been reduced or removed altogether'.<sup>17</sup> His unique conception of the development of so-called Irish mahogany stems from the same inverted reasoning.<sup>18</sup> Here he proposed that because of the lavish use of wood, 'Irish' furniture in the style of the 1730s and 40s must have been made after 1747, and furthermore that it must have been made in England and shipped to Ireland to take advantage of a drawback of duty on exported mahogany.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Present State of Old English Furniture*, R.W. Symonds initially followed Macquoid in assuming a heavy import duty until 1733.<sup>20</sup> He also argued for the luxury status of mahogany furniture even after the duty was removed: '... for some years after this date mahogany furniture, ornate in design and of high quality and workmanship, must have been expensive and only within the means of the fashionable and wealthy classes for whom it was principally made.' This point was reiterated more than once.<sup>21</sup> The idea was developed further in

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<sup>16</sup> 21 George II cap.2. Cescinsky, *op.cit.*, pp.26-27. Cescinsky repeated his arguments in *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture*, London 1931, p.112. He suggested that the removal of duty in 1747 implied a clear division between mahogany furniture before and after c.1750, due to the different kinds of mahogany timber imported. It was not until after c.1750, he maintained, that figured mahogany was used, 'due to greater knowledge and finer grading of the timber'. He did not explain how this related to the claimed reduction in import duty.

<sup>17</sup> Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, pp.74, 129.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.130-144.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.135-7. The historiography of 'Irish' mahogany is extremely suspect, and Cescinsky hit the nail on the head when he said that were it not for the 'Irish' tag, 'examples of this class might very well have taken their place in a well ordered progression of types of this period and have been included in the series of models which developed from the early George the Second lion-mahogany.' *Ibid.*, p.130.

<sup>20</sup> R.W. Symonds, *The Present State of Old English Furniture*, London 1921, p.75; *English Furniture*, p.139.

<sup>21</sup> '... the early mahogany furniture was very expensive and made almost exclusively for the wealthy classes.' *Ibid.*, 1921, pp.75, 76. Symonds went on to write (p.76), 'The carving and cabinet-work were of the highest quality, in fact it may be said that at no period in the making of English furniture were they surpassed.'

*English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, which contains a fully worked analysis of the impact of mahogany on furniture design, based on his observations of the character and style of early mahogany furniture.<sup>22</sup>

The assumption that mahogany was both expensive and of restricted availability underlay, therefore, the interpretations of early mahogany furniture offered by all three authors. A number of awkward anomalies followed from this. The first was that all three writers noted that the appearance of much early mahogany furniture belied its supposedly luxury status. Macquoid - 'It is evident that the early articles of furniture made in mahogany were rather plain in character...'; Cescinsky - 'The introduction of mahogany usually marks a reversion to earlier and more simple models...'; and Symonds - '... the majority of this early mahogany furniture is very plain in character, having neither figured wood nor carved decoration to relieve it.'<sup>23</sup> In *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, Symonds qualified this view somewhat, by dividing early mahogany furniture into two kinds: 'The first variety is of the highest quality, and is typical of what would have come from the mansions of the nobility and the rich...The second variety of mahogany furniture belonging to this period was of a lower grade of quality... This second-grade mahogany furniture was usually of a plain and austere character...'<sup>24</sup>

The workaday appearance of much early mahogany furniture, so clearly at odds with assumed luxury status, was a paradox which required explanation. Symonds summed up the problem in a sentence: 'In fact, the mahogany piece is sometimes so austere that one might wonder how the cabinet-makers found a sale for it.'<sup>25</sup>

All three authors resolved this paradox in the same way, by attributing the plainness of the furniture to the nature and quality of the wood. Early mahogany timber was characterised as straight grained, dark, lacking figure and with limited decorative potential. According to Cescinsky, 'The wood of this period is a straight grained hard Cuba, with little or no figure...'. Symonds concurred: 'The type of mahogany that was first employed for English furniture was of a dark red colour with but little figure. It was essentially a material for solid construction and not a veneered one...'<sup>26</sup> There was little point in practising

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<sup>22</sup> R.W. Symonds, *English Furniture*, pp.138-173. This analysis was reiterated, in shortened form, in 'Early Imports, Part 2'.

<sup>23</sup> Macquoid, *op.cit.*, p.54. Cescinsky, *op.cit.*, p.31. R.W. Symonds, 'Early Mahogany Furniture', *Connoisseur*, Vol.79, February 1935, p.68. Symonds reiterated this view in further pre-and post-war articles, for instance; 'This early mahogany cabinet-ware is severe and plain in appearance...'. The Influence of Mahogany on Furniture Design', *The Antique Collector*, Vol.20, No.8, September-October, 1949, p.173.

<sup>24</sup> R.W. Symonds, *English Furniture*, pp.141-3. The distinction was also emphasised in 'Early Mahogany Furniture', p.69.

<sup>25</sup> Symonds, 'The Influence of Mahogany', p.173.

<sup>26</sup> Cescinsky, *op.cit.*, p.24. See also *The Gentle Art*, p.112; 'The first mahogany to be imported was a dark heavy wood, without figure,...'; Symonds, 'Early Mahogany Furniture', pp.68-73. See also *The Present State*, 1921, p.74, *Furniture Making in 17th and 18th Century England*, pp.117-9, and *English Furniture*, p.139 '... being

what Cescinsky called the 'doubtful economy' of cutting this wood into veneers, and therefore the majority of early mahogany pieces were of unadventurous design and made in solid timber.<sup>27</sup>

The nature and quality of the first mahogany importations is discussed in detail in chapter three, but since these appraisals of early mahogany furniture rest so heavily on this point, it is worth raising a few objections here. First, the dark and sombre appearance of early mahogany furniture is due less to the natural colour of the wood than to two centuries of oxidisation, wear, polish and dirt. Where early mahogany has been stripped or 'restored' its colour is often, to modern eyes, uncomfortably bright. Something of the original colour of 1720s mahogany can be seen in the floor of Marble Hill House, or on the undersides of Kent's furniture at Houghton Hall. Secondly, despite the general rules of thumb which attribute particular varieties of mahogany with reliable characteristics of colour, figure, hardness, etc., mahogany of whatever period or provenance is extremely varied in all these qualities. Consistency in character or appearance is likely to be the result of the selection and not nature. The bland character of much early mahogany furniture tells us less about the quality of the timber than about its perceived status and value. Thirdly, figure in wood depends not only on its natural endowments but on how it is converted and employed. Such evidence as is available suggests that most early mahogany was sawn in Jamaica and arrived in England in boards or planks up to four inches in thickness.<sup>28</sup> It was converted without regard for figure, but rather to minimise shipping costs and achieve maximum width and minimum waste. This gave the furniture maker little scope for imaginative use of the timber, since 'run of the mill' or tangential sawing will not show the typical mahogany stripe or mottle except towards the edges of the board. Irregularities were discarded as too wasteful of shipping space and much of the best figured timber was not even considered. Edward Long relates that the heavily buttressed mahogany butts, which contained some of the finest, most highly figured timber, were habitually left in the ground due to the difficulty of extraction. Only if the market price were high enough was the

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a plain wood with little marking, the furniture was accordingly made in the solid', and p.155: 'Mahogany furniture up to about 1750 was made in the solid wood and not veneered.... The cabinet-makers did not use the figure and grain of the wood as a form of decoration; this early school of mahogany furniture, with its dark, sometimes black tone, being in consequence of a severe and plain character, save when in the best quality pieces it was relieved with carving.'

<sup>27</sup> 'The trade returned, therefore, to the former traditions of solid construction, and veneering presses, cauls, hammers, and sand-bags were laid aside for a while. This use of solid wood lasted only until the finely figured mahoganies were discovered, and then veneering or facing was revived again.' Cescinsky, *The Gentle Art*, p.112.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance the discussion on the supply of mahogany boards and planks to the Admiralty in 1724, pp.52-55, below. See also chapter six, below, on the requirements for cutting and shipping mahogany. The customs returns are very imprecise on this point, but the general impression is that where scantling is specified, planks rather than logs are in the majority.



expense of extracting them justified.<sup>29</sup> Although one occasionally finds early furniture employing curl or crotch figures, these are exceptional. Logs containing figured timber from the fork of the tree had to be specially cut. Such logs took up more shipping space and hence were uneconomic unless, once again, the price was sufficiently high.<sup>30</sup>

A fourth and much emphasised element in the idea of plain, unfigured early mahogany was the assertion that the majority of early importations originated in the Spanish West Indies, and that this explained its special character. Cescinsky identified it as Cuban, Macquoid as either Cuban or San Domingo, and Symonds as Spanish or San Domingo. All these varieties will be discussed in later chapters, but it is important to state here that there is no truth in any of these surmises. There is no evidence for any importations of mahogany, direct or indirect, from either Cuba or St Domingo until the 1760s.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, the notion that early mahogany was suitable only for plain, solid construction is entirely inconsistent with the main premise of the argument. One might legitimately ask, if the timber was so plain, wherein lay its luxurious and exclusive appeal?

One way in which former historians overcame this awkward paradox was to propose that it was the physical properties of mahogany, rather than its decorative appeal, which were most important. Mahogany was apparently harder, denser, stronger and closer textured than previous cabinet woods. 'It is very clear,' wrote Macquoid, 'that the employment of mahogany suggested possibilities not to be found in oak or walnut...'.<sup>32</sup> Cescinsky concurred: 'The introduction of the new wood for furniture... had the effect of greatly modifying the trades of the cabinet-maker and the chair maker, both as regards design and construction.'<sup>33</sup> Among the possibilities offered by the use of mahogany were greater use of moulded detail and carved decoration. Indeed, it was suggested that carving was a necessity, in order to disguise the aesthetic shortcomings of early mahogany timber.<sup>34</sup> Other consequences included the development of

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Long, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, pp.843-844. See the discussion in chapter four concerning the use of mahogany curls after c.1760.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* For more on the cost of shipping mahogany see chapter six, below.

<sup>31</sup> Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, Vol.II, pp.24, 27; *The Gentle Art*, pp.111, 117. Macquoid, *op.cit.*, pp.49, 213; Symonds, *The Present State*, p.76; *English Furniture*, pp. 138, 155-8. Symonds admits that: 'This lack of figure, however, is not typical of Spanish mahogany, since it is a wood which often exhibits the finest figuring.' *Ibid.* See below, chapters three and four for discussions of the issue of foreign sources of mahogany.

<sup>32</sup> Macquoid, *op.cit.*, p.58.

<sup>33</sup> Cescinsky, *The Gentle Art*, p.112.

<sup>34</sup> Macquoid, *op.cit.*, pp.48, 60, 65; Cescinsky, *The Gentle Art*, pp.113 *et passim*; R.W. Symonds, 'The Influence of Mahogany', p.175; '... both chair-makers and cabinet-makers found that carving was an excellent way of relieving the plainness of the design': *English Furniture*, p.139; 'This plainness also caused a greater use of carving as a means of ornamentation'; p.142: and '... ornament in the form of carving was the means of relieving the austerity of such pieces, as there was but little figure in the wood.'

lighter and more elegant forms, particularly of chairs, and the introduction of the pierced splat.<sup>35</sup> Cescinsky even went so far as to suggest that the use of mahogany led to the adoption of European serpentine and bombe forms and ultimately to the rococo style in English furniture.<sup>36</sup>

Symonds's approach to the issue of stylistic development was characteristically balanced. Whilst accepting that the physical properties of mahogany were very different from those of walnut, and made it particularly suitable for carving, he was initially reluctant to suggest that this amounted to a new stylistic departure. In *The Present State* he wrote: '... it may be said that the introduction of mahogany for furniture making coincided with, if it did not actually inspire, a new fashion for ornament... The actual form of the various articles of early mahogany furniture adhered closely to that of walnut, with the addition, however, of these carved motifs: but as mahogany borrowed its design from walnut, so in return walnut furniture was lent decoration by mahogany; and, accordingly, pieces of walnut furniture, made after the initial entry of mahogany into the furniture world, are found decorated with the same carved features as are found in mahogany.'<sup>37</sup> Six years later, in *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, Symonds put it more bluntly: 'The introduction of mahogany, unlike walnut, did not coincide with a new style in furniture.'<sup>38</sup>

The real crux of this argument lies not in the question of whether mahogany is or is not a better carving medium than other woods, but in the assumption that carved furniture was necessarily costly furniture. This was undoubtedly true, but the value or status of carved furniture did not derive from its raw materials, but rather from the work of the carver. For instance, a bill for a pier table supplied by Mathias Lock to Hinton House, Somerset, c.1745, reveals that the joinery cost L1. 5s. and the carving L21. This was a pine table, very extensively carved and enriched to the last degree, so the example is perhaps an extreme one.<sup>39</sup> The fact remains that carving was a skilled and expensive business whereas materials were relatively cheap. No carver or furniture maker would lay out money on a costly wood only to carve most of it away. If mahogany, like pine and oak, was employed for carved furniture this tells us no more than that these were all regarded as suitable media for carving, and cheap enough to be used as such. There is a further point here. Mathias Lock's pier table was manifestly not representative of pine furniture in general. By the same token we cannot legitimately infer, from certain examples of carved early mahogany furniture, general rules about the impact of mahogany on furniture design.

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<sup>35</sup> Cescinsky, *The Gentle Art*, pp.115.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>37</sup> Symonds, *The Present State*, p.74.

<sup>38</sup> R.W. Symonds, *English Furniture*, p.138.

<sup>39</sup> The bill is reproduced in James Yorke, *op.cit.*, p.60.

## The price of mahogany in the 1720s

From the foregoing discussion it is apparent that the contradictions inherent in the Macquoid/Cescinsky/Symonds interpretation of early mahogany furniture stem from the premise that, at the time of its first introduction, mahogany was a luxury commodity. In his later writings, R.W. Symonds began tentatively to work through these difficulties, and in particular to consider the implications of the Naval Stores Act. Although he had noted the relevance of the Act as early as 1934, it was only in 1949 that he came to the important conclusion that as a result of this Act, '...these theories about the prohibitive cost of mahogany furniture, owing to the duty on the wood, are quite erroneous'.<sup>40</sup> In the same article Symonds argued that the design and character of much early mahogany furniture bore out the fact of its modest price. This was a revolutionary theory, but having got so far, Symonds went no further, and despite further work on the subject published by Edward Joy in 1953, in which it was suggested that as a result of the 1721 Act mahogany was 'relatively cheap', the implications of Symonds's discoveries were not fully explored.<sup>41</sup> Neither author attempted to put a figure on this relative cheapness, nor to follow through its consequences for the design and manufacture of English 18th-century furniture. And yet these issues are crucial to any assessment of the importance of mahogany to the development of English furniture making.

In fact, all the evidence indicates that mahogany in the 1720s was a relatively cheap timber. As we have seen in chapter one, the circumstances surrounding its introduction after the Naval Stores Act strongly suggest that low market value was the primary factor inhibiting its importation. For the furniture maker, as for the importer, the initial considerations governing the importation and use of mahogany were likely to be financial. In the world of commerce and trade the question 'Will it pay?' was ultimately the only one that mattered. Like the shippers, furniture makers were not artists but traders, who had wages to pay and mouths to feed. When considering the uses to which mahogany might be put, their first and very natural concern was to make it profitable. The question of cost, and particularly of cost relative to other woods, is therefore central to the understanding of how mahogany was regarded and how it was used in the years immediately after 1722.

There is no published work on the prices of early 18th-century furniture timbers, partly because reliable data is hard to come by, and partly because furniture historians, as Cescinsky convincingly demonstrated, are rarely economists or mathematicians. A number of published inventories from this period contain valuations of furniture maker's stock in trade including timber, but the information is rarely precise enough to make accurate measure for measure comparisons. Nor are the samples large enough or consistent enough

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<sup>40</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'The New Wood', p.142.

<sup>41</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'The Influence of Mahogany', pp.173-178; E.T. Joy, 'The Introduction of Mahogany', pp.1567.

to make the data reliable.<sup>42</sup> However, extensive records of timber prices can be found in the surviving accounts for various Royal Navy dockyards. These cover not only the cost of naval timber, but also cite prices of joinery and carpentry timber such as deal and wainscot.<sup>43</sup> A second valuable source is the collected records of the Commissioners for Building Fifty New Churches in London. These contain proposals, contracts, bills and disbursements for the workmen and artisans employed in building the 'Queen Anne' churches between 1711 and 1759.<sup>44</sup> The majority of the records cover the period 1713-1732, and are extremely detailed, enabling reliable price series for various types of timber to be compiled. For instance, between 1713 and 1730 the price of 10 ft whole deals varied between 1s.2d and 1s.4d each. The deals averaged 11" wide and 1 1/4 inches thick, which works out to a price of 1.2-1.39d per superficial foot. 'Clean' deals, of the type used for quality work, including cabinet making, cost up to 3s. each, or just over 3d per foot.<sup>45</sup> Ordinary (i.e., tangentially sawn) oak boards averaged 2-3d per foot, but 1" wainscot was considerably dearer, at 5d.<sup>46</sup> This price probably represents the upper limit for wainscot in London, since the Navy was paying only 3d per foot for the same article.<sup>47</sup> The difference between the two prices might fairly be regarded as the difference between the retail and wholesale price. By way of comparison, the price of walnut timber began at about 3d (equivalent to L6 per ton) for 'common' stuff, and reached 24d (L50 per ton) for 'very fine' veneer quality wood. The average for solid walnut (i.e., not veneer quality) seems to have been around 6-8d per foot.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, extracts from inventories quoted in John Cross, *op.cit.* Unfortunately these inventories only give prices for the whole stock in trade, and do not quote values per superficial foot for all the various woods cited.

<sup>43</sup> The most accessible records are those kept by the Treasurer of the Navy, and filed in the Public Record Office under Adm 20. Here one finds details of payments to many different suppliers, from glaziers and painters to timber merchants.

In the 18th century the term *wainscot* always implied quarter sawn oak board, usually imported. The benchmark variety was Dutch wainscot. It was shipped to Holland from the Baltic and from central Germany, but milled in Holland and exported from there.

<sup>44</sup> Lambeth Palace Library, Papers of the Commission to Build Fifty New Churches.

<sup>45</sup> 'Clean' or 'bright' were deals which were loaded on shipboard directly from the sawmill. The great majority of deals spent weeks or even months floating in the sawmill basin before shipment.

<sup>46</sup> Lambeth Palace Library. These prices were mostly abstracted from the Books of Works, MSS 2697-27002 inclusive. Other valuable data on prices can be found in the Book of Contracts, MS 2703, and the Building accounts, MS 2707. The superficial price of wainscot boards related directly to their thickness, from 1 1/2" at 7d, 1" at 5d, 3/4" at 4d. and so on.

<sup>47</sup> Adm 20/142 *et seq.* Wainscot was bought relatively infrequently, since the Navy's primary demand was for shipbuilding timber and not joinery wood. However, several purchases of wainscot are recorded, and the prices are consistent.

<sup>48</sup> Polly Legg, *op.cit.*, passim. See also occasional entries in the customs returns, in which 6d is the usual price. Cust 3.

At the time of writing, there are no published data for the retail price of mahogany in London in the 1720s. However, the rateable value of mahogany given in the Additional Book of Rates was L8 per ton, and probably represents something like the market price. In the customs returns for the same period, the value of mahogany is consistently given as a nominal L7-9 per ton.<sup>49</sup> Each ton of timber contained a nominal 480 superficial feet, which, at L8 per ton, is equivalent to 4d per foot.<sup>50</sup> These figures show that mahogany was about half the price of reasonable quality walnut and about the same as wainscot oak. Its most likely market was therefore as a joinery timber rather than a cabinet wood.

Although the use of mahogany for fixed joinery, rather than for moveable furniture, has been recorded by previous historians, it has always been regarded as the exception rather than the rule. Symonds noted the use of mahogany for panelling at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, and in the interior of George I's yacht, the *Carolina*, which was built before 1727.<sup>51</sup> He also remarked on its use for panelling in North America, but concluded that 'Mahogany was used very seldom for the wainscotting of rooms in England, the reason undoubtedly being that it was far too expensive for this purpose.'<sup>52</sup> Macquoid and Cescinsky both remark on the use of mahogany at Houghton Hall in Norfolk, and the *Dictionary of English Furniture* notes its employment at Cannons in Middlesex, Houghton Hall, and Seaton Delaval in Northumberland.

Seaton Delaval, a highly idiosyncratic baroque mansion designed by Sir John Vanbrugh, is now derelict, but its mahogany panelled north-east room, which was installed in January 1726, has survived. It is entirely lined in solid mahogany divided into bolection moulded panels, and is complete even to its window shutters. So far as is known, the north-east room was the only one at Seaton Delaval in which mahogany was used, and very little documentary record survives.<sup>53</sup> This was probably not Vanbrugh's first encounter with mahogany.

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<sup>49</sup> Cust 3. Unlike unrated goods, which paid duty on the value at source, rated goods were taxed according to their average value on the English market at the time the rate was set.

<sup>50</sup> This was the standard trade measure. See chapter eight for further details.

<sup>51</sup> 'We hear that during the Storm which happen'd when his Majesty sail'd from Helvoetsluys, they were obliged to cut down the Room in the *Carolina* Yacht which was built on purpose for the late King to dine in on the Quarter Deck, where his present Majesty always chose to lie for the Convenience of the Air, which was richly furnish'd and lined with Mahogany, the Pannels, Bed, Chairs, and Window Curtains of Crimson Damask; the whole Building, which extended from Side to Side, was entirely cut clear to the Deck, and thrown overboard, it being so much in the Way of working the Ship, and also gathering the Wind; all the Brass Guns, together with a great deal of Baggage, were likewise thrown overboard; the Vessel shipp'd three Seas, and was in most imminent Danger on the Coast of Norfolk; but through the great Abilities of the Admiral, and the Skill of the Dutch Pilot ... out-rid the Storm.'

Symonds discovered this reference in *The Country Journal: or, The Craftsman*, of 8 January 1737, and reproduced it in 'Early Imports, Part II', p.377.

<sup>52</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'Early Imports, Part I', p.220.

<sup>53</sup> The work on the mahogany room is recorded in a letter from the Clerk of Works to the architect, Sir John Vanbrugh: 'Thomas Harles and two of his men are sett on to wainscott the North East Roome with the mahoggony wood, which is so well dried & seasoned that it works extremely fine, save some course

At another Vanbrugh house, King's Weston in Bristol, the staircase inlaid with mahogany survives. This was installed by 1719 at the latest.<sup>54</sup>

For Houghton Hall and Cannons the surviving documentation is relatively full, enabling the cost of the mahogany to be accurately calculated. Cannons, the great house remodelled by James Gibbs for James Bridges, Duke of Chandos, was demolished in 1747. Fortunately the inventory of 1725 and the demolition sale catalogue of 1747 survive, and these both describe the saloon, completed in 1723, as panelled in walnut and mahogany.<sup>55</sup> Documentary material relating to the building of Cannons survives among the Stowe papers now held at the Huntington Library, California. These record at least 4351 feet of mahogany purchased for use at Cannons. More than a third of this was bought in 1721, before the Naval Stores Act came into effect, which makes its employment at Cannons the earliest documented instance in England. The rest of the timber was purchased between 1721 and 1723, when the panelling of the Saloon was complete. Payments recorded in the Cannons accounts show that the mahogany was bought from three different timber merchants at a cost of 2d per foot. At this price the timber can barely have repaid its shipping costs, which suggests that these were almost certainly speculative cargos carried at the shippers' expense.<sup>56</sup>

The use of mahogany at both Cannons and Seaton Delaval must have represented something of a novelty, since in each case only one room was panelled in the new wood. Houghton Hall, by contrast, was extensively fitted out

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pieces there is two more of Harles' men sawing the mahogany continually and the crust of that wood is very hard.' James Mewburn to Sir John Vanbrugh, 21 January 1726. This document is housed in a glass display case inside the mahogany room at Seaton Delaval.

<sup>54</sup> Kerry Downes, 'The King's Weston Book of Drawings', *Architectural History*, 10, 1967, pp.9-37. The plan for the Halfpace of the staircase survives (plate 32), and is clearly marked 'mahogena' for sections of the inlay. The drawing is dated 1719. There is some uncertainty about the authorship of the drawings, and a conclusive attribution to Vanbrugh is not possible. I am grateful to Dr Ivan Hall for drawing this article to my attention.

<sup>55</sup> Collins Baker, *The Life and Times of James Bridges, First Duke of Chandos*, Oxford, 1972, pp.147-148. Manuscript material relating to Chandos and Cannons, including the inventory of 1725, is now housed with the Stowe Papers at the Huntington Library, California. Several copies of the sale catalogues of 1747 exist.

<sup>56</sup> Huntington Library, Stowe MSS. ST vol.85. Payment to John Gray, Timber Merch<sup>t</sup>, 13 October 1722, 'To his Bill of 271 foot of Mahogany at 2<sup>d</sup> p Foot and Charges - L24.1.8'.

Payment to William Stanworth, Timber merch<sup>t</sup>, 13 October 1722, 'To his Bill for 144 ft<sup>2</sup> of Mahogany at 2<sup>s</sup> p Cft - L14.8.0'.

N.B. This second bill was calculated at two shillings per cubic foot, equivalent to 2d per superficial foot. Collins Baker (p.148) cites another payment in March 1724 to James Bull for a further 211 feet at L21.2.0. This also works out to two shillings per cubic foot. The three bills account for a total of 4531 feet, or 9.4 tons.

The cost of sawing is revealed by the following entries:

21 January 1721 - Paid Wm Cooper, Sawyer

'To his Bill for cutting 509 foot of Mahogany & 1 days work - L1.7.6.'

13 November 1721 - Paid Wm Cooper

'To his Bill for cutting 1173 foot of D<sup>o</sup> 2.13.0.'

with doors, doorcases stairs and panelling, all in mahogany. The man responsible for overseeing the work at Houghton was Thomas Ripley, Master Carpenter to the Crown, who in this case also acted as Walpole's clerk of works. Before examining this celebrated contract in any detail it will be apposite to examine Ripley's role in an earlier building in which mahogany was also extensively used. This was the new Admiralty Office in Whitehall.

The Admiralty Office was begun in 1723, with Ripley as architect in charge.<sup>57</sup> Thomas Ripley was a carpenter by training, and through Walpole's patronage was appointed Master Carpenter in 1721 and Comptroller of Works in 1726.<sup>58</sup> It was on Ripley's recommendation that the Lords of the Admiralty instructed Captain Barrow Harris, then commanding the Royal Navy warships on the Jamaica station, to buy mahogany for use in the new building. The specification for the contract was sent in October 1723, and comprised four hundred 2 1/2 inch planks, six hundred 2 inch, and a thousand each of 1 1/2 inch and 1 inch boards. The planks and boards were to be between 8 and ten feet long, and assuming a conservative average width of 12 inches per plank, the contract amounted to 47,000 feet of mahogany, equivalent to almost 98 tons.<sup>59</sup> Captain Harris was ordered to buy the mahogany 'on the Cheapest terms you can', and send it home in Royal Navy ships as they came off station.

In December 1723 Captain Harris wrote to the Navy Board, informing them that he had begun to buy timber, but would have to send it mostly in three and four-inch plank, since there was very little thin board available. But, he added, this would be cheaper, since it reduced the cutting charges as well as losses from damage during the voyage home.<sup>60</sup> The first shipment of 600 planks was carried on board the *Mermaid*, and its imminent arrival was advertised in the press:

His Majesty's Ship the Mermaid, which is coming from Jamaica, hath on Board from thence 600 Planks of the famous Mahogany or Redwood, which grows in no Part of the World but the West-Indies, which Wood

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<sup>57</sup> Documentation concerning the mahogany contract for the new Admiralty Office can be found in the following files at the PRO: Adm 1, *Navy Board Out-letters*; Adm 2, *Navy Board In-letters*; Adm 3, *Minutes of the Admiralty Board*.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Ripley (1683-1758) was born in Yorkshire and moved to London where he was admitted to the Carpenter's Company in 1705. His subsequent career owed everything to his marriage to a servant of Sir Robert Walpole. Through Walpole's patronage he became Labourer in Trust at the Savoy (1715), Clerk of Works at the Mews (1716), successor to Grinling Gibbons as Master Carpenter (1721) and to Sir John Vanbrugh as Comptroller of Works (1726). For further details see Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, 3rd ed., Yale 1995, pp.818-820.

Ripley may have first encountered mahogany when carrying out work at the London Customs House from c.1718, or at the Liverpool Customs House between 1719 and 1721. As a professional carpenter, one may accept Ripley's endorsement of mahogany to the Lords of the Admiralty as being born from experience rather than hearsay.

<sup>59</sup> Adm 2/51 Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to Captain Harris, 3 October 1723, copy in the Navy Office file. Harris was further instructed that if smaller scantling were not available, he was to buy instead a thousand each of four and three inch plank, which amounted to at least 70,000 feet.

<sup>60</sup> Adm 2/1880, Harris to Navy Board, 30 December 1723.

is to be employed in making all the Inner Doors in the new Admiralty Office, now building at Whitehall; and to be used in Tables and other Purposes for the said Office. The Adventure and Faukland, which are expected Home from Jamaica are also to bring certain Quantities of the said Wood for his Majesty's Service, there being 7000 Planks contracted for at Jamaica, by His Majesty's Order which is brought Home from Time to Time, by the Men of War, as they come from thence, Duty Free.

*St James' Evening Post*, 24 May 1724.<sup>61</sup>

The *Mermaid* arrived with its mahogany in June 1724, and was closely followed by a second shipment on the *Nonsuch*.<sup>62</sup> The wood was landed at Deptford and lightered up-river to Whitehall Stairs.<sup>63</sup> By September enough mahogany had arrived to complete the work at Whitehall, and Harris was instructed to send no more.<sup>64</sup> However, Harris had already bought a considerable quantity, and had more on order. He wrote to the Navy Board explaining his predicament, and was advised that if he could not dispose of the mahogany in Jamaica without loss, he was to send it to England anyway.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, further shipments arrived with the *Leopard*, *Launceston*, *Adventure* and Harris's own ship, the *Falkland*.<sup>66</sup> Much of this remained unused at Deptford until the autumn of 1726, when it was sent up to Whitehall.<sup>67</sup>

The reason why the Admiralty Board chose to use mahogany in preference to deal or wainscot was very straightforward: Ripley told their Lordships that mahogany 'will be cheaper than any other Wood...'<sup>68</sup> The original invoices for the contract have yet to come to light, so the price paid is still a matter of speculation, but the Liverpool Port Books record prices at source in Jamaica below 1d per foot.<sup>69</sup> Since the timber came home in Royal Navy ships, they will have paid no freight, thereby saving most of the cost of importation. In these

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<sup>61</sup> The figure of 7000 planks seem to have been inflated by the press. This story was of sufficient interest to be reprinted in provincial newspapers such as the *York Mercury* of 1 June 1724.

<sup>62</sup> Adm 2/1880, Harris to Navy Board 30 December 1723. Adm 3/25, Minutes, 14 July 1724.

<sup>63</sup> Adm 3/35, Minutes, 14 July 1724.

<sup>64</sup> Adm 3/35, Minutes, 18 September 1724.

<sup>65</sup> Adm 3/35, Minutes, 18 September 1724. Adm 106/770, Captain Harris to Navy Board, 6 February 1725. Adm 2/51 Lords Commissioners to Captain Harris, 4 March 1725, copy in Navy Board file. Adm 1/3638, Navy Office to Lords Commissioners, 26 April 1725. Adm 3/35, Minutes 2 March 1725.

<sup>66</sup> Adm 3/35, Minutes 2 March 1725. Adm 1/3638, Navy Office to Lords Commissioners 26 April 1725. Adm 2/1880, Captain Harris to Navy Board 31 May 1725.

<sup>67</sup> Adm 3/36 Minutes, 18 October 1726.

<sup>68</sup> Adm 3/34. Minutes of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, 3 October 1723.

<sup>69</sup> E 190 1403/12



circumstances the Admiralty probably got their mahogany cheaper than deal. They were able to make a profit on the transaction, since 3548 feet of surplus mahogany was resold at just over 3d per foot.<sup>70</sup>

So far as is known, the mahogany used in the Admiralty Building is still there. It was used in place of deals for the door and window frames on the lower and middle storeys of the building, where, once painted, it has not been seen since.<sup>71</sup>

If the customs records are accurate the mahogany imported for this one building accounted for at least 60% of the total imported into London in 1724, and a considerable proportion of the following year's total as well.

The example of the Admiralty building throws a rather different light on the use of mahogany at Houghton Hall (Figure 2.1). The employment of mahogany on a large scale for such mundane purposes as wainscotting, doors, doorcases and stairs is usually assumed to be indicative of extraordinary extravagance. Indeed, some writers have hinted that such wealth cannot have been gained honestly, and that the mahogany at Houghton is tainted with suggestions of stock-jobbing, the South Sea Bubble and similar political and financial chicanery.<sup>72</sup> Others, as we have seen in chapter one, have said that Walpole himself was responsible for the removal of import duty on mahogany solely in order to furnish Houghton Hall. None of this is true. The documentation for the contract is relatively complete, and can be found among Walpole's own papers and in the Port Books for King's Lynn<sup>73</sup>. It is probable that, as in the case of the Admiralty Office, it was Ripley who recommended the use of mahogany in lieu of wainscot or deal. The timber was ordered from Jamaica in (probably) mid-1724, and was shipped to London in three loads of 305 (per *Loyal Betty*), 88 (per *Rose*) and 26 planks (per *Dolphin*), making a total of 419. From London the timber came coastwise to King's Lynn. The first shipment must have entered London before the end of 1724, since it began arriving at King's Lynn in January

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<sup>70</sup> Adm 20 147 Part 1, 14 March 1727. The accounts record a payment of L1147.5.3 for Captain Harris' expenses since 1722. Included in these expenses were the bills for the purchase of mahogany for the Admiralty Office, but 'the Particulars thereof remain in the Comptroller's Office'. It has not been possible to locate these particulars. However, a marginal note explains that L47.15.9 can be set against Harris' bill, since this was the sum got for '3548 feet of Mahogany Plank sold being more than was wanted for the Admiralty Office.'

<sup>71</sup> Adm 2/51, Lords Commissioners to Captain Harris, 3 October 1723. At the time of writing, the building is still owned by the Ministry of Defence, but may soon be sold. It has not been possible to gain access to the building, but published accounts make no mention of any mahogany other than the odd stair handrail. The most opulent interior is the Admiralty boardroom, which remains largely as built in 1724, and is entirely panelled in wainscot, not mahogany. RCHM, *Survey of London*, 16, pp.57-64. See also *Country Life*, November 1923, pp.17-24; *The Builder*, 9, 1851, p.3.

<sup>72</sup> Cescinsky accused Walpole of 'making a fortune out of a national calamity.' *English Furniture*, p.27.

<sup>73</sup> The relevant documentation can be found in Cambridge University Library, *Cholmondeley MSS*, Vouchers, and in Port Books E 190 451/2, 454/4. One of the shipments of mahogany recorded in the Port Books has Walpole's name pencilled in beside it. Many of the vouchers are in Walpole's own hand, and it is clear that Ripley was responsible for purchase, shipping, lighterage and other logistical matters.

**Figure 2.1:**

Houghton Hall, the saloon, showing mahogany doors and doorcases.



**Photo:** Jarrolds publishing, reproduced by permission of the Marquess of Cholmondeley.

of the following year. Thereafter it came periodically by various vessels in 1725, and the last delivery, of 100 planks, was made on 6 December 1725. The port books record a total of 391 planks landed, 28 short of the number given in Walpole's vouchers.<sup>74</sup>

The cost of the mahogany can be calculated from Walpole's own records. Initial purchase and shipping to London of 419 planks cost L490.8.9<sup>75</sup>. The

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<sup>74</sup> The shipments recorded in the Port Books are dated 7 January, 23 February, 26 April, 23 June, 10 July, 6 December. An interesting sidelight is thrown on this discrepancy by the use of mahogany to build a staircase in a house in Spitalfields, London. The house was built in 1726 for Marmaduke Smith, a Yorkshire born carpenter-builder and associate of Thomas Ripley. The staircase is of solid mahogany - could these be Walpole's missing planks?

<sup>75</sup> Cholmondeley MSS, *Vouchers*, May, 5 May, 21 May, 21 June 1725.

shipping invoices for two of the shipments, by the Rose and the Dolphin, show that freight was charged at 1 1/2d per foot, and that the planks averaged 71.5 superficial feet each, freight measure.<sup>76</sup> The entire shipment therefore amounted to just under 30,000 feet (about 60 tons), or about 16% of the total imported into London that year. The cost was a fraction under 4d per foot. Bills for lighterage in London and shipping coastwise to King's Lynn are not complete, but based on comparisons with the costs of coastwise shipping between Lancaster and Liverpool, these probably added a halfpenny or three farthings per foot.<sup>77</sup> The mahogany for Houghton therefore cost Walpole no more than the equivalent quantity of wainscot. The figures are consistent with those found in the Customs 3, and with the average rateable value of mahogany established in the 1724 Book of Rates.

The most unlikely of these early mahogany houses, and the least well known, is Marble Hill House at Twickenham (Figure 2.2). This modest Palladian house by the Thames is an exact contemporary of Lord Burlington's nearby Chiswick Villa. By comparison with Burlington's lavishly detailed villa, Marble Hill is plain, inside and out. But it has a solid mahogany staircase, and the entire *piano nobile* is floored with it. No documentation for this survives, but it is likely that the floor was installed in 1727 or 1728.<sup>78</sup> An anecdotal account of 1816 by J. Norris Brewer is the only one which throws any light on the subject. 'It is traditionally asserted that the mahogany of which the staircase and floors are constructed, was nearly proving the cause of some important and disastrous political events. George II, it is said, directed one of his captains, whose course lay near the Bay of Honduras, to land and cut for him a few of the finest trees. The captain executed his commission with so little ceremony, that the Court of Spain presented a remonstrance; and the subsequent interchange of opinions of the subject had nearly plunged the two nations into a war!'<sup>79</sup>

There may be more than a grain of truth in this account. Henrietta Howard, for whom the house was built, was mistress to George II. Its construction was financed by a settlement made on her by the king when still Prince of Wales in 1723. The settlement was inadequate, which is why building was suspended for a year or two between 1725 and 1727. The accession of George II in 1727 coincided with the recommencement of work on the house, and with a state of near-war between Britain and Spain in the West Indies. A British fleet blockaded the annual Spanish silver *flota* at Porto Bello, and any one of these Royal Navy warships could have cut mahogany on the nearby Central American coast. In the customs returns for 1727 mahogany valued at L405.12.0 was imported into London from *Spanish West Indies* (This is the name by which the coast of Central America was called in the customs returns.) This single

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> See chapter three below, p.106 and footnote 152.

<sup>78</sup> *Marble Hill House*, Julius Bryant, London 1988, pp.30-31. A fuller account of the house is given in M.P.G. Draper and W.A. Eden, *Marble Hill House*, London 1970.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

shipment, amounting to 50 tons of timber, could well be the wood used at Marble Hill.<sup>80</sup> Whatever the truth of Norris Brewer's anecdote, the most significant thing about the mahogany at Marble Hill is that the house was built on the cheap. The possible use of the Royal Navy to both cut the mahogany and bring it home only serves to reinforce the fact.

**Figure 2.2:** Marble Hill House, Twickenham.



Photo: The author.

In contrast to the lack of documentation for Marble Hill House, the mahogany furniture in the church of St George's Bloomsbury is minutely recorded in the archives of the Church Commissioners at Lambeth Palace. St George's (Figure 2.3) is one of the twelve 'Queen Anne' churches, built subsequent to the 1711 Act for building fifty new churches in or near the Cities of London and

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<sup>80</sup> The source of the shipment cannot be confirmed, since the relevant London Port Books were destroyed in the late 19th century. It is probable that a record of the diplomatic incident recorded by Norris Brewer survives amongst the papers of the government departments involved, but at the present time no search has been made.

Westminster.<sup>81</sup> A Commission was established to oversee the operation of the Act, of which Sir Christopher Wren, Sir John Vanbrugh and Thomas Archer were all members. In October 1711 Nicholas Hawksmoor and William Dickinson were appointed Surveyors, responsible for the surveying, contract management and building of the churches. Hawksmoor also submitted designs for a number of the churches, of which St George's was one. The site, a rather cramped one between Bloomsbury Way and Little Russell Street, was purchased in 1716 and

**Figure 2.3:** St George's Bloomsbury, south front and portico, 1713-26.



Photo: The author.

building began the same year. There were delays in construction due to overspending, so it was not until 1725 that the interior was ready for plasterers, painters and joiners. St George's was unique among the twelve churches in making extensive use of mahogany in its interior. Although the pews, wall panelling and galleries were fitted out in wainscot and deal, St George's had a pulpit, reredos and altar table of mahogany. The documentation for each of

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<sup>81</sup> For a general background to the 1711 Act see Kerry Downes, *Hawksmoor*, London, 1972, pp.103-140. The history of St George's, Bloomsbury, is related in Hugh Meller, *St George's Bloomsbury: an illustrated guide to the church*, London 1975.

these survives and is complete.<sup>82</sup>

The pulpit was substantially finished by the end of 1726 (Figure 2.4). Although invoiced as mahogany, it is in fact of wainscot faced with mahogany veneer, and with carved solid mahogany mouldings. Each of the six panels is inlaid with oak and (probably) holly. It now lacks its veneered canopy, which was also inlaid, and its pedestal. The effect is consequently rather less imposing than intended.

**Figure 2.4:**

St George's Bloomsbury,  
the pulpit, 1726.



Photo: The author.

The reredos, probably completed before the end of 1727, survives as invoiced, although it has been moved from its original position in the east apse (Figure

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<sup>82</sup> The documentation for these pieces can be found in the Books of Works for 25 March 1725 - 31 December 1726, pp.255-6; 1 January 1727 to 25 March 1728, pp.80--95. MSS 2700 & 2701, Lambeth Palace Library.

2.5). It is a massive structure of oak, solid mahogany and mahogany veneer. The base is panelled with tangentially sawn mahogany boards up to 18" in width, and the fluted columns are composed of mahogany strips two flutes wide, glued together and turned. The composite capitals are carved from solid mahogany. The niche is veneered with a combination of mahogany, oak and other woods. The mahogany veneers in the niche have been cut radially to expose a striped figure, making this possibly the earliest extant example of mahogany veneer used for decorative effect.

Figure 2.5:

St George's Bloomsbury,  
the reredos, 1727.



Photo: The author.

The altar table, completed by March 1728, measured 4'6" by 3'2", with a solid mahogany top 2" thick. The rails were of carved mahogany, and it was raised on claw feet. Only the front rail and one side rail survive, having been re-used for

the fronts of two lecterns (Figure 2.6). All the joinery was carried out by the firm of Thomas Phillips, a well established London carpenter and joiner. The carving was done by John Boson and John How.<sup>83</sup>

Figure 2.6: St George's Bloomsbury, altar table front converted to a lectern, 1728.



Photo: The author.

Together, the reredos, pulpit and altar table at St George's represent the earliest, best documented and most completely surviving group of joiner-made mahogany furniture in England. The reredos, in particular, is a construction of

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas Phillips (c.1689-1736) was partner to Benjamin Timbrell. His firm worked on several London churches and was employed on several occasions by the architect James Gibbs. His son John became a Master Carpenter in his turn, and his name occurs on the invoices submitted for the reredos and altar table at St George's Bloomsbury.

John Boson (fl.1726-43) is better known for the pair of carved mahogany dressing tables with mirrors *en suite* supplied to the Duchess of Burlington in 1735. These are shown in Gervase Jackson-Stops, ed., *The Treasure Houses of Britain*, exhibition catalogue, Yale 1985, pp.220-221. Boson worked for William Kent at Kew and on several London churches. The mahogany pieces at St George's Bloomsbury are his earliest recorded work.

Less is known of the career of Boson's partner John How. He worked at St George's Hanover Square before St George's Bloomsbury, and was a subscriber to James Gibbs's *A Book of Architecture* (1728). Geoffrey Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England, 1660-1820*, Edinburgh 1981, pp.247 *et seq.*



great magnificence, so impressive, in fact, that until recently it was thought to have come originally from chapel of the Duke of Bedford's house, demolished in 1800.<sup>84</sup> It was also expensive - the joinery alone came to L300.00 - but the expense had little to do with the materials, since the Commissioners invariably selected the cheapest tenders for all work.<sup>85</sup> The elaborate construction and veneered work in the niche probably accounted for most of the price. The pulpit can be compared directly with contemporary examples in other churches. Costing L140.00 for joinery alone, the mahogany pulpit at St George's was the most expensive of any, but with its veneered ogee canopy it was also the most elaborate. The next dearest was at Limehouse (L125), Spitalfields (L120) and St Mary Woolnoth (L120). All these were made in wainscot and/or deal.

The examples of Seaton Delaval, Cannons, the Admiralty, Houghton Hall, Marble Hill and St George's Bloomsbury are consistent in demonstrating the use of mahogany as a joinery wood in the 1720s, primarily as an alternative to wainscot. Given the very competitive price of mahogany at this date it is unlikely that these cases are exceptional. More examples should be expected not only in London but in and around the West India outports of Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster, for the advent of mahogany was as much a provincial as a metropolitan phenomenon.

### **The distribution of mahogany outside London**

The adoption of mahogany among English furniture makers is usually regarded as a process which began in London and only gradually spread to provincial centres. Both Macquoid and Cescinsky postulated a high class, London-centred trade employing fashionable mahogany and contrasted it with benighted provincial makers working in oak and walnut.<sup>86</sup> Cescinsky regarded the persistence of walnut in English furniture making after c.1730 as essentially a provincial manifestation, explained by the availability of mahogany only to the best London makers.<sup>87</sup> Symonds initially agreed with this assessment, but later was more cautious, proposing that the question of London's dominance of mahogany furniture production was 'bound up with the supply of mahogany to provincial towns in the first half of the 18th century, a subject about which we know very little'.<sup>88</sup>

The conventional picture of a London-dominated cabinet trade appears to have been largely true up to the passing of the Naval Stores Act, at least so far

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<sup>84</sup> Meller, *op.cit.*, p.9.

<sup>85</sup> The proposals or tenders were submitted in September 1724. Thomas Phillips undercut his nearest rival by over L30. MS 2715, f.44. Lambeth Palace Library.

<sup>86</sup> Cescinsky, *op.cit.*, pp.76-77.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Symonds, 'The Influence of Mahogany', p.174.

as imported cabinet woods are concerned. Between 1697 and 1721, more than 98 per cent of the walnut timber imported into England came into London. In the case of olivewood, the figure was 100 per cent, and the same was true of princes wood and violet wood.<sup>89</sup> It is fairly certain that the imported walnut was of high quality, since only the best timber could stand the high import duties. These stood at 20 per cent for all European walnut except from France, which paid an additional 50 per cent.<sup>90</sup> It is impossible to assess the extent to which this picture was qualified by the use of home grown walnut timber, but the fact that the most fashionable and expensive foreign cabinet woods of the day were only imported into London is significant.

With the passing of the Naval Stores Act, the balance of trade in imported furniture timbers shifted markedly. Not only mahogany but American black walnut was imported in significant quantities into ports other than London. Indeed, in the very earliest days of the trade (before 1722), it was the outports and not London which took the lead in importing mahogany (Figure 1.7). The early activity of the western outports can be confirmed from the Port Books which show mahogany coming into Bristol before 1720 and Liverpool by 1723 at the latest.<sup>91</sup> The Naval Stores Act greatly accelerated this process, so that between 1720 and 1750 from seven to forty per cent of mahogany came annually into outports (Figure 2.7). The average was 21 per cent. The scale of these importations began modestly enough - thirty five tons of mahogany into outports in 1723, for instance, compared with just over fifty tons into London - but they grew rapidly. In 1726 the quantity imported into outports was just over sixty tons, and in 1731 more than two hundred tons. In 1738 mahogany importations into the outports exceeded four hundred and fifty tons.<sup>92</sup>

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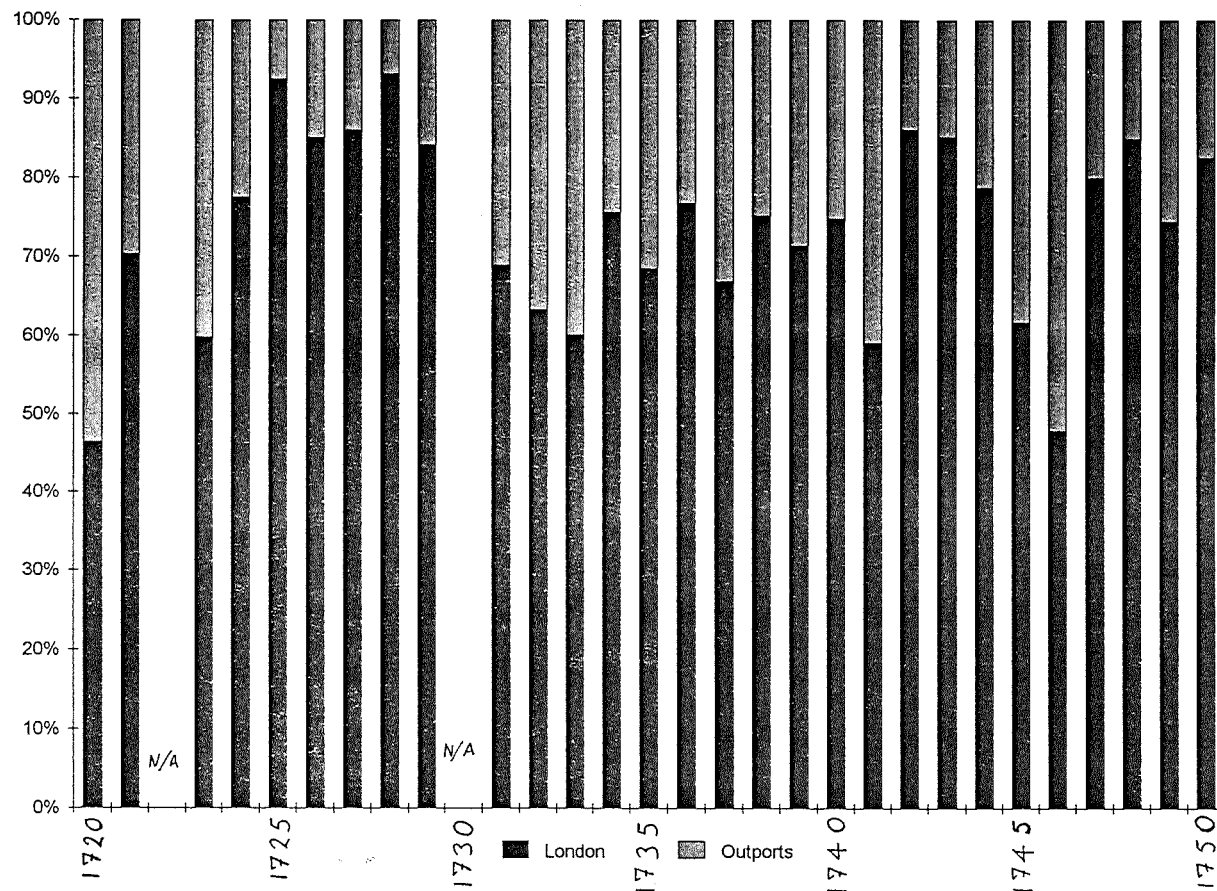
<sup>89</sup> Customs 3. The difference, albeit slight, in the figures for walnut and olivewood might be explained by the fact that whereas provincial makers were able to use native grown stocks of walnut to supplement imported veneers, this was not possible with olive wood or princes wood. The customs returns are no doubt fallible, but the fact that no significant quantities of these cabinet woods were recorded entering outports is important. The implication is that all olivewood and princes wood furniture of this period was made in London.

<sup>90</sup> A. Bowett, 'After the Naval Stores Act', pp.16-123, and note 25 for details of the taxation of European timbers at this period.

<sup>91</sup> E 190 1188/3 (Bristol), E 190 1403/12 (Liverpool). On 27 January 1720 160 small pieces of mahogany were landed from the *Shirley*, arrived from Jamaica. Mahogany had been landed in Bristol before this date, however. See note 117, below. The first importation into Liverpool was recorded on 1 February 1723, when 11 planks containing 100 cubic feet were landed from the *Hannah and Sarah*. There were two further importations during 1723.

<sup>92</sup> Cust 3. The relationship between London and outports in the mahogany trade conforms to the general pattern of the rise of the Atlantic economy. In the early to mid-seventeenth century, London dominated the market in West India goods, but from the 1660s onwards the outports' share of the trade grew, and in the 18th century the rise of first Bristol and then Liverpool was fuelled almost entirely by the growth in the West Indian and North American trades. In 1702 London owned 43.3% of total English shipping tonnage, the west of England 23.6%. By 1788 these figures had changed to 29.9 and 29% respectively. Over the same period Bristol's shipping tonnage rose from 17.3 thousand tons to 37.8, that of Liverpool from 8.6 to 76.1 thousand tons. Whereas a great deal of London tonnage was involved in other trades (coastwise, Europe,

Figure 2.7: Percentage of annual mahogany importations - London vs outports, 1720-1750.



Source: Customs 3.

The great majority of importations came from Jamaica, and the ports into which the mahogany was brought can be determined from the Jamaica shipping register, which survives in reasonably complete condition from 1742. In the mid-1740s the English destinations of vessels clearing Jamaica were, in order of importance, London, Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster. Figure 2.8 gives the number of vessels clearing yearly for each port.<sup>93</sup>

Mediterranean, East Indies) most of the west coast tonnage was involved in the Atlantic trade. Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.19, 24, *et passim*.. For a short general discussion of the rise of Atlantic trade see D.A. Farnie, 'The Commercial Empire of the Atlantic, 1607-1783', *Economic History Review*, Second Series, XV, No.2, 1962, pp.205-218. Farnie comments: 'The West Country... ceased to be a remote backwater on the edge of the known world and moved into the front line of transatlantic maritime activity as its ports began their long-term rise.'

<sup>93</sup> Of course, these ports were also served from other west Indian islands and the North American colonies. The total number of ships entering Bristol from the West Indies and North America rose from 70 in 1687 to 74 in 1700 and 137 in 1764. The figures for Liverpool were 21 in 1687 and 88 in 1764. Davis,

**Figure 2.8:** Number of vessels cleared outwards from Jamaica for England, 1744-47.

	1744	1745	1746	1747
London	57	53	51	53
Bristol	35	20	33	44
Liverpool	25	21	10	25
Lancaster	4	3	4	5

Source: CO 142/15

The total number of vessels clearing Jamaica for the three western outports was actually greater than those clearing for London. However, London-bound ships tended to be significantly larger, and this partly explains the fact that with fewer ships London still received the greater share of mahogany importations.

The effect of figures 2.7 and 2.8 is to suggest that the traditional view of early mahogany as the prerogative of the London furniture trade is quite wrong. Mahogany became available in the primary West India outports at roughly the same time as in London, and in significant quantities. Moreover, the impact of mahogany was likely to have been much greater, relatively speaking, in those ports which hitherto had very little in the way of a quality furniture trade. From 1722 onwards, the joiners and carpenters of Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster were supplied with the world's best furniture wood on the same terms as their London rivals. The implications of this development are far reaching, and are worth considering in a little more detail.

The growth of the west coast ports is one of the notable economic and demographic phenomena of 18th-century English history. It was due to the rise of the Atlantic economy, fuelled largely by one commodity, which was West Indian sugar. In 1702 43 per cent of all English seaborne trade went through London. By 1751 the figure was 28 per cent, and the outports accounted for 72 per cent of England's total shipping tonnage.<sup>94</sup> The majority of this tonnage was accounted for by the West Coast ports. Bristol led the way, and was already active in the sugar trade by the middle of the 17th century. Liverpool was not far behind, and the town's first sugar refinery was built in the 1680s. Thereafter economic expansion was rapid, and in Liverpool's case it was mirrored by the equally rapid development of its port.<sup>95</sup> Until 1719 Liverpool had no purpose-

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*op.cit.*, pp.36, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.184-5, 200; C.H. Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship, 1603-1763*, London 1965, pp.271, 276.

<sup>95</sup> There are numerous histories of the economic rise of Liverpool in the 18th century. Many of these are concerned specifically with Liverpool's role in the African slave trade. The most useful general summary of the rise of the port of Liverpool can be found in F.E. Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey, an Economic History of a Port 1700-1970*, Newton Abbot, 1971.

built dock, so that ocean going vessels were forced to anchor at the mouth of the Dee and discharge their cargo into lighters.<sup>96</sup> At the beginning of the 18th century there was a marked increase in the West India trade, with importations of raw sugar rising from 760 tons in 1704 to 1,120 tons in 1711, and this initiated a dock building programme which continued throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>97</sup> By 1752 Liverpool had more vessels engaged in West Indian trade than in the African and European trades combined, and before the end of the century had overtaken Bristol as Britain's pre-eminent West India outport.<sup>98</sup> It was also regarded as foremost market in the world for mahogany and other American woods.

With the commercial expansion came industrial development. To the north was the south-west Lancashire coalfield; to the east was Manchester, one of the fastest growing manufacturing centres in the world; to the south were the Cheshire saltfields, and further inland but increasing in importance as the century progressed were the emerging industrial centres of Staffordshire and the Midlands. The canal system was still in its infancy, but all these areas were part of Liverpool's economic hinterland, reached by a network of small rivers - the Mersey, Irwell, Weaver and Douglas. By 1725 a good road system was also in place, connecting Liverpool with Lancaster, Manchester and even York.<sup>99</sup> Liverpool supplied all these places with West India goods, including, one assumes, mahogany.<sup>100</sup>

At Bristol the story is less dramatic, since in the 17th century the port was already England's largest outside London, but no less important.<sup>101</sup> Aside from the growth of the port itself, Bristol served an extensive hinterland. Via the Avon and the Severn mahogany could be shipped deep into the West Midlands. The Gloucester port books record mahogany shipped upstream from Bristol along the River Severn as early as 1717, five years before the Naval Stores Act. Between 1724 and 1734 twelve shipments of mahogany, ranging from two to eighty planks were recorded at Gloucester.<sup>102</sup> Above Gloucester, ships

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<sup>96</sup> Hyde, *op.cit.*, p.14.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.12-13, 25-42.

<sup>100</sup> Minchington, *op.cit.*, pp.157-8. Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.37-38, and p.38, note 2. Minchington observes that the west Midlands had historically been part of Bristol's commercial hinterland, but that during the 18th century this area came progressively within Liverpool's economic orbit. Davis cites Parliamentary petitions as early as 1720 from Midlands merchants who obtained West India goods via Liverpool.

<sup>101</sup> For the economic development of 18th-century Bristol see P.Mcgrath, ed., *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, Newton Abbot, 1970.

<sup>102</sup> Portbooks Programme, University of Wolverhampton. I am indebted to Nancy Cox for her help in obtaining this information. The very early date of the first shipment is extraordinary, and predates the first recorded clearance of mahogany from Jamaica for Bristol in 1720. Outport shippers seem to have been more prepared than their London counterparts to experiment with return cargos. In 1719, for instance, 60

sailed or were towed as far as Shrewsbury and Welshpool on the Severn and to Stratford on the Warwickshire Avon. Mahogany from Bristol also percolated into Herefordshire and the Welsh Marches.<sup>103</sup>

As important as their inland connections were the coastwise trades. Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster acted as primary distribution centres from which mahogany could reach secondary ports throughout western Britain, from Dumfries and Galloway in the north to Devon, Dorset and Hampshire in the south. The area served by the coasting trade of Bristol extended from London, along the south coast, around the west country to south Wales, Cardigan Bay and Anglesey.<sup>104</sup> Here it overlapped with the trade of Liverpool and Lancaster. These ports traded from mid-Wales up the Lancashire to Westmorland, Cumberland and south west Scotland.

Potentially, therefore, mahogany from the three primary West India outports could be got to any point on the west coast between London and Glasgow and thence, depending on the availability of river-borne transport, a long way inland.<sup>105</sup> The only obstacle to widespread distribution was cost. For instance, the freight cost of timber from Liverpool to Lancaster was 2 1/2d per cubic foot. By the time loading, lighterage and other incidental charges had been added, the price of mahogany had increased by at least a halfpenny per superficial foot. This suggests there may have been a division between those outports with direct West Indian connections - Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster - and the secondary ports served by the coastwise trade. In the former, mahogany must have been rapidly adopted by the woodworking trades. In the latter, the speed with which mahogany came into use may have been retarded by considerations of cost. Such considerations were likely to have operated with more force where viable alternatives to mahogany existed. Outports with direct trade to Europe and Scandinavia but only indirect trade to the West Indies could probably obtain wainscot significantly more cheaply than mahogany. Inland areas with no ready access to a port were likely to find indigenous timber cheaper than both.

To substantiate the hypothesis of an early adoption of mahogany in the west of England as well as in London would require vast labour to collate material from local archives, particularly inventories, to show the rate at which mahogany furniture percolated from the ports into the countryside. The task is beyond the scope of this thesis, but one or two isolated examples might serve to indicate its potential. Dunhman Massey Hall, near Altrincham in Cheshire, was rebuilt

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manchineal planks were imported into Bristol and 91 to Liverpool. CO 142/14.

<sup>103</sup> In 1729 the architect John Wood installed a mahogany reredos and altar rail at Tyberton church, near the Golden Valley. The timber was barged up the Wye above Hereford and unshipped at Sugwas Pool, a few miles from the church. See T. Mowl and B. Earnshaw, *John Wood, Architect of Obsession*, Bath 1988, pp.61-3. Wood's interior at Tyberton church survives. The reredos is mainly oak, veneered with three mahogany crosses. The altar rail and balusters are solid mahogany.

<sup>104</sup> For a general study of the coasting trade see T.S. Willan, *The English Coasting Trade, 1600-1750*, Manchester, 1938.

<sup>105</sup> Very little work has been done on 18th-century transport costs. As a general rule, heavy loads went by water where possible, since water freight was charged by volume and land freight by weight.

between 1732 and 1740. It contains a main staircase and stairwell panelling of solid mahogany. It also contains a large quantity of solid mahogany furniture, much of which is of the same date and probably original to the house.<sup>106</sup> Burrow Hall, near Kirkby Lonsdale, is a small Palladian house built in 1738. It too contains a solid mahogany staircase and panelling, though supporting documentary evidence does not survive. These are unlikely to be the only houses in the North West in which mahogany was used extensively at an early date. Many more may have been destroyed in the Victorian rebuilding of Liverpool, or by Luftwaffe bombing. Others may yet be discovered. The general point remains, and this is that the introduction of mahogany was a corollary to the rise of the West India trade. Mahogany was not a low volume, high value luxury commodity destined for a niche market. It was one of a range of West India goods imported in increasing quantities as the volume of West India shipping grew year by year. Because the west coast ports were ideally situated to take a leading role in this trade, they were also likely to be early leaders in the general introduction of mahogany into the timber market.

The situation on the east coast of England was markedly different to that on the west. Until the 1750's London was the only east coast port trading directly to Jamaica. Even Hull, second only to London in the volume of its overseas trade, had no direct trade with Jamaica until 1752.<sup>107</sup> Prior to this, West India goods imported into Hull came coastwise from London. Although logwood, fustic, *lignum vitae*, boxwood and many other West Indian commodities are listed as coastwise cargo in the Hull Port Books, no mahogany was imported before 1730.<sup>108</sup> This evidence, or lack of it, suggests that with one or two notable exceptions (Seaton Delaval and Houghton), the eastern outports were some years behind Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster in receiving mahogany. Again, the cost of coastwise shipping may have been a significant factor in this.<sup>109</sup>

Cost aside, there was no physical obstacle to obtaining mahogany anywhere on the east coast and a good way inland. Although statistics for London's coastwise trade in the 18th century are not available, in the late 17th century, 67.4 per cent of this trade went to the east coast ports.<sup>110</sup> The chief recipients of London's east coast re-export trade were King's Lynn, Hull and Newcastle. King's Lynn's inland navigation via the Cam and Ouse rivers was extensive, and according to Defoe the port supplied 'about six Counties wholly, and three Counties in Part,

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<sup>106</sup> Manchester University Library, *Dunham Massey Papers*, inventories EGR7/17/1-9.

<sup>107</sup> Cust 3. According to Davis, only one vessel entered Hull from 'America' (unspecified) in 1728, 15 in 1772. Davis, *op.cit.*, p.39.

<sup>108</sup> E 190 355/6 *et seq.*

<sup>109</sup> In 1744 Thomas Ivory of Norwich offered to supply mahogany to the trade at London prices plus the cost of carriage to Norwich. He was one of many land-locked 18th century provincial makers who claimed to match the low prices of London makers, implying that the London trade had their materials cheaper because they were closer to the point of importation. *DEFM*

<sup>110</sup> Willan, *op.cit.*, p.144. London's 18th-century Port Books were destroyed in an administrative tidy-up at the end of the last century.

with their Goods...'.<sup>111</sup> Further north, an extensive river transport system radiated inland from the mouth of the Humber. From Hull shipping went via the Humber and Trent into Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, via the Aire to Leeds and the West Riding of Yorkshire, via the Ouse to York, Ripon and the Dales.<sup>112</sup> Further north still, the rivers Tees and Tyne carried goods deep into County Durham and Northumberland. Since we lack a detailed analysis of the east coast Port Books it is impossible to quantify the rate and volume of coastwise mahogany shipments, but it is probable that when London's coastwise re-export trade is taken into consideration, the proportion of mahogany ultimately arriving in provincial towns and cities was even greater than that shown in Figure 2.13.

From c.1730 onwards mahogany appears in regional records in all parts of the country. At Blandford in Dorset the joinery and building firm of Thomas, John and William Bastard had a mahogany writing table and a quantity of unwrought mahogany destroyed by fire in 1731.<sup>113</sup> Amongst those provincial furniture makers supplying or advertising mahogany furniture by 1740 were John Bickadike of Newcastle; Joseph Hall of Hull; John Pearce of Derby; Humphrey Hands of Warwick; Thomas Harrison of Middleham in Wensleydale; Samuel Lockwood of Ipswich; Francis Lomax of Shrewsbury.<sup>114</sup> This handful of names is merely some of those that have so far come to light. Further work among the thousands of local archives the length and breadth of England and Wales will certainly bring many more to scholarly attention.

For provincial furniture makers, far more than for their better established London rivals, the introduction of mahogany was little short of a revolution. The potential for change inherent in this raw material is illustrated by the rise of the Lancaster firm of Gillow. In 1727 Robert Gillow set up a joinery and carpentry business in Lancaster. By 1732 Gillow was manufacturing mahogany furniture to order and a few years later he was manufacturing for speculative sale. By 1742 at the latest he was exporting finished mahogany furniture back to the West Indies.<sup>115</sup> By the middle of the 18th century Gillow had customers all over the north of England, southern Scotland and among the industrialists of the

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<sup>111</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Tour of the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ii, p.495. Most of the river routes leading inland from the Wash were pioneered by the coal trade in the 17th century. The highest navigable points were, from East to West, Thetford, Bury St Edmunds, Cambridge, and Bedford. Barges could also sail up the Nene beyond Peterborough, up the Welland to Stamford, and up the Whitham beyond Lincoln. From there it was possible to navigate into the River Trent and on into the east Midlands. R Finch, *Coals to Newcastle*, Lavenham 1973, pp.54-56.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.56-58.

<sup>113</sup> Polly Legg, *op.cit.*, pp.15-43.

<sup>114</sup> *DEFM*.

<sup>115</sup> Gillow 344/1 Waste Book and *passim*. For a discussion of Gillow's export trade to the West Indies see Keith Ingram, 'The West Indian trade of an English furniture firm in the 18th century,' *Jamaican Historical Review*, March 1962; 'Furniture and the Plantation: Further Light on the West Indian Trade of an English Furniture Firm in the Eighteenth Century', *Furniture History*, XXVIII, 1992, pp.42-98.



English midlands. In 1769 Gillow opened a London shop, competing with St Martin's Lane's finest. For an 18th-century tradesman this was a meteoric rise, apparently achieved without any of the weighty political or social patronage usually required for such advancement. The key to this extraordinary success was mahogany. As we shall discover in due course, Gillow's furniture business was a perfect mirror of the vicissitudes of the mahogany trade in general.

### Early mahogany furniture - a reappraisal

**Figure 2.9:**

Mahogany and gilt armchair,  
probably designed by William Kent



Photo: The author, by permission of the Marquess of Cholmondeley.

Compared with the relatively extensive documentation of fixed mahogany woodwork from the 1720s, examples of moveable furniture for which both provenance and documentation survive are rare. Those that are well known are all of Symonds's first variety of early mahogany furniture, coming 'from the

mansions of the nobility and the rich.’ At Houghton Hall there is a famous suite of mahogany and gilt seat furniture, probably designed by William Kent and carved by James Richards between 1726 and 1729 (Figure 2.9). These epitomise the opulent style often associated with early mahogany furniture. The form is high baroque, and the decorative treatment makes maximum use of the contrast between the rich, dark wood and gilded highlights. Equally well known is the pair of dressing tables supplied by John Boson to Lady Burlington in 1735 (Figure 2.10). They were certainly expensive - we know that Boson charged L20 for carving them - and the contrast between gilding and plain wood is again highly effective.

**Figure 2.10:** Mahogany dressing table carved by John Boson, 1735. One of a pair.



Photo: Trustees of the Chatsworth Estates.

Furniture of this type inevitably creates the impression of luxury and extravagance, but it was exceptional. At Houghton far more mahogany was consumed in mundane joinery than for moveable furniture. Even among the latter, the majority is in unadorned, solid mahogany. The benches in the Marble Hall, possibly also designed by Kent, are more typical of the joiner-made mahogany furniture which still survives in quantity at Houghton (Figure 2.11). We know from Walpole’s own records that his mahogany cost no more than wainscot, and most of it was used as such. And we know that ten years before he carved Lady Burlington’s tables, John Boson was carving mahogany at St George’s Bloomsbury where cheapness was the only criterion considered by the

Church Commissioners.<sup>116</sup>

Figure 2.11: Mahogany hall bench, Houghton Hall, 1725-30



Photo: The author, by permission of the Marquess of Cholmondeley.

In contrast to the few celebrated examples which have caught the eye of connoisseurs and historians, the great majority of surviving mahogany furniture, dateable on stylistic grounds to before 1740, is plain, unadorned and unremarkable. This is furniture of Symonds' second variety. It is almost all anonymous, without provenance or authorship, and this has made assessment of its status and value difficult. A few labelled examples survive, however. Figure 2.12 shows a mahogany bookcase bearing the trade label of John Belchier, of St Paul's churchyard, London.<sup>117</sup> Belchier, described on his death in 1753 as 'a very eminent cabinetmaker', is best known for his walnut veneered and japanned

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<sup>116</sup> The reredos at St George's is also gilded, but there is no evidence of it having been so originally. The painter's bills record that the mahogany was simply oiled at 4d a yard. The impression of luxury bestowed by the gilding is a later addition, and there was no difference in original finish between the mahogany and the wainscot which flanked it. Lambeth Palace Library, MS.2701, f.256.

<sup>117</sup> John Belchier, fl.1717-1753, offered a wide range of goods including state beds, looking glasses, gilt and gesso work, and walnut furniture. For further details see DEFM. The bookcase illustrated was sold by Sotheby's on 18th November 1994, lot 77.

Figure 2.12:

Mahogany bookcase by  
John Belchier, c.1740.

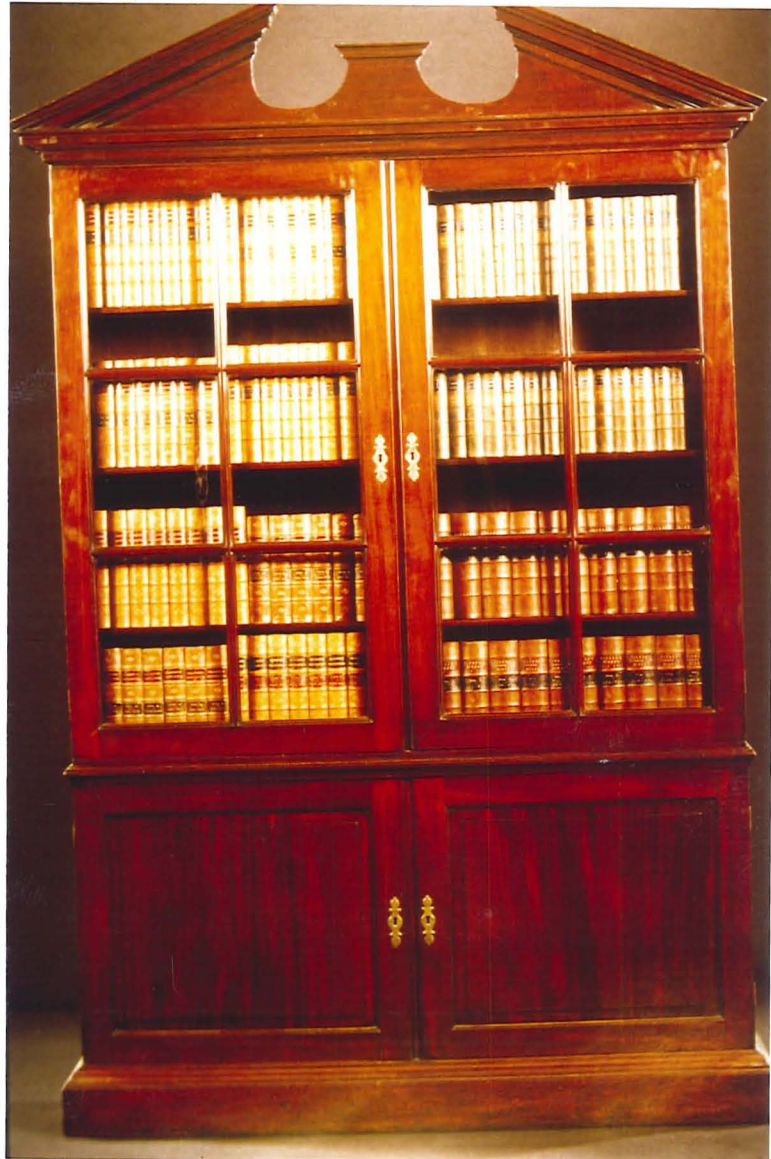


Photo: Sotheby's.

desk-and-bookcases, and this is the only mahogany piece by him recorded. It is very plain, of severe architectural form in solid mahogany with the minimum of enrichment and simple mouldings. It appears to date from c.1740, but with so few stylistic indicators it is difficult to be more precise.<sup>118</sup> The bookcase is of a type made in both wainscot and mahogany which survives in reasonable numbers. Of very similar character is the furniture of another London maker, John Pardoe, of Temple Bar, Strand.<sup>119</sup> A number of articles in walnut and mahogany are known bearing Pardoe's label, of which figure 2.13 is one. This

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<sup>118</sup> A fair number of similar bookcases survive, as noted by Symonds in 'The Influence of Mahogany'.

<sup>119</sup> John Pardoe, *fl.*1717-48. One of Pardoe's trade cards survives, advertising a wide range of furniture and upholstery. He retired from trade in 1748. For further details see DEFM.

**Figure 2.13:**

Mahogany chest of drawers by John Pardoe, 1743.



Photo: Sotheby's

plain mahogany chest of drawers is undated, but another piece by Pardoe, a mahogany bureau, bears the date of supply, 3 March 1743, and its modest price of L3.13.6.<sup>120</sup> Like Belchier's bookcase, Pardoe's work is plain and workmanlike, with the minimum of embellishment. In common with most early mahogany furniture, it is soundly made in solid timber. Both in appearance and construction this type of furniture has more in common with wainscot than

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<sup>120</sup> This bureau was sold by Sotheby's on 23 May 1980, lot 154. Other mahogany articles Pardoe's label include a dressing chest sold at the same sale, lot 129, and a chest of drawers illustrated in *Country Life*, 10 June 1965, p.1421.

walnut.<sup>121</sup>

In his post war articles, 'The New Wood' and 'The Influence of Mahogany on Furniture Design', R.W. Symonds observed that the single biggest advantage of mahogany when compared to European timbers, especially oak and walnut, was its greater width. Hitherto, he said, "The joiners used wainscot for their dining-tables;... Having procured some mahogany, the joiners found that it was a perfect material for dining tables; the wide planks permitted each of its three leaves to be made in one piece...".<sup>122</sup> Accordingly, he argued, the most common articles of early mahogany furniture were tables of all kinds, and in particular the drop-leaf dining table and the snap-top tripod or claw table, a type which until the introduction of mahogany was a relative rarity.<sup>123</sup> This view is certainly consistent with the evidence of surviving furniture, and also with the content of early trade advertisements researched by Symonds (see chapter one, p.29 and note 4), in which mahogany tables feature prominently. We should also remember Bramcher's *Man of Taste*, who went 'running mad' for 'red vein'd' mahogany dining tables. Planks of widths suitable for 'table wood' soon began to fetch a premium; a great deal, perhaps the majority, of mahogany never reached this size, but nevertheless found ready employment. Even planks of twelve or fourteen inches were wider, more stable and better coloured than wainscot, and hence found a receptive market among furniture makers.

Mahogany was also undoubtedly a fine carver's wood, and carved mahogany slab frames or tables are one of the most distinctive early forms.<sup>124</sup> Among the earliest are the pair still standing in the Marble Hall at Houghton (Figure 2.13) These are of composite construction, so that the more massive parts are carved from glued-up blocks of mahogany, but the wastage involved in their manufacture was nevertheless considerable. Tables of this kind are only exceptionally found in walnut, but usually in oak or painted pine. The sheer woodiness of many of these early slab tables is extravagant, and suggests that, far from being Cescinsky's 'prohibitive luxury', mahogany was freely available.

The real impact of mahogany was felt, not at the luxury end of the market, where new and marvellous materials could always be had at a price, but among the broad middle range of furniture makers, for whom the use of imported 'exotic' timbers had not previously been an option. In the late 17th century

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<sup>121</sup> It was these workaday examples of early mahogany that posed such problems for Herbert Cescinsky and others, since the contrast between their obvious ordinariness and their supposed luxury status was irreconcilable. In order to overcome this difficulty, the antiques trade have invented the term 'red walnut' to describe the solid, red-brown timber which looks like mahogany but does not accord with their preconceptions of the luxury character of early mahogany furniture. This term is in widespread use among dealers and auctioneers. Indeed, the bookcase by John Belchier (Figure 2.11) was described in Sotheby's catalogue as red walnut. The term is both misleading and nonsensical.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138. This was something to which Symonds attached considerable importance in all his works from 1921 onwards.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.138, 142.

<sup>124</sup> See, for instance Macquoid, *op.cit.*, figs. 73-78; Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, figs. 125-136; Symonds, *The Present State*, figs. 58 & 59, 67 & 68; *English Furniture*, figs. 176-182.

luxury cabinet work was virtually defined by the use of imported woods such as olivewood, princes wood, rosewood and ebony. From 1722 onwards this was no longer the case, and by the 1740s mahogany was available in most areas of England. In terms of price, mahogany was comparable to wainscot, but on all other counts mahogany won hands down. In colour and figure, in width, stability, and ease of working, mahogany was much the superior wood. Its rapid success is therefore unsurprising. Mahogany became the broad foundation on which the great Georgian furniture trade was built. Ultimately, however, mahogany's manifold virtues would have counted for little had there not been a large commercial empire to support its importation. The story of mahogany is indissolubly linked with that of West Indian trade, and in particular, with the trade of one West Indian island - Jamaica.

**Figure 2.14:** Carved mahogany slab frame, one of a pair, Houghton Hall, 1725-30.



Photo: The author, by permission of the Marquess of Cholmondeley

## CHAPTER THREE - THE JAMAICA TRADE 1720-1763.

### The island of Jamaica

At the time of its occupation by the English in May 1655, Jamaica had not more than 1,500 Spanish inhabitants and an equal number of negro slaves.<sup>1</sup> The island was almost entirely undeveloped, a virgin territory 140 miles long and just over 40 miles at its widest. Much of Jamaica is mountainous, with more than half its area over 1,000 feet above sea level, and rising to more than 7,400 feet in the Blue Mountains at the eastern end of the island.<sup>2</sup> There was one navigable river, Black River, rising in the western interior of the island and emerging on the south coast about sixty miles west of Kingston. Around the eastern and northern coasts, plains form a narrow fringe between the mountains and the sea, but on the south is a broad savannah, interrupted only by the May Day and Santa Cruz hills of Manchester and St Elizabeth parishes. It was here on the southern lowlands that the English began to settle in the years after 1655 (Figure 3.1).

For the first forty years of English occupation, Jamaica acted chiefly as a buccaneering base. At Port Royal, on the tip of the long arm of land which encloses Kingston Harbour, the buccaneers established a stronghold which quickly became a boisterous town of some 8,000 inhabitants. Port Royal came to a dramatic and, some said, a deserved end in 1692, when an earthquake threw half the town into the sea, killing two thousand people. A new town was founded at Kingston, a couple of miles across the bay on the landward side. From 1664 onwards the various governors of Jamaica attempted to circumscribe the activities of the buccaneers and encouraged them to adopt steadier livelihoods. Settlers arrived from England and from other Caribbean islands, and after the initial failure to maintain the Spanish cacao walks, they turned to sugar production. Sugar canes grew like weeds in Jamaica's fertile soil. In 1673 there were already 57 Jamaican sugar mills in operation; two years later this number had risen to 73, with a further 43 building<sup>3</sup>. By 1700 Jamaica's population stood at around 7,000 whites and 4,500 negro slaves, and in 1712 the output of sugar in Jamaica exceeded that of Barbados for the first time.<sup>4</sup> In 1726 a former

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<sup>1</sup> General accounts of the English conquest and settlement of Jamaica can be found in Sir Alan Burns, *History of the British West Indies*, London 1954; Cyril Hamshere, *The British in the Caribbean*, London 1972; C.P. Lucas, *Historical Geography of the British Colonies*, Oxford 1890. One of the best and most detailed recent accounts is Michael Craton and James Walvin, *A Jamaican Plantation - The History of Worthy Park 1670-1970*, Toronto, 1970, pp.1-45.

<sup>2</sup> 'The internal part of the island is very high, broken land, and in some places, the mountains rise to a prodigious height: between the hills are interspersed beautiful vallies, generally well cultivated, and laid out in rich farms and plantations.' Dr John Quier and others, *Letters and Essays... on the West Indies by different practitioners*, London, 1778, p.xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Noel Deer, *The History of Sugar*, London 1949, Vol.I, p.176.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.



Jamaican resident wrote: 'It is evident to all, who are conversant in Trade, that the Island is of greater Consequence to the Crown of Great Britain, than all the other Sugar Colonies belonging to his Majesty...'<sup>5</sup>

Mahogany trees were abundant in Jamaica. In 1740 the traveller Charles Leslie noted: 'The Mountains, and indeed the greater Part of the Island, are covered with Woods... the *Cedar*, the *Lignam vitae*, the *Mahogany*, and unnumbered others mingling their boughs.'<sup>6</sup> Although commonly found in the mountains of the interior, mahogany grew best in those areas most suitable for settlement and cultivation. According to James Macfadyen, 'The Mahogany delights in a light stony or marly soil, and is a common tree in our plains and lower hills. I have never met with it at an elevation above 3,000 feet, nor very close to the sea-shore.'<sup>7</sup> There is little evidence that the early settlers attached much value to the timber. It is not mentioned by Sir Hans Sloane (1688 & 1725), nor in Henry Barham's *Hortus Americanus* (1722).<sup>8</sup> Whilst commercially valuable woods such as brasiletto, fustic and *lignum vitae* were exported to England, others were felled indiscriminately to make way for sugar cane.<sup>9</sup> Much timber was burned in the sugar boilers; the rest was employed in structural work. Edward Long records that mahogany was 'exceedingly plentiful' on the south coast, and many of the first settlers' houses were built and even roofed with it.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-18th century a good number of the old houses made from mahogany timber were still in evidence. Charles Leslie noted many 'Gentlemens' Houses ... of one story, consisting of five or six handsome Apartments, beautifully lined and floored with Mahogany'. Another observer noted that in Kingston 'The Buildings are... floored with Mahogany, or some other beautiful Wood, of which there is Plenty in Jamaica'.<sup>11</sup> It was presumably these kinds of employments which first suggested to the West India shippers the possibility of mahogany finding a market in England.

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<sup>5</sup> Anon, *The State of the Island of Jamaica*, London 1726, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica*, London 1740, p.19.

<sup>7</sup> Macfadyen, *Flora of Jamaica*, p.176. These early 19th-century trees seen by Macfadyen were almost certainly the regrowth of areas cleared in the early years of the trade.

<sup>8</sup> Barham, *Hortus Americanus*, Sir Hans Sloane, 'A Voyage to the Islands Madeira, etc...'

<sup>9</sup> CO 142/14,15. The evidence for early timber exports from Jamaica is discussed in chapter one.

The idea that so-called 'exotic' cabinet woods necessarily possess intrinsic value is fairly modern. Most early authorities record the indiscriminate destruction of woodland on the West Indian islands and the employment of now valuable woods for the most mundane purposes. For instance, Richard Ligon describes *Prickly Yellow wood*, now better known as satinwood, as 'good for posts and beams'. *Redwood*, by which Ligon probably meant mahogany, was 'accounted very lasting, and good for building.' Ligon, *op.cit.*, p.41.

<sup>10</sup> 'We may imagine the plenty of it in former times here, when it used to be cut up for beams, joists, plank, and even shingles'. Edward Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.278; III, p.843. Long's statement was probably drawn from Patrick Browne's 1759 work, *The Civil and Natural History of Jamaica*. Later authorities such as Macfadyen usually paraphrased Long or Browne, or both. Macfadyen, *op.cit.*, p.176.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie, *op.cit.*, p.30; Anon, *op.cit.*, p.5.

As both population and sugar production increased, so did the demand for land. Settlement spread first along the south coast, but by the middle of the 18th century plantations were established with increasing frequency in the Westmoreland plain and along the northern coast.<sup>12</sup> Mahogany cutting therefore went hand in hand with settlement. When land was cleared to establish a plantation, it was customary to leave about one third in timber. Edward Long's plantation at Lucky Valley, for instance, contained 250 acres of woodland out of a total of 900. This ensured a good supply of timber for construction jobs on the plantation, and for fuel to fire the sugar boilers.<sup>13</sup> Scattered singly and in small groups amongst the woods were mahogany trees. The author of *The Importance of Jamaica to Great Britain* described mahogany trees growing 'in Keys or little Islands, any Person's Property who has Negroes to cut it down and saw it into Planks, whence it is brought in Sloops to Kingston, and so sent to England...'.<sup>14</sup>

### The growth and development of the trade

Until the 1770s Jamaica was by far the greatest supplier of mahogany to the English market (Figure 3.2, Appendix I).<sup>15</sup> The island possessed a greater land area (4250 square miles) than all the other British islands combined, and until the middle of the 18th century, it was still to some extent a frontier colony,

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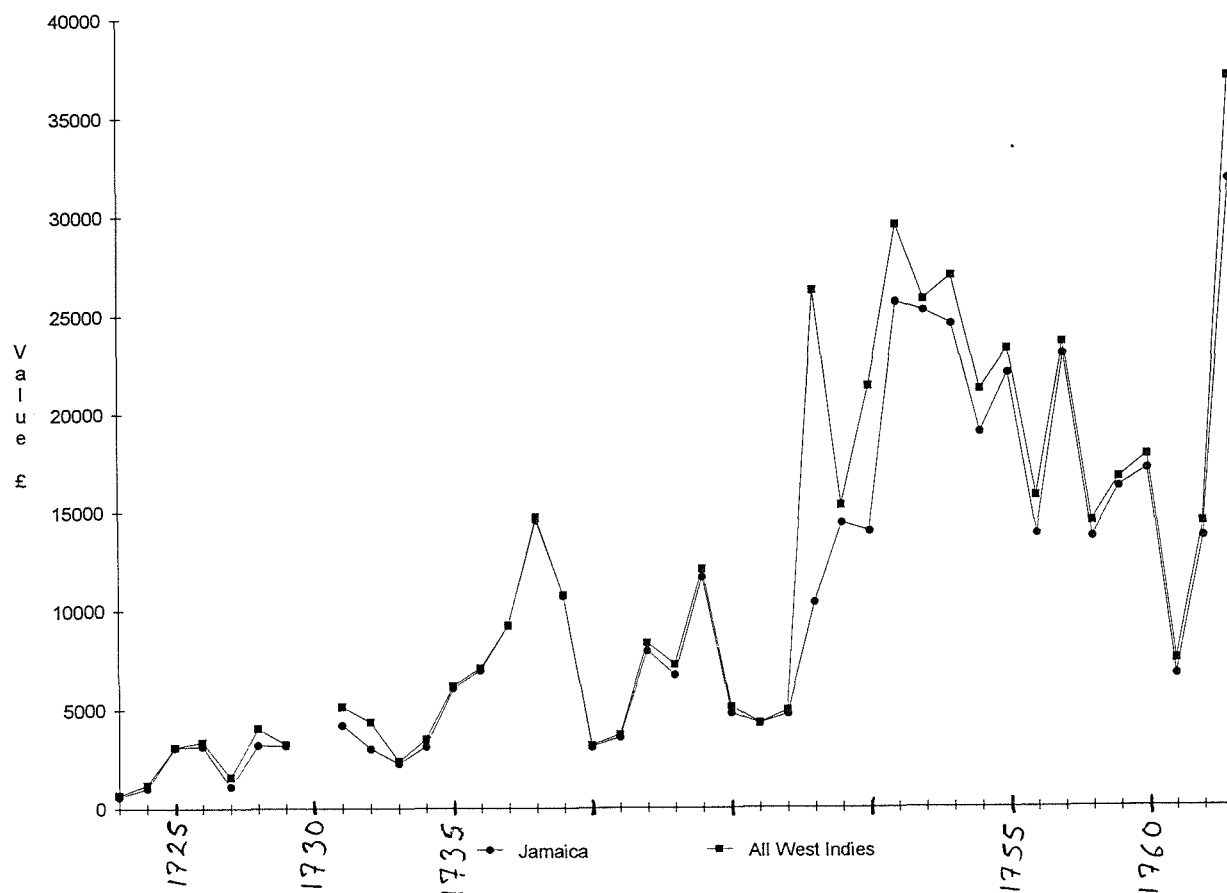
<sup>12</sup> A more detailed account of the demographic development of Jamaica can be found in B.W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, Kingston 1988, pp.6-7. See also Craton and Walvin, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Higman, *op.cit.*, p.86. See Craton and Walvin, *op.cit.*, for a good account of the founding of one such plantation at Worthy Park, about 25 miles inland from Spanish Town. In 1689 this estate of 1774 acres contained at least 500 acres of 'good valley woodland'. According to Noel Deer, the usual organisation of land on a Jamaican sugar plantation allowed one third for sugar cane, one third in pasture and crops, and one third in woodland for fuel and timber. Deer, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, p.334. Contemporary accounts include Edward Long, *op.cit.*, and Bryan Edwards, *History of the West Indies*, London 1798. He calculated (Book V, p.250) that the 'average' Jamaican sugar estate comprised 300 acres in sugar cane, 200 in guinea grass, 100 in provisions and the rest woodland.

<sup>14</sup> Anon, *The Importance of Jamaica to Great-Britain consider'd*, London, 1740, p.49.

<sup>15</sup> Up to the end of the War of Austrian Succession (1748) Jamaica's share of the mahogany imported direct into England varied between 99.9 and 70 per cent, and averaged 92.5 per cent. Prior to the war Jamaica's average share was slightly less, at 90.2 per cent, and in the few years between the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) and the beginning of the Seven Years' War (1756) it fell to just over 78 per cent. This virtual monopoly was exaggerated by the wartime convoy system in force between 1739 and 1748, which tended to favour Jamaica at the expense of smaller islands. Of the other British possessions, the single most important source was the Bahamas. For the rest, every island contributed something, with Barbados first in importance, followed by Antigua and Montserrat. But in contrast to Jamaica most of the smaller islands were heavily settled before 1700, and were largely denuded of viable reserves of wood. Their slight contribution to the trade is therefore unsurprising.

**Figure 3.2.** Value of mahogany importations from the West Indies, 1723-1763.



Source: Customs 3.

- Notes:
1. The graph shows the value of mahogany importations from Jamaica against the total of importations from the West Indies.
  2. Importations via North America are not included.

relatively undeveloped and underpopulated.<sup>16</sup> The island was rich in timber, and mahogany cutting was able to expand almost continuously, alongside settlement and planting, until the third quarter of the 18th century. Jamaica was also the centre of Britain's colonial empire in the Caribbean. It had, therefore, the both commercial infrastructure and the shipping to support the rapidly expanding mahogany trade.

Despite the sudden and impressive increase in mahogany importations after 1722, the growth of the trade in the first ten years or so was relatively sluggish when compared with later decades. The 1720s were slack years for Atlantic trade generally. War with Spain in the West Indies seemed a real possibility,

<sup>16</sup> Pares, *Merchants and Planters*, pp.41-42. A report of 1788 calculated the land area of Jamaica at 3,500,000 acres, of which only 1,150,000 were under cultivation. BT 6/75 f.17, *Petition of the Assembly of Jamaica to the Board of Trade*, December 1788.

shippers were nervous and the sugar market was depressed.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, mahogany was new to the English timber market, and there may have been a residual uncertainty amongst importers as to its reception. There was still some ambiguity about what sort of wood it was. Was mahogany merely a substitute for wainscot, or was it something better, capable of creating a market all of its own?

From 1733 until 1739 importations of all West India goods rose sharply. The value of mahogany importations peaked at almost L15000 in 1738, before crashing dramatically with the outbreak of war with Spain in 1739. Scarcity of mahogany during wartime became a regular feature of the trade throughout the 18th century. The contraction of trade was general, but mahogany suffered more than most West Indian commodities. This is shown by figure 3.3, which reveals the marked adverse effect of war on mahogany importations as compared with sugar, particularly during the years 1739-48 and 1756-63. The reason for this was that in the Jamaica trade mahogany was always a marginal commodity, carried only when shipping space was available. When commercial conditions became difficult, and the volume of shipping was reduced by war, then shippers tended to concentrate on their core business, which was sugar and its related products. As well as being the planters' chief source of revenue, sugar was liable to spoil if not packed and shipped with expedition.<sup>18</sup> When shipping was short, therefore, mahogany could wait but sugar could not. In the War of Austrian Succession (1739-48), the reduction in sugar importations was only slight, compared with the heavy fall in mahogany. In the Seven Years' War (1756-63), sugar importations actually rose, due to the capture of the rich French sugar islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, when trade was booming, and there were more ships than sugar in the Caribbean, mahogany took up the slack. The end of each war is marked by a significant upturn or 'release cycle' in importations, as British shipping, no longer threatened by enemy privateers, flocked into West Indian ports. The phenomenon was particularly notable in 1764-5, when the post-war shipping boom coincided with a slump in sugar production, allowing mahogany to be carried in record quantities. The overall effect was that the mahogany trade grew fitfully, in series of great peacetime leaps interrupted by wartime slumps.

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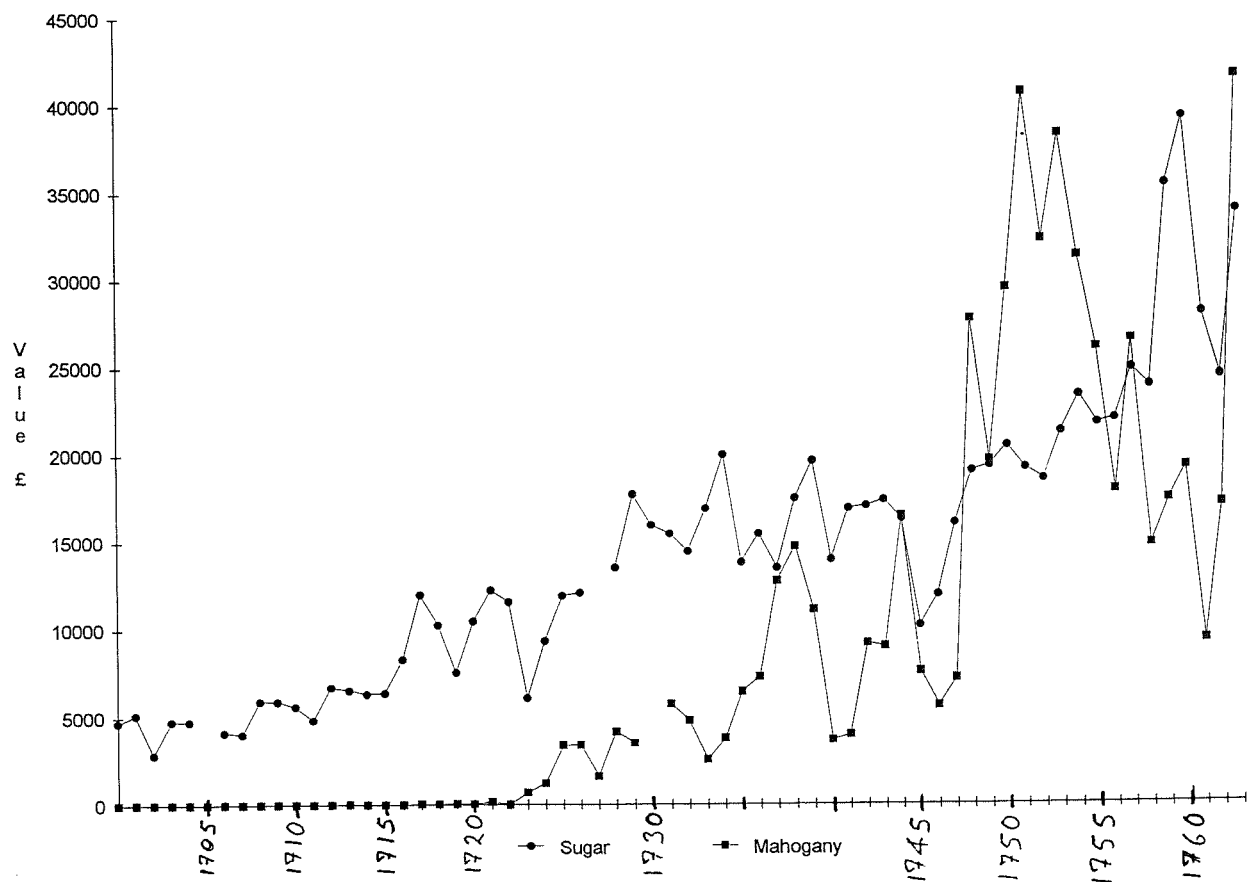
<sup>17</sup> According to Frank Pitman the root cause of this depression was slack demand for sugar in England and competition in the European markets from French, Dutch and Portuguese producers. F.W. Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies, 1700-1763*, Yale 1917, pp.163-169.

<sup>18</sup> For accounts of shipping matters in the sugar trade see R.Pares, *A West India Fortune*, London 1950, pp.207-208; and Craton and Walvin, *op.cit.*, pp.113-4.

<sup>19</sup> Both graphs feature marked year-on year fluctuations, and although the long term trend was upwards, it tended to move fitfully, with periodic slumps. This is characteristic of both sugar and mahogany markets. The low price of sugar c.1713-20 is reflected in slack import figures, and was one of the factors leading to the 1721 Naval Stores Act. The price began to rise in the late 1720s, leading to the boom import years of 1728-30. This in turn was followed by a relatively sluggish period up to 1750, in which trade was additionally depressed by war. After the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) trade began a rapid expansion, which in the case of sugar lasted until the early 1770s. For further informations see Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.31, 41-2; Pares, *Merchants and Planters*, Economic History Review Supplement 4, 1960, p.40.

From the time the trade became properly established in the late 1730s to the mid-1760s the total growth was about 300 per cent. This is roughly comparable to the rise in sugar importations over the same period. At the same time, the tonnage of British shipping involved in the West India trade also rose by approximately the same amount.<sup>20</sup> This crude comparison might suggest that over the long term it was shipping capacity which was the controlling factor in the growth of all West Indian trade, including that in mahogany.

Figure 3.3: Mahogany and sugar, 1700-1763.



Source: Customs 3.

Notes: 1. The graph includes all mahogany imported, including importations via North America.  
 2. The quantity of sugar is given in hundredweights, and for the purposes of this graph has been divided by a factor of ten.

The fluctuations in the supply of mahogany created a volatile market in England, with alternate periods of scarcity and glut. This had an inevitable impact on its market price. The effect is first apparent during the war of Austrian Succession (1739-48). Between 1738 and 1740 the average price of

<sup>20</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, p.298.

mahogany rose from 4d to 8d per foot.<sup>21</sup> Part of the price rise can be attributed to increases in wartime freight rates and insurance.<sup>22</sup> Primarily, though, it was due simply to the laws of supply and demand, as mahogany importations fell from some 1800 tons in 1738 to 458 tons in 1740.<sup>23</sup> Importations picked up again in the later 1740s, despite the entry of France into the war in 1744, but 6-8d per foot remained the norm until the peace of Aix la Chapelle in 1748.<sup>24</sup>

With the peace, prices fell back slightly. Between 1748 and 1752 Robert Gillow paid between 5d and 7 1/2d per foot. It is notable, however, that despite record importations in the early 1750s, prices did not return to their pre-war level. This became a characteristic feature of each post-war 'release cycle' - a surge in importations, followed by a fall in price, but never quite back to the old levels.<sup>25</sup> Gillow was probably buying relatively cheaply at Lancaster, since in the early 1750s the average price of Jamaica mahogany in London was still sixteen guineas per ton (equivalent to 8d/ft), double its pre-war price.<sup>26</sup>

Until the middle of the 18th century direct trade between England and Jamaica had been confined to London and the three western outports of Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster. By the early 1750s this situation was changing rapidly,

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<sup>21</sup> The low level of importations was probably due to the war scare of 1740-41, when the French dispatched a powerful fleet to the West Indies. In the event, war with France did not break out until 1744.

<sup>22</sup> The rate of freight increased by 25 per cent to 2d per foot. Insurance rose from about 5 per cent to 12, 15 or 20 percent. For further discussion of these topics see chapter six.

<sup>23</sup> Shortage of shipping was clearly the limiting factor in the chain of supply during wartime. This in itself does not explain the rise in price, of which the major part was accounted for by increases at Jamaica rather than by profiteering in England. The most probable explanation is that since shipping was short, the planters' primary concern was to obtain a loading for their sugar, and comparatively little mahogany was cut. This resulted in a highly competitive timber market at Kingston, and a consequent rise in profits for the planters. The same phenomenon occurred in Honduras in the early 1780s, when the rise in wartime prices benefitted the cutters to such a degree that they attempted (unsuccessfully) to fix prices at that level even in peacetime. By the same token, the Honduras cutters found trade during the Napoleonic War very profitable despite the smaller quantities of mahogany exported. Their least profitable episode was the boom years of 1786-8, when prices were depressed by the sheer volume of mahogany on the market.

<sup>24</sup> Waste Book 344/2. In January 1748 Gillow ordered mahogany 'from 6<sup>d</sup> to 7 1/2 if good, but you must send 20 or 30 pounds worth but it be good if possible.' In May he began to buy more in anticipation of a cessation of hostilities. 'As we are going to have a peace... nothing is better remittance for me than mahogany: for my part would chuse nothing Else: if you can get it Shipt.' Letter Book 344/166.

<sup>25</sup> All West Indian commodities shared this phenomenon to some extent. Stocks of colonial produce tended to accumulate in the islands during wartime. This combined with pent-up demand and high prices to cause a sudden flood of colonial goods into England as soon as peace was declared. For further details see Davis, *op.cit.*, p.27 *et passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Cust 3; BT 6/50, Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790. This document contains a list of average prices for mahogany on the London market between 1750 and 1789. Waugh declares the source of his information as Messrs Seddons, the prominent furniture manufacturers in Aldersgate, who were also mahogany importers. In Lancaster, Robert Gillow was still able to buy mahogany for between 2d and 4d per foot (L4-8 per ton) in 1732-3, but a decade later he was paying 5-7d (L10-14 per ton), and in the early 1750s good quality 'table wood', i.e., timber over 24" wide, was fetching up to a shilling per foot (L24 per ton). 344/161, 344/166.

and in addition to the established West India outports, ships now cleared Kingston for Newcastle, Hull, Plymouth, Holyhead, Preston and Whitehaven. In Scotland, Glasgow was joined by Perth and Leith.<sup>27</sup> These towns were thereby promoted from secondary to primary West India ports, with all the benefits this entailed, including cheaper mahogany, and more of it. But although the amount of mahogany imported into outports increased as the total volume of trade increased, the percentage distribution between London and outports remained roughly the same.

### **The North American re-export trade**

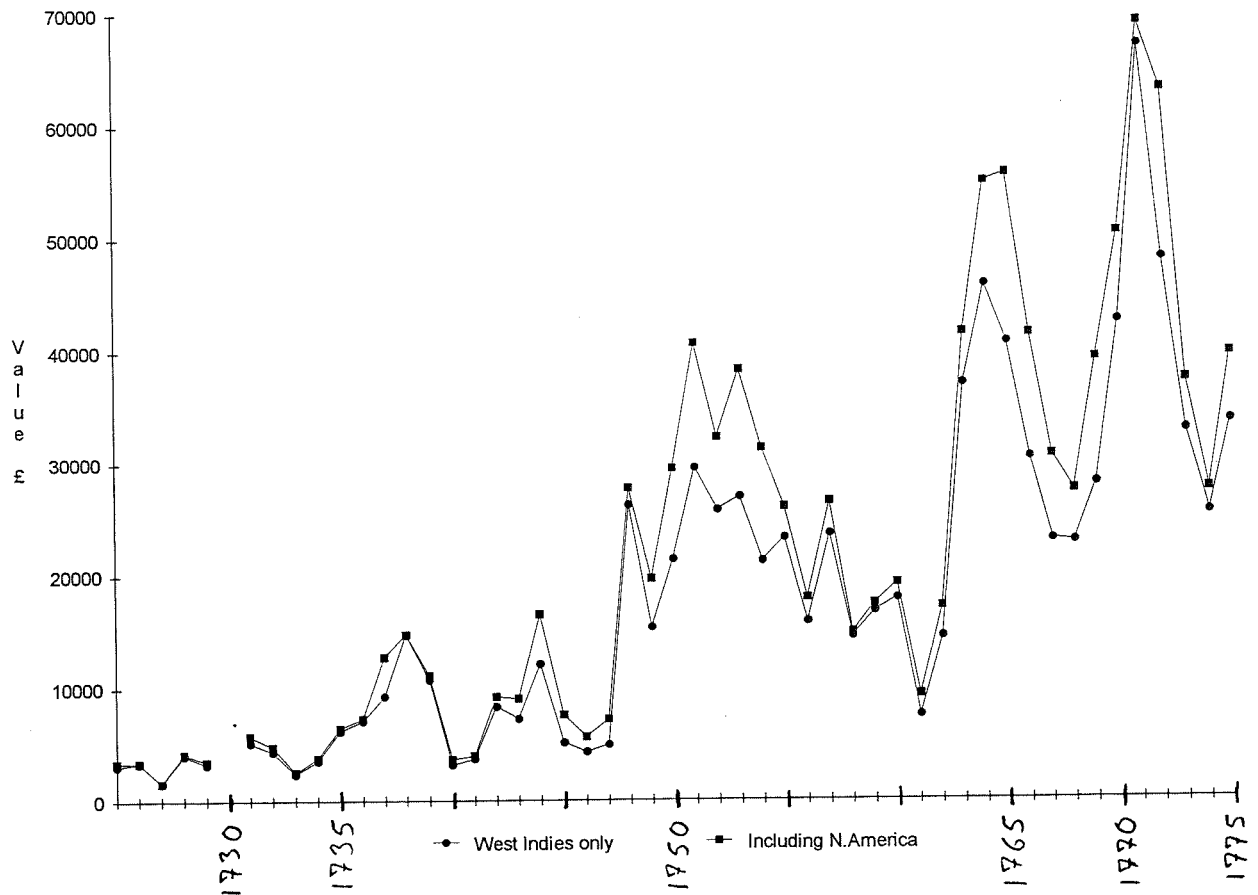
From 1725 onwards a good proportion of the mahogany imported into England came indirectly, *via* the North American colonies, and in some years these re-exports amounted to 36% of the English total (Figure 3.4, Appendix II). The shipping returns for various colonies, both North American and West Indian, show that the mahogany trade into the continental colonies began in earnest in the 1720s, roughly coeval with the passing of the Naval Stores Act in England. Although the provisions of the Act did not extend to trade between the West Indies and North America, its effect on mahogany importations into North America was decisive, for reasons that will be discussed shortly. However, the import tariffs of each North American colony varied, and were set by the legislatures of the individual colonies. It is highly probable that these tariffs had a bearing on the volume and direction of the mahogany trade into North America, but until detailed research is carried out their effects will remain unquantified. Lack of information on this topic must be regarded as a conspicuous *caveat* underlying the whole of the discussion of the trade *via* North America.

The demand for mahogany in North America itself was relatively subdued, since the population was far smaller than England, and the furniture making trades less developed. Unlike English furniture makers, North Americans had plenty of home grown alternatives to mahogany, particularly black walnut and cherry, which mitigated demand for imported timber. The emergence of a considerable re-export trade to England suggests that the North Americans imported more mahogany than they could usefully employ. The explanation for this lies in the economic interrelationship of Great Britain, the thirteen colonies of North America and the West Indian plantations. There is not space here to discuss in detail what is undoubtedly a complex and often contentious economic relationship, but the dynamics of the exchange, insofar as they relate to mahogany, appear to have been as follows: the North American colonists imported more British goods than they could pay for by their own exports. They therefore depended on the West Indian plantations to provide cash revenue to

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<sup>27</sup> CO 142/15.

**Figure 3.4:** Value of importations of mahogany from North America and West Indies, 1725-1775.



Source: Customs 3.

make up the deficit.<sup>28</sup> This they achieved by exporting plantation stores, such as timber and provisions, to the West Indies, and returning with cash, bills of

<sup>28</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, p.40. R.B. Sheridan quotes a Barbados agent who claimed: 'in proportion to their dependence on North America, they [the planters] enable North America and Ireland to trade with Great Britain.' *Sugar and Slavery: an Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623-1775*, Baltimore, 1974, p.475. On the same subject David Richardson comments: '...it appears that the North Americans achieved an overall balance of payments surplus of some £507,000 annually on their business with the Caribbean between 1768 and 1772. The bulk of this surplus accrued to colonies north of the Delaware, which also accumulated the largest trade deficits with Britain... Surpluses on Caribbean trade were thus vital to the mainland colonies, allowing them to pay for almost 18 percent of their recorded imports from Britain around 1770.' 'The Slave Trade, Sugar, and British Economic Growth, 1748-1776', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 1987, pp.739-769. A contemporary analysis is given by Bryan Edwards: 'The Americans .... made up the deficiency, in a great degree, by means of their circuitous trade in the West Indies.... and were thus enabled to extend their dealings with Great Britain.' Edwards, *op.cit.*, Book VI. p.397 *et passim*.



exchange or West Indian produce. Some of this West Indian produce was consumed in the thirteen colonies; the rest, including mahogany, was remitted to England.<sup>29</sup> The clear early leader in the re-export trade was Carolina (Appendix II). Carolina had a thriving seaborne trade with the West Indies and the Bahamas in particular. Outward cargos were of relatively low value - timber, rice and other foodstuffs - and purchased little enough sugar or rum for the return lading, so that cheaper cargos, like mahogany, completed the freight. But Carolina was relatively underpopulated, with no urban centres other than Charleston and, unlike some of the northern colonies, no manufacturing base to speak of.<sup>30</sup> Hence Carolina re-exported the majority of its mahogany, either to other American colonies or to England.<sup>31</sup>

Further south, neither Georgia nor Florida were of much importance until after 1763. Georgia was the newest and the least developed of the colonies, whilst Florida was not acquired from the Spanish until the Peace of Paris. To the north, Virginia and Maryland re-exported some mahogany, especially after 1748, but it never equalled black walnut in importance.<sup>32</sup>

Pennsylvania, New York and New England all had well established populations and developing furniture manufacturing centres which must have created a growing demand for mahogany timber. It was in these areas that mahogany first supplanted in popularity the indigenous cabinet woods such as black walnut,

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<sup>29</sup> For the West Indians, as for the North Americans, this commercial relationship was essential for economic survival. The West Indian plantations depended on the northern colonies for the major part of their supplies of food and raw materials and, as the population of the islands grew, this dependence progressively increased. According to Edward Long, in 1751 Jamaica imported 4 million feet of lumber and 2.6 million hogshead and puncheon staves. Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.501. By the 1770s North America provided the British West Indies with a third of their dried fish; almost all their pickled fish; seven-eighths of their oats; three-quarters of their corn; nearly all their peas, butter, cheese, beans and onions; half of their flour; a quarter of their rice; five-sixths of their pine, oak and cedar boards; over half their slaves; most of their horses, sheep hogs, and poultry. Some of these commodities came chiefly from one colony or group of colonies. For instance, Pennsylvania and New York supplied the bulk of the flour, New England the fish and oil, and Georgia the rice. Most colonies supplied timber, but again there were particular specialities - white pine and oak from New England, oak, yellow pine and cypress from Carolina and Georgia. Return cargoes consisted of a more limited range of goods; rum, molasses, sugar, cotton, coffee, spices, indigo, dyewoods, and mahogany. S.H.H. Carrington, 'The American Revolution and the British West Indies' Economy', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVII,4, Spring 1987, pp. 823-850. For further analyses of trade between North America and the West Indies see L.J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean*, 1928, reprinted New York 1963; Pares, *War and Trade*, pp.395-403; F.W. Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies, 1700-1763*, Yale 1917; H.C. Bell, 'The West India Trade before the American Revolution', *American Historical Review*, XXII, 1917, pp. 272-287. A.M. Whitson, 'The Outlook of the Continental American Colonies on the British West Indies, 1760-1775', *Political Science Quarterly*, March 1930, pp.56-86.

<sup>30</sup> For an account of Carolina's mercantile development see John Bivins, Jnr., *The Furniture of Coastal North Carolina, 1700-1820*, MESDA 1988, pp.3-94. Jack Green, 'Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol.88, No.4, October 1987, pp. 192-210.

<sup>31</sup> CO 5/509. Carolina shipping returns, 1721-35.

<sup>32</sup> Between 1725 and 1775 the value of mahogany importations from Virginia and Maryland totalled L4,465, those of black walnut L50,292. Source: Customs 3. These figures have been rounded down to the nearest pound sterling.

whilst the surplus was re-exported to England. Re-exports remained sporadic until after the War of Austrian Succession, but from 1748 onwards these colonies sent substantial amounts of mahogany to England. This was in part a result of the removal of the wartime threat against Atlantic shipping. It may also have been due to rising mahogany prices on the English market, so that the indirect trade became profitable despite the double freights involved. During the Seven Years' War all maritime trade suffered, but in the 1760s mahogany re-exports recommenced with vigour, until brought to an abrupt halt by the commencement of the Revolutionary War in 1775.

One of the most notable differences between the trades to England and to North America was that Jamaica's role was far less dominant. Precise figures are impossible to determine, because shipping returns are not complete for every West Indian and North American colony, but the Jamaica shipping returns suggest that as a rule very little of that island's mahogany went to North America. In 1747, for instance, 4669 planks and 359,400 feet of mahogany cleared Kingston for England and a mere 28 planks and 260 feet cleared for North America - less than 1% of the total.<sup>33</sup> The destinations were various - Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Philadelphia, Rhode Island, New York and New England - and the amounts generally small. Most shipments amounted to a few planks or a few thousand superficial feet. The largest did not exceed twenty thousand feet, compared with sixty or even one hundred thousand feet in shipments to London. In 1753 something over two million feet were exported from Jamaica to England compared with just under 74,000 feet to North America - this was still under 4% of the total. In other years no mahogany at all was cleared from Kingston to North America, even though ships were returning north in ballast. It is probable, however, that the figures for Kingston are not reliably representative of Jamaica as a whole. Minor ports on the north side, such as Montego Bay and Port Antonio, were geographically better placed to serve the North American trade. Shipping returns for these ports are by no means complete, but mahogany was certainly exported from these to North America, and probably in comparatively greater proportion than from Kingston. Nevertheless, the trade between Jamaica and North America was quite insufficient account for the volume of mahogany re-exported to England. The North Americans were clearly obtaining their mahogany elsewhere.

### **Bahamas mahogany**

One variety of mahogany that occurs in North America but not in English records is Providence mahogany.<sup>34</sup> Providence or Bahamas mahogany was imported from the port of Nassau in New Providence, the most commercially

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<sup>33</sup> CO 142/15.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, Hinckley cites the 1748 inventory of a Philadelphia joiner, Thomas Gant, which included '2 Boards of Providence Wood'. Hinckley, *Historic Cabinet Woods*, p.131.

important of the Bahama islands.<sup>35</sup> Nassau was ideally situated as an entrepot between the continental North American colonies and the British West Indies. It was also nicely poised as a base from which to smuggle goods into Cuba and Hispaniola.<sup>36</sup> Some colonial vessels plied the short route between North America, especially the Carolinas, and the Bahamas, bringing food and plantation stores and exporting timber and salt.<sup>37</sup> Others called in at Nassau on their way back from Jamaica and other islands. Here vessels short of freight could always be sure of a loading of timber, of which the Bahamas had an abundant supply. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the principal Bahamian timber exports were brazilletto and other dyewoods, cedar, *lignum vitae* and sweetwood.<sup>38</sup> From c.1723 onwards these were joined by mahogany.

The main difficulty in making any assessment of the trade in Bahamas mahogany is one of terminology. Some modern botanical authorities state that the Bahamian name for mahogany (*Swietenia spp.*) is *madeira*.<sup>39</sup> Others state that *madeira* is the wood of *Persea indica*, a plant introduced to the Bahamas from the Canary islands.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, Mark Catesby's *Natural History* (1754) makes no mention of *madeira*, and neither do any other 18th-century botanical works. This omission is perhaps explained by the fact that Catesby and his fellow botanists were interested in scientific rather than colloquial nomenclature. The word certainly occurs in official correspondence from the 1720s onwards, and appears to distinguish *madeira* from mahogany. In 1729 the Surveyor General of Customs wrote of 'The great quantity of Madeira manchinele, mohogonny and other trees...' and decribed both 'Maddara and

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<sup>35</sup> CO 23/2 f.249. 'The principal place of the Bahama Islands is this of Providence, where the Governor and all the publick officers have their residence in a small village called Nassau, a good harbour for small ships defended by a regular fort etc.. In this Island are the bulk of the inhabitants, consisting of about 500 white people and 250 negro's....' Richard Fitzwilliam, Surveyor General of Customs for the Southern Continent of America, to the Commissioners of Customs, 3 October 1729. New Providence was 'the only Island frequented by foreign vessels and consequently all the Produce of al the rest is carried there.' CO 23/8 f.10, Governor Shirley to the Board of Trade, 9 December 1768.

<sup>36</sup> CO 27/12 Bahamas Shipping Returns.

<sup>37</sup> CO 23/2, ff.249-252. 'The chief trade here at present is by employing their vessels (of which there are about 20 but very small) in carrying Maddara and Mohogonny wood, turtle, lemons, oranges, pine apples etc. to South Carolina...' Richard Fitzwilliam to the Commissioners of Customs, *ref.cit.*. CO 23/8, f.5; 'The Bahamians having chiefly employed themselves in cutting the Woods and Timber of the Country for Exportation, in order to procure Provisions and other Necessaries.... they have hitherto applied themselves very little to Planting of any Sort...' Governor Thomas Shirley to the Earl of Hillsborough, 9 December 1768.

<sup>38</sup> CO 27/12, Bahamas Shipping Returns. 'The soil of all the Bahama Islands being nearly the same. so is their natural Produce, all of them yeilding [sic] Mahogany, Madeira, Lignum Vitae, Boxwood, Green Ebony or Fustic, Brazilletto, Eleuthera or Sweet Wood Bark and Winter Bark...' Shirley to Hillsborough, *ref.cit.*, f.10.

<sup>39</sup> E.G.; Northrop, *Flora of New Providence and Andros*, London, 1902; Shattuck, *The Bahama Islands*, London 1905. Record and Hess, *op.cit.*, p.374.

<sup>40</sup> Dolley, *Plants of the Bahamas*, Philadelphia 1889, p.403. Hinckley, *op.cit.*, pp.55-56.

Mohogony wood' exported to the Carolinas.<sup>41</sup> In 1768 Thomas Shirley, the Governor of the Bahamas, enumerated among the natural produce of the Bahamas 'Mahogany, Madeira, Lignum Vitae...'.<sup>42</sup> Were mahogany and madeira the same, or were they different plants?

The confusion of nomenclature becomes problematic when attempting to interpret the information contained in the statistical record. For instance, the Bahamas shipping returns show that from the early 1720s madeira was exported from New Providence in large quantities to North America. The bulk of these exportations went to the Carolinas, where the shipping returns show large entries of madeira, but very little mahogany.<sup>43</sup> These same returns nevertheless record sizeable exports of mahogany to England and to other North America colonies, far exceeding the amount imported. Quantities of madeira were also exported from Providence to England from 1721 onwards, but are not recorded, at least not under that name, in the English customs returns. On the other hand, mahogany from New Providence was recorded by the English customs although there is no record of it leaving the Bahamas.<sup>44</sup> In an article published in 1994 Brad Rauschenberg proposed that madeira and mahogany were one and the same wood, arguing that the difference in terminology was 'a matter of semantics, depending on the national origin of the describer'.<sup>45</sup> This makes good sense; the word madeira is a generic Spanish term for wood, and may have been inherited from the early Spanish settlers. What most British West Indians called mahogany, a Bahamian called madeira. Rauschenberg's thesis is supported by the fact that although both mahogany and madeira were exported from New Providence, the two woods rarely appear in the same bill of lading. As a rule, either mahogany or madeira were listed, but not both. With two exceptions, where mahogany rather than madeira was recorded in the Bahamas shipping returns it was specified as Jamaican. For instance, on 1 May 1744 the sloop Tinker cleared New Providence for Boston, carrying 27 planks of Jamaica mahogany and 1830 feet of madeira plank<sup>46</sup>. Between May 1744 and October 1751, all the mahogany shipped out of New Providence was described as Jamaica mahogany, and must have originated there. The source of this timber can be confirmed since it is recorded in the cargos of vessels entering Nassau from Jamaica. It appears, therefore, that in the Bahamas a distinction was made between mahogany of Bahamian growth, called madeira, and mahogany from

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Fitzwilliam to Commissioners of Customs, *ref.cit.*

<sup>42</sup> CO 23/8 f.10 Shirley to the Earl of Hillsborough, *ref.cit.*

<sup>43</sup> The first recorded shipment of mahogany from Providence to North America was made on 22 November 1724, in the pink *Carteret*, bound for South Carolina, where it entered on 22 December. CO 27/12, Bahamas shipping returns. CO5/509, South Carolina shipping returns.

<sup>44</sup> CO 27/12. Cust 3.

<sup>45</sup> Rauschenberg, *op.cit.*, p.70.

<sup>46</sup> CO 27/12.

other West Indian islands, chiefly Jamaica.<sup>47</sup> The dual terminology is remarkably consistent, and this is probably explained by the fact that, in the manner of officialdom the world over, the entries in the shipping returns were copied verbatim from each ship's manifest to ensure that the details of the cargo tallied at every stage of shipment.

Sizeable amounts of madeira wood, together with occasional shipments of Jamaica mahogany, were exported from New Providence to virtually every North American port from Georgia to New England. It is impossible to quantify the scale of the trade, since the Providence shipping returns are incomplete, but the frequency and scale of shipments from Bahamas to the northern colonies contrast markedly with the desultory nature of the trade in Jamaican mahogany. Where North American shipping returns survive they show that Providence was by far the most frequent source of mahogany/madeira importations into North America, and Bahamas or Providence mahogany was therefore the dominant variety on the North American market.<sup>48</sup>

**Figure 3.5:** Value of importations of mahogany from New Providence to England, 1720-1763

1720	-	1731	580	1742	-	1753	1963
1721	46	1732	242	1743	-	1754	
1722	n/a	1733	-	1744	-	1755	
1723	-	1734	-	1745	-	1756	-
1724	-	1735	-	1746	-	1757	-
1725	-	1736	-	1747	-	1758	886
1726	-	1737	-	1748	18	1759	437
1727	405	1738	-	1749	-	1760	701
1728	-	1739	6	1750	1939	1761	735
1729	-	1740	-	1751	1174	1762	740
1730	n/a	1741	-	1752	272	1763	2547

Source: Customs 3

By contrast with the North American trade, the trade between New Providence and England was not large, and at first glance it appears that Bahamas mahogany did not make much impact on the English market (Figure 3.5).<sup>49</sup> However, when the re-export trade from North America is taken into account, then the proportion of Bahamas mahogany on the English market rises

<sup>47</sup> The use of the term madeira wood gradually lapsed with time, and by the 1780s had been replaced by the more generally accepted name mahogany.

<sup>48</sup> The shipping returns consulted on a sample basis include Carolina (CO5/509, 510); Georgia (CO 5/709, 710); New York (CO 5/1222-1228); Virginia (CO 5/1443-1450).

<sup>49</sup> In 1729 the Surveyor General of Customs wrote that although there were large quantities of mahogany and other woods in the islands 'there is no immediate export for these directly to Great Britain'. Richard Fitzwilliam to the Commissioners of Customs, *ref.cit.*

considerably. To this must be added a second, though less important indirect source, which was the Bermudas (Figure 3.6).

Mahogany is not indigenous to the Bermudas, and therefore mahogany exported from Bermuda must have originated elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> According to the Providence shipping returns, Bermuda was the single most frequent destination for exports of madeira wood. Some, possibly most, of this timber was probably employed in shipbuilding, but a good deal was re-exported to England, where it was recorded by H.M. Customs as mahogany. The total, therefore, of Bahamas mahogany entering the English market by indirect routes considerably exceeded the amount imported direct. As a source of mahogany for the English market the Bahamas ranked second only to Jamaica, and comfortably exceeded the combined total of all the other British West Indian islands.

Despite its importance, there is no record of Bahamas mahogany being distinguished by the English trade from other varieties. Consequently it is unlikely that the English trade made any distinction in quality, appearance or employment between Bahamas and other West Indian mahogany. No 18th century descriptions of the timber have been uncovered, though the tree itself was illustrated and described by Catesby, who saw it growing 'to a great Height, and... usually four Foot in Diameter...'.<sup>51</sup> Such dimensions compared favourably with Jamaican and other island-grown varieties. Both in the Bahamas and Bermuda the most common employment of mahogany, especially in the later 17th and early 18th century, before it acquired value as a cabinet wood, was in

**Figure 3.8:** Value of mahogany importations from Bermuda to England, 1720-1763

1720	-	1731	-	1742	-	1753	315
1721	-	1732	-	1743	-	1754	?
1722	n/a	1733	1	1744	-	1755	?
1723	10	1734	-	1745	-	1756	560
1724	50	1735	16	1746	5	1757	-
1725	15	1736	30	1747	-	1758	-
1726	200	1737	-	1748	-	1759	20
1727	33	1738	-	1749	72	1760	-
1728	-	1739	-	1750	85	1761	38
1729	24	1740	-	1751	160	1762	75
1730	n/a	1741	-	1752	97	1763	-

Source: Customs 3

<sup>50</sup> 'The Chief and indeed only business of these islanders is the building and navigating of light sloops and brigantines, built with their cedar, which they employ chiefly in trade between North America and the West Indies... They export nothing from themselves but some white stone to the West Indies...'. Edmund Burke, *European Settlements in America*, London 1757. Quoted in C.P. Lucas, *Historical Geography of the British Colonies*, Oxford, 1890.

<sup>51</sup> Catesby, *Natural History*, p.81.

shipbuilding.<sup>52</sup>

Bahamas mahogany was still commercially viable in the early 19th century, when it was described by Macfadyen as 'a rich and hard wood...superior to what is at present exported from Jamaica'.<sup>53</sup> Towards the end of the 19th century commercial supplies became scarce. Laslett (1875) described Nassau mahogany as 'even more dwarfish than St Domingo', and gave its usual dimensions in the log as five feet long by six to twelve inches in diameter.<sup>54</sup> By this time all of the first-growth mahogany had long been cut, and Laslett's description tallies with those made by later 19th and 20th century botanists who recorded small second-growth trees, usually solitary, on most of the islands in the Bahamas group.

### The Cuban mahogany myth

One of the more enduring factoids of English furniture history is the idea that the best early mahogany came from Spanish possessions. This notion appears to have arisen during the 19th century, and was accepted as fact by the time Constance Simon wrote *English Furniture Designers* in 1905. In this she stated: ...the first large importations of this timber from Cuba, San Domingo, and Honduras were made about 1720.<sup>55</sup> Other historians concurred; for instance, Macquoid - 'The mahogany generally called 'Spanish', with 'clouded' grain, was especially prized, and obtained largely, though not exclusively, from San Domingo and Cuba....good splats were often made of Cuban wood, which is hard, dark, and capable of close carving...'; Cescinsky - '...during the first three-quarters of the 18th century, Spanish mahogany was almost exclusively used... the wood of this period is a straight-grained hard Cuba'; and Symonds - 'The first variety of mahogany that was imported for the making of furniture was known as Spanish or San Domingo mahogany.'<sup>56</sup> This view, given credence and authority by constant iteration, is now general, and wood of *Swietenia mahogani* is commonly designated 'Cuban type'.

The rationale for the belief that early mahogany importations originated in Cuba and other Spanish possessions has never been given, but there are some possible explanations. At the time Macquoid and Cescinsky were writing the Jamaican mahogany trade had been defunct for a hundred years. St Domingo and Cuba were the main suppliers of quality timber, and had been for most of the 19th century. From Cuba in particular it was still possible to obtain wood of

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*. See also Richard Fitzwilliam, *ref.cit.*, where he describes mahogany and madeira as 'fit for building vessells [sic] and other uses'.

<sup>53</sup> Macfadyen, *op.cit.*, p.177.

<sup>54</sup> Laslett, *Timber and timber trees*, p.261.

<sup>55</sup> Simon, *English Furniture Designers*, pp.3, 194.

<sup>56</sup> Macquoid, *op.cit.*, pp.48, 213; Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, pp.12, 24. Symonds, *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, p.155.

similar quality and appearance to 18th-century Jamaican mahogany. Another factor is the evidence of Thomas Sheraton, to whom furniture historians have usually turned for information on the various types of mahogany employed in English furniture making. Sheraton's *Cabinet Dictionary* (1803) makes no mention at all of Jamaican wood, because by this time Jamaica mahogany had virtually disappeared from the trade, and the market was then divided between Honduras and Spanish mahogany. But Sheraton was quite wrong in his belief that 'probably the Cuba and Spanish mahogany are the same...'.<sup>57</sup> In the late 18th and early 19th century, Cuban and Spanish mahogany were very different articles. The latter, from the island of Hispaniola, was regarded as distinct from and very much superior to Cuban.<sup>58</sup> In the later 19th century the term 'Spanish' was more loosely applied, so that Cuban and other mahoganies gained quality by association.<sup>59</sup>

In the earliest of his many articles on the subject, R.W. Symonds succeeded first in exposing the fallacy of Cuban mahogany and then in reinforcing it. In 'Early Imports' (1934), Symonds was the first historian to recognise the fact that 'the major part of the mahogany that was shipped to England came from Jamaica...'.<sup>60</sup> But, he said, this did not necessarily mean that this was Jamaican mahogany: 'Merchants in Jamaica bought the Spanish mahogany from Cuba and Honduras and traded it to the English merchants.'<sup>61</sup> His authority for this statement was Edward Long, who claimed, in *History of Jamaica* (1774), that in order to avoid the import duty on foreign mahogany, timber from Spanish possessions was first imported into Jamaica and exported thence as Jamaica wood.<sup>62</sup> This was a timely discovery, for it allowed Symonds and later historians to reconcile two seemingly incompatible notions: that the majority of mahogany was imported into England from Jamaica, and that most of this mahogany was Cuban or Spanish wood.<sup>63</sup> Long's evidence is discussed in detail in the next chapter, but two points should be made here: first, that the *History of Jamaica*

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<sup>57</sup> Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, I, p.184.

<sup>58</sup> This subject is discussed more fully in chapter 5.

<sup>59</sup> This more general appellation was certainly current by 1840, when Thomas Tredgold wrote 'The variety called Spanish is imported from Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and some other of the West Indian islands...' *Elementary Principles of Carpentry*, London 1840. By the 1870s the term had been extended even more widely. '...the produce of... Central America, Mexico, and the island of Cuba, and other of the West Indies,... is indiscriminately called Spanish or Cuba mahogany'. Laslett, *op.cit.*, p.258.

<sup>60</sup> Symonds, 'Early Imports', Part I, p.216.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.216-7.

<sup>62</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.497. The question of import duty on foreign mahogany is discussed fully in the next chapter. According to the Additional Book of Rates (1724) mahogany imported direct from foreign possessions paid duty on a rateable value of L8 per ton. This was the figure which Cescinsky wrongly assumed to be the duty on all mahogany. The actual amount of duty paid was L.1.0.3. By the 1760s this had increased to L2.4.0.

<sup>63</sup> For instance, Symonds, 'The New Wood'; Edward Joy, 'The Advent of Mahogany'.



was written in the 1770s, and cannot be taken as evidence for an earlier period; second, that Long's statement is unsupported by any other contemporary authority. It is worth adding that Cescinsky's erroneous conviction that mahogany paid a duty of L8 per ton (discussed in chapter two) added spurious weight to Long's remarks. The notion of mahogany as contraband was both convenient and attractive to furniture historians. It added to the mystique of the wood and enhanced its exclusive image. It is, however, wholly fictitious. To understand why this is so we must briefly consider the legislative and commercial realities of Caribbean trade prior to 1763.

### Trade with Spain and France in the West Indies

Commercial relations between Britain, Spain and France in the West Indies have been at the heart of most academic studies of 18th-century colonial policy.<sup>64</sup> What follows here is a summary of a complex subject, covering only those points relevant to the question of mahogany importations from foreign possessions before 1763. The subject is best understood by considering it in two halves: firstly, the illegal trade by foreign vessels into Jamaica; secondly, the legal trade in British vessels out of Jamaica.

The lynchpin of British commercial policy in the West Indies was the body of legislation known collectively as the Acts of Navigation.<sup>65</sup> The object of these Acts was to exclude all foreign vessels from the trade between Great Britain and its colonies, and to ensure that foreign manufactures and plantation produce did not encroach on British markets. The Acts prohibited all foreign vessels from trading into British West Indian ports. In addition, most of the individual colonial legislatures passed their own legislation to the same effect.<sup>66</sup> The result was that no Spanish, French or other foreign ships could import goods

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<sup>64</sup> The best and most comprehensive of these is still Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies 1739-1763*, 2nd ed., London 1963. Others include: F. Armytage, *The Free Port System in the British West Indies: A Study in Commercial Policy, 1766-1822*, London 1953; J. McLachlan, *Trade and Peace with Old Spain*, Cambridge, 1940; Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*; L.J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833*, New York 1963. Among numerous articles on the subject are: V.L. Brown, 'The South Sea Company and the Contraband Trade', *American Historical Review*, XXXI, 1926; 'Contraband Trade; a Factor in the decline of Spain's Empire in America', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, VIII, 1928; A.Christelow, 'Contraband Trade between Jamaica and the Spanish Main, and the Free Ports Act of 1766', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XXII 1942; 'Economic Background of the Anglo-Spanish War of 1762,' *Journal of Modern History*, XVIII, 1946; G.H. Nelson, 'Contraband Trade under the Asiento, 1730-39', *American Historical Review*, LI, 1945; C. Nettels, 'England and the Spanish American Trade, 1680-1715', *Journal of Modern History*, III, 1931, pp.1-32;

<sup>65</sup> The first of these measures was the Navigation Ordinance of 1651, enacted under the Commonwealth. It was confirmed and extended by *12 Charles II cap.18; 13 Charles II cap.14; 13 & 14 Charles II cap.11; 7 & 8 William III cap.22.*

<sup>66</sup> For instance, 'An Act to prevent all fraudulent trade to Hispaniola and other foreign parts.' Council of Jamaica, *Acts*, 5 January 1715.

legally into the British West Indies.<sup>67</sup>

In these circumstances smuggling was bound to occur. The colonial records of Jamaica and other islands, together with those of the Board of Trade, are full of references to illicit trade, and numerous academic studies have attempted to analyse and quantify it.<sup>68</sup> By its very nature, smuggling defies statistical analysis, and much of the 'evidence' is elliptical to say the least, but amongst the vast mass of data from both official and unofficial sources there is no reference to smuggled mahogany prior to 1763. Many foreign smugglers actually carried no goods at all, but simply came with bullion to buy slaves and British manufactures. When carried, the chief illicit commodities were sugar and related products, all of which were burdened with hefty protective duties if imported legitimately, and hence were worth smuggling. It is extremely unlikely that any Spaniard or Frenchman would risk his cargo, vessel, liberty and perhaps his life to smuggle low value, high bulk goods such as timber. Of course, if the timber were suddenly to acquire great value, then the situation was immediately changed, but so long as Jamaica possessed plentiful reserves of mahogany this was unlikely to be the case. By the time prices had risen sufficiently in the 1760s to give mahogany some potential as contraband, the legislative basis of inter-colonial trade had been radically changed by the Free Ports legislation. From 1766 onwards foreign vessels were freely permitted to trade into Jamaican ports, and smuggling, so far as mahogany was concerned, was no longer an issue. (This subject will be discussed in more detail in chapter four).

In contrast to goods carried in foreign vessels, the British authorities made no effort to prevent their own vessels from trading into Spanish America. This was despite the fact that the Madrid Treaty of 1670 obliged both nations to prohibit trade between their respective possessions in the West Indies.<sup>69</sup> Neither the British government nor its

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<sup>67</sup> Trade between the subjects of Britain and Spain in the West Indies was forbidden by paragraph 9 the Treaty of Madrid (1670). Trade between the subjects of Britain and France in the West Indies was forbidden by the paragraphs 5 and 6 of the Treaty of Peace and Neutrality (1786). The Navigation Laws did permit foreign vessels to enter British colonial ports carrying bullion, i.e., in order to buy British goods with gold or silver. This was sound mercantilist thinking since it depleted foreign reserves of bullion whilst encouraging British manufactures. In addition, it went some way towards resolving the chronic cash shortages endemic in West Indian commerce.

<sup>68</sup> *Supra*, note 64. The question of contraband trade was raised by the colonial Governors with relative frequency, and was always answered, officially at least, in the same way. For instance, in 1720 the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations asked his Majesty's Council at Law to address the following question: "Whether Spanish ships, coming from the Spanish ports in America and laden with the products of those Countries, are prohibited by the Acts of Trade, and particularly those of the 12th and 15th of King Charles the 2nd, and that of 7th and 8th of King William, to unload and sell their cargoes in any of the British Plantations in America, and to load again there." The reply was quickly returned that all such trade was prohibited. *CSPAWI*.

<sup>69</sup> Paragraph 9 of the Treaty stated:

the subjects, merchants, captains, masters, and mariners of each ally respectively, shall forbear and abstain from sailing to, and trafficking in, the ports and havens that have fortifications and magazines, and in all other places possessed by either party in the West Indies.

colonial servants ever paid more than lip service to this agreement, and the prevailing attitude to smuggling into Spanish America is summed up in this passage from Edward Long:

... to keep good faith, we ought not to encourage, by public authority, any English subjects in carrying a trade at any coast or place claimed by the Spaniards; still we must admit, that such English subjects, as may incline to run the hazard of such a trade, ought not to be restrained by penal laws and coercions of our framing; because they voluntarily resign themselves to the peril of losing not only their vessel and cargo, but their personal liberty, if caught by the Spaniards, and are out of protection of the treaty; all of which were penalty sufficient.<sup>70</sup>

Like most of his compatriots, Long concluded that "To prevent the trade, is the proper care of the Spaniards, not of the English".

The object of the trade was to create a market in Spanish America for slaves and British manufactures, and to drain off the gold and silver bullion which the Spaniards mined out of Central and South America. The trade is recorded in detail in the Jamaican shipping registers, which give the destinations and the cargos of British vessels trading out of Jamaica from the early 1740s. Most destinations fall within an arc from Truxillo in the Bay of Honduras south through Porto Bello and Cartagena and to the Dutch colony of Curacao in the east. At the same time, a number of vessels traded to Hispaniola and to the south Cuban coast.<sup>71</sup>

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The only occasions on which it was legal for the ships of Spain and Great Britain to enter each other ports were when absolute need required it, i.e., in order to take refuge from a storm or from the enemy action of a third party. There was, in addition, a generally acknowledged right to 'wood and water' in distress, in other words, to come ashore at any point to make repairs and to obtain drinking water.

Pares points out that the 1670 Treaty was framed with deliberate ambiguities on both sides which, while overcoming immediate difficulties, sowed the seeds of conflict in the 18th century. *War and Trade*, pp.28-34. There was a prior treaty, that of 1667, but according to Pares 'it is doubtful if any article of the Treaty of 1667 applied in America'. *Ibid*, p.29.

An exception to the prohibition on trade was made by the granting of the Asiento to the British South Seas Company in 1713. By this agreement the Company acquired the right to supply slaves to the Spanish colonies and to bring one vessel yearly to trade at Porto Bello or Vera Cruz.

<sup>70</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p.307.

<sup>71</sup> CO 142/16-20. Most authorities consider the contraband trade to have picked up considerably after the war of 1739-48, but in the 1750s there was a notable falling off in the trade with Cuba and Hispaniola. This was due in part to the outbreak of war in 1756, but the change was already evident before this. In his report of 1752 the Governor of Jamaica, Edward Trelawny, remarked on the change and attempted to explain it.

The great Trade that this Island us'd formerly to have with the Spaniards and on the Continent, and the South side of Cuba, is greatly decreas'd, owing to the Kingdom of Peru, St<sup>a</sup> Fe, etc., being now supplied with European Commoditys by Ships that go thither from Cadiz... besides the strictness of the Spanish Governor in suppressing Contraband Trade...

On the outward voyage Jamaican vessels carried slaves and 'dry goods', i.e., British manufactures. The return freights were horses, mules, dyewoods and other colonial produce.<sup>72</sup> So long as certain specified articles, principally sugar, were not carried, these goods were entered legally into Kingston and other British colonial ports. A good number of vessels returned either in ballast or without having sold their outward cargo. In all, there were in the mid-18th century about 50 vessels from fifteen to sixty tons trading from Jamaica to foreign, mainly Spanish, possessions, many of them making several trips per year.<sup>73</sup> Despite this considerable commercial activity, the Jamaican shipping registers record only three British vessels between 1742 and 1757 bringing mahogany into Jamaica from foreign possessions. The first was in March 1744, when 6,000 feet of mahogany was imported from Truxillo (This may in fact have

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so that Jamaica has but few vessels employ'd in Trading to the Spaniards and they are chiefly such as are taken up with contracts for Negroes...

CO137/25 Part 2, ff:243-244, Edward Trelawny, 'A State of the Island of Jamaica.'

<sup>72</sup> CO 142/16-20. The French and the Dutch colonists were similarly engaged in trading with the Spaniards, and their vessels returned with similar cargos. Pares, *War and Trade*, pp.130-131.

One of the best first hand accounts of this trade is that written by Nathaniel Uring. 'In the beginning of the year 1711, I went over in a Sloop, well mann'd and arm'd, to trade on the Coast of *New Spain*; and we carried with us a great Quantity of dry Goods, and about 150 Negroes. We first touch'd at *Portobello*, but being War-Time, we used to go to the *Grout* within *Monkey-Key*, [Puerto de Garrote, about five miles west of Point Manzanillo] which is a very good Harbour, and is about four or five Miles from the Harbour and Town of *Portobello*. As soon as we arrived there, our Custom was to send one of our People, who could speak *Spanish*, into the Town with letters to the Merchants, to give them notice of our Arrival; and they appointed the Time and Place, where and when our Canow should wait for them, to bring them on Board, in order to traffick with us; and when they had agreed for so many Negroes, and such a Quantity of Goods as they wanted, they returned to the Town, and the next Day brought their money on board and received them. We lay at this Place Trading six Weeks, in which time the *Spanish* Merchants at *Panama* had Notice of our being there, and they came over the *Isthmus* to trade with us. These Merchants frequently travelled in the habits of Peasants, and had their Mules with them, on which they brought their Money in Jars, which they fill'd up with Meal; and if any of the King's Officers met them, nothing appeared but the Meal, and pretended they were poor People going to *Portobello* to buy some Trifles... When they had bought as many Negroes, and such a Quantity of dry Goods as their Money would Purchase, they us'd to proportion and make them up into little Packs, fit for one Man to carry... While we lay at the Grout the first Voyage, a *Spaniard* agreed with us for Seventy Slaves, and a good Quantity of dry Goods, which we delivered between *Chagre* and *Porto Nova*, the signal agreed upon being made from the Castle of *Chagre*, we anchored about two Miles from it, and sent our Canows on Shore, where we found the *Spaniards* with several Asses and Mules laden with Gold and Silver, which we carried on board; and when the Money was found to be right, and all Things were adjusted, we landed the Negroes and dry Goods, providing them with Necessaries for their journey over to the South Sea, and then sailed again for the *Grout*. But not being able to dispose of all our Cargoe there, we set Sail for *Cartagena*, and by the Way touched at *Tolne*, where we furnished our selves with a good Number of Poultry, which we reckon'd the best upon the Main. When we arrived at the *Brew*, which is the place where we lay to trade with the Merchants of *Cartagena*, we gave notice of it to some of the People of that Island, who sent Word into the City of our being there: Several Merchants came from thence to trade with us, and when we had sold what we could, we returned to *Jamaica*.' *The Voyages and Travels of Captain Nathaniel Uring*, London, 1726, pp.113-4.

<sup>73</sup> CO 142/15, 16. Patrick Browne gives the number of vessels engaged in trade with foreign possessions in 1752 as forty-nine, Trelawny fifty-one. Browne, *op.cit.*, p.17. Edward Trelawny, *ref.cit.*, f.244.

come not from the Spaniards but from the British cutters on the Mosquito Shore.) In December of the same year 81 pieces of mahogany were brought from the Dutch colony of Curacao, and in September 1755 4,000 feet of mahogany were imported from Porto Bello.<sup>74</sup>

Shipping returns from other British colonies tell the same story. From the Bahamas, for instance, British vessels traded with Hispaniola and the north coast of Cuba, but they returned either in ballast or, occasionally, with cattle and hides. According to the shipping returns, no Cuban or Hispaniola mahogany was imported into the Bahamas before the 1760s.<sup>75</sup> Whilst it must be acknowledged that there are many lacunae in the shipping returns - for Jamaica, for instance, they do not survive at all for the period 1722-1742 - the fact remains that there is no evidence to support the belief that most, or even a substantial part of early mahogany importations originated in foreign West Indian possessions and were smuggled through Jamaica.

British vessels trading to Spanish America need not, of course, return to Jamaica, but could instead sail direct for England, and a certain amount of foreign mahogany was imported in this way. The first recorded direct importation of mahogany from the Spanish West Indies occurred in 1724, when a total of L78.10.0 was brought in. (Appendix I.) Thereafter, sporadic shipments were recorded, some were trivial, such as the L1.18.0 imported in 1738, and some sizeable, such as the L405.12.0 imported in 1727. Altogether mahogany worth L15,667.8.1 was imported from the Spanish West Indies between 1724 and 1748, the great majority of it accounted for by one entry worth L14,691.18.0. in 1748. This was recorded in the customs returns as 'Prize goods', captured either from the French or the Spanish. The mahogany, amounting to over 1800 tons, would have needed at least half a dozen ships to carry it. It is possible therefore that this prize was one or more Spanish warships, with hull and decking made entirely of mahogany, captured and brought to England to be broken up.<sup>76</sup> Prize goods aside, the amount of mahogany imported direct from the Spanish West Indies represented a fraction of one percent of the total of over twenty one thousand tons imported into England between 1722 and 1748.<sup>77</sup> Thereafter no

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<sup>74</sup> CO 142/15,16

<sup>75</sup> CO 27/13.

<sup>76</sup> In Spanish America mahogany had been a royal monopoly since 1622, reserved for shipbuilding. Spanish built ships were frequently employed after capture by the British, or were broken up and the mahogany re-used. Chaloner and Fleming commented on this practise in 1850: 'Spanish Shipbuilders... succeeded in building ships, some of which, even at the present day, are in commission in our Navy, or when broken up from age, have had their Mahogany Timbers used in new Ships... To Shipowners, the purchase of Ships built of Mahogany, in preference to other woods, has this important consideration; for however ancient or worn such Ships may become, the intrinsic value of old Mahogany to Shipbreakers will be much greater than any other Wood; and Cabinet-makers will frequently give very high prices for old seasoned Mahogany. It is a curious and interesting fact, that Furniture is being made at the Royal Dockyards at this day, out of the beautiful Mahogany found in breaking up the old line of battle ship, the Gibraltar, which was built in the Havana 100 years ago!' Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree*, pp.49, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Cust 3.

further importations from the Spanish West Indies were recorded until after the Seven Years' War.<sup>78</sup>

### The Mosquito Shore and Rattan mahogany

In the mid-1740s a new variety of mahogany arrived on the English market. It was called Rattan, after the island of Ruatan, about thirty-five miles off the coast of Honduras (not to be confused with Belize or British Honduras further north). The mahogany was cut on the nearby mainland, an area known to the English as the Mosquito Shore, after the indigenous local tribes of Mosquito Indians. The Shore extended from Black River, east around Cape Gracias a Dios and south to the San Juan River in modern Nicaragua (Figure 3.7). English involvement in the area dated back to the early 17th century, when a steadfast alliance, based on a common enmity to the Spanish, had quickly been forged between the English and the Mosquito Indians.<sup>79</sup>

The principal English trading settlements on the Shore were at Bluefields Lagoon and Black River. Here English cloth and other manufactures were exchanged for indigo, sarsaparilla and Nicaragua wood (a dyewood). The Shore was also a customary place of refuge for the English logwood cutters at Belize, for whom periodic Spanish assaults resulted in the wholesale evacuation of cutters and their dependents to Black River.<sup>80</sup> Early in the 1739-48 war the British government decided to occupy and fortify the island of Ruatan in order to protect their settlers on the Shore, and this became for a time the centre of English activities, both military and commercial, in Spanish America.<sup>81</sup> Ruatan was restored to Spain by the Treaty of Aix la Chapelle (1748), and thenceforth

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<sup>78</sup> The bulk of these importations came into London, but it is not possible to determine their source with any accuracy, since the London port books for the 18th century no longer exist. According to *11 George I cap.7* (1724) mahogany imported direct from foreign possessions was subject to an import duty of L2. 0. 0, based on the rateable value of L8 per ton set in 1724. The fact that foreign mahogany was imported despite the duty demonstrates that duty alone did not prevent trade. It cannot therefore be used as a rationale to support assumptions that foreign timber was brought into England illegally.

<sup>79</sup> General accounts of English activities on the Mosquito Shore can be found in numerous authorities, for instance: Pares, *War and Trade*, pp.97-104. A more detailed study is Frank Griffith Dawson, 'William Pitt's Settlement at Black River on the Mosquito Shore: A Challenge to Spain in Central America, 1732-87,' *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1983, pp.677-706. Pitt founded the settlement at Black River in 1732 after being expelled from Belize by the Spanish. He was an enterprising logwood trader who quickly became the dominant capitalist on the Shore.

Most of the official correspondence concerning the Shore is contained in CO 123/1, 'Papers relative to the Mosquito Shore'. Further material can be found scattered among the Jamaican correspondence in CO 137/25, and in Adm 7/837. A 17th-century account can be found in Esquemeling, *Buccanners of America*, pp.249-251.

<sup>80</sup> Dawson, *op.cit.*, pp.683, 687. Gipson, *op.cit.*, pp.632-637. CO 123/1, ff.61-2.

<sup>81</sup> Pares, *War and Trade*, pp.103-4. Dawson, *op.cit.*, p.685.

the main English effort was concentrated at Black River.<sup>82</sup>

In 1749 Captain Robert Hodgson was appointed superintendent of the Shore, and his reports provide detailed accounts of the place and its produce.<sup>83</sup> Among the many natural resources mahogany was abundant. Most commercial supplies came from the easily accessible lowlands, and particularly from along the banks of the many rivers. 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.'<sup>84</sup>

The precise date at which mahogany was first cut on the Shore is unclear. It is possible that the first shipments of mahogany went direct to England, and are among those recorded as from *Spanish West Indies*.<sup>85</sup> From the mid-1740s, however, the majority went via Kingston. The first recorded shipment was made in November 1745, when the brig Expedition landed 20,000 feet of mahogany at Kingston.<sup>86</sup> The same vessel carried another mahogany cargo in the April of the following year, and thenceforth Rattan mahogany became a regular feature of the trade between the Mosquito Shore and Jamaica.<sup>87</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the scale of the trade in Rattan mahogany. In the early 1740s about fifty British families were settled on the Shore, many of whom were loggers.<sup>88</sup> This number grew steadily to around 2,600 white settlers by 1787.<sup>89</sup> Aside from the four or five Jamaican registered vessels plying between Kingston and the Shore, in the 1750s the settlers themselves owned twelve vessels, of which three traded direct to England, and others to New York or Jamaica.<sup>90</sup> Mahogany that went via Kingston was not entered separately in the

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* For a near contemporary account of these events see Adm 7/837, 'An Account of the Mosquito Shore', by Lieutenant Joseph Smith, late Captain of the Fort at Black River, 1765. A number of maps and plans of the settlement and fortifications at Black River survive in CO 700 at the PRO.

<sup>83</sup> CO 123/1, ff.5-6 Duke of Bedford to Captain Robert Hodgson, 5 October 1749; ff.55-79, Capt. Robert Hodgson, 'The First Account of the State of that Part of America called the Mosquito Shore, in the Year 1757.'

<sup>84</sup> CO 137/25, Part One, ff.45-6, Richard Jones, Engineer, to Governor Trelawney, 22 September 1748. See also the accounts by Captain Robert Hodgson, *ref.cit.*, ff.64-65, and Lieutenant Joseph Smith, *ref.cit.*

<sup>85</sup> According to Sir Charles Whitworth, 'Mosquito Shore and Honduras Bay... are sometimes entered separately, but more frequently by the common name of Spanish West Indies'. BT 6/185. *State of the Trade of Great Britain*, London 1776, para. lvi. However, there is no record of mahogany cut and shipped from Honduras until the 1760s, so that the Mosquito Shore is the most likely source of these importations.

<sup>86</sup> CO142/15.

<sup>87</sup> The relevant entries may be found in the Jamaica Shipping Returns.

<sup>88</sup> CO 123/1, ff.3-4. Report to the Lords Commissioners of the Council for Plantations and Trade, 3 May 1744.

<sup>89</sup> Dawson, *op.cit.*, p.677.

<sup>90</sup> CO 123/1, f.63. CO 137/25 ff.243-5, Trelawney, *ref.cit.*

English customs but included with Jamaican mahogany. There was no subterfuge here - the Mosquito Shore was technically under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Jamaica, and had 'for many Years been considered as part of the Government of Jamaica.'<sup>91</sup> Hence imports and exports to and from the Mosquito shore (with the exception of sugar, coffee and indigo) were treated in the same way as those of the British possessions.<sup>92</sup> Some idea of the volume of the trade can be gained from the Jamaica shipping returns, but in no year did the figures recorded therein approach Robert Hodgson's estimate of 200,000 ft exported in 1757. This represented just over 21 per cent of the total of mahogany imported from Jamaica in that year (200,000 feet is also the figure given by another observer in 1753).<sup>93</sup> After the Seven Years' War exports rose rapidly to 650,000 feet in 1764 at 'a very moderate calculation', and 709,000 feet by 1769. This was sufficient to employ about 30 ships in the trade.<sup>94</sup> Between 1763 and 1770 Rattan mahogany was recorded in the English customs returns together with that from Honduras. From 1771 it was recorded separately, and in that year Mosquito mahogany to the value of L1858, equivalent to 111,480 feet, was imported direct into England. By this time a considerable logging infrastructure had arisen; according to one Spanish source there were water powered sawmills operating on the Mosquito Shore in 1776.<sup>95</sup> Despite competition from Honduras mahogany from 1763 onwards, mahogany continued to be cut on the Shore until it was evacuated in 1787.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> BT6/50. George Dyer, on behalf of the Merchants trading to Honduras Bay, to Lord Hawkesbury, 1789. Robert Hodgson's account of 1757 mentions the duty revenue of various Mosquito products, but omits any mention of duty on mahogany. *Ref.cit.*, f.63.

<sup>92</sup> In order to protect British planters' monopolies, the Act of 4 *George III cap.15* placed a tax on certain commodities, including sugar, coffee and indigo, imported from foreign possessions in America into the British West Indian colonies.

<sup>93</sup> CO 123/1, f.62; CO 137/25 ff.345-8, Edward Lewis to Governor Knowles, 29 January 1753. These estimates may be accurate, but could well have been inflated in order to convince the government of the continuing importance of the Mosquito Shore settlements. Quantities of Rattan timber also went to North America from the mid-1740s onwards. CO 142/15.

<sup>94</sup> CO 137/34, ff.167-168. Joseph Otway to Board of Trade, 25 May 1764; ff.232-235, Otway to Board of Trade; ff.240-245. Richard Jones to Governor Trelawny, 4 April 1770.

<sup>95</sup> Griffith Dawson, *op.cit.*, p.693.

<sup>96</sup> Value of mahogany imported into England from the Mosquito Shore. Source: Customs 3

1771	1858. 0. 0	1776	
1772	11641. 0. 0	1777	2700. 0. 0
1773	7361. 0. 0	1778	4050. 0. 0
1774	3484. 0. 0	1779	
1775	3520. 0. 0	1780	192. 0. 0



## Rattan mahogany: quality and utilisation

Rattan mahogany was universally considered much inferior in quality to Jamaican. In his survey of woods of the Mosquito Shore 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.<sup>97</sup>

A few years earlier another correspondent told Governor Knowles that Rattan mahogany was 'an inferior quality to that of Jamaica by half its value'.<sup>98</sup> The Gillow letter books confirm that Rattan was always quoted at considerably lower prices than Jamaican, and Sheraton called it 'a kind of bastard mahogany'.<sup>99</sup> This did not necessarily affect its marketability, however. Low price, good breadth and light weight were desirable attributes for many uses. It was, for instance, 'absolutely necessary for making coach panels of'.<sup>100</sup> It was also an ideal carcass timber, and there was always a demand for what Gillow called 'good soft mahogany'.<sup>101</sup>

The introduction of Rattan extended the period during which mahogany was used as a joinery wood. As Jamaica wood became dearer, Rattan remained competitive with Dutch wainscot. In June 1753, for instance, an advertisement appeared in the *London Evening Post* offering 'A Large Parcel of Mahogany for Fourpence a Foot, River Measure, which is as cheap as Wainscoat'.<sup>102</sup> In St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, the organ by Richard Bridge has a panelled mahogany case made of wide, straight grained timber. This was installed in 1757, and is possibly an example of Rattan mahogany employed in joiner's work.

One important consequence of the introduction of Rattan timber was that for the first time it was necessary to distinguish between Jamaican mahogany and

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<sup>97</sup> Hodgson, *ref.cit.*, f.65.

<sup>98</sup> CO 137/25 f347. Edward Lewis to Governor Knowles, 29 January 1753.

<sup>99</sup> Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, London 1803, II, p.294. For the lower price of Rattan mahogany see also the prices submitted to the Board of Trade by two correspondents in 1790: BT6 /50, William Ryder to Lord Hawkesbury, 16 March 1790; Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790.

<sup>100</sup> BT6/50, Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790. Breadth is something Gillow referred to more than once. e.g., 'Soft Mahogany... generally runs broader' Letter Book 344/166, Gillow to Wm Rathbone, 26 October 1760.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 November 1759.

<sup>102</sup> *London Evening Post*, 26 June 1753. Quoted in Geoffrey Beard, *The National Trust Book of English Furniture*, London 1985, p.27.

another variety, so it was from about 1745-50 that the phrase 'Jamaica wood' came into use.<sup>103</sup> Henceforth 'Jamaica' signified not only a place of origin, but also a standard of excellence and quality.

### **Jamaica mahogany: quality and utilisation**

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.<sup>104</sup>

Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century Jamaica mahogany was the benchmark against which other varieties were measured, and its reputation endured long after commercial supplies were exhausted. In 1837 James Macfadyen wrote '...the Old Jamaica Mahogany is still considered superior to any that can now be procured from any other country.'<sup>105</sup> In 1853 Blackie's *Cabinet-Makers' Assistant* 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.'<sup>106</sup> Such statements, written several decades after the demise of the Jamaica trade, have an elegaic quality which should arouse caution in the modern reader. As with all timbers, Jamaica mahogany varied greatly in all those criteria which comprise quality - colour, texture, figure and density. It should also be borne in mind that attitudes to mahogany changed greatly over the course of the 18th century. Batty Langley, in common with many joiners of the 1720s and 30s, regarded it as fit for wainscotting.<sup>107</sup> Mark Catesby considered it solely in the light of its physical properties as a structural timber, and remarked on its suitability for shipbuilding and withstanding gunshot.<sup>108</sup> The notion of Jamaica mahogany as a premium or veneer quality cabinet wood arose only gradually, as furniture makers became

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<sup>103</sup> The first use I have been able to find of this term used in the Gillow records was in an invoice for planks shipped to Dublin, dated 28 December 1754. These are described as 'Right Jamaica Wood'. Accounts 344/161.

<sup>104</sup> *The Panorama of Science and Art*, Vol I, Liverpool c.1816-1830, p.91.

<sup>105</sup> Macfadyen, *op.cit.*, p.176.

<sup>106</sup> Blackie, *Cabinet-Maker's Assistant.*, p.29.

<sup>107</sup> Batty Langley, *A Sure Method of Improving Estates*, London 1728, p.136.

<sup>108</sup> Catesby, *op.cit.*, p.81.

better acquainted with its structural and decorative potential. Price, too, was a vital part of this transformation, as the cheap joinery timber of the 1720s became a highly valued cabinet wood in the 1750s.<sup>109</sup>

All 18th-century authorities agree that the earliest supplies of Jamaica mahogany were those most easily accessible.<sup>110</sup> 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.<sup>111</sup> In this respect the observations of Macquoid *et al.* have some basis in fact. 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 wood, was nevertheless ideal for its first employment in interior joinery.

Mahogany trees were not replanted.<sup>112</sup> The most accessible timber was inevitably soon exhausted, and so the mahogany cutters moved inland and to higher elevations.<sup>113</sup> The timber grown on poorer, upland soils was notably harder and more richly coloured than the lowland variety. Robert Hodgson's analysis of the differences between Rattan and Jamaican timber has already been quoted above (p.96), and contains a significant qualification, referring to 'what is *now* got in that Island' (my italics) suggesting that there was a meaningful difference between present (1757) and former supplies of Jamaican timber. He says that present supplies were obtained from 'dry, rocky ground', resulting in 'slow growth and close grain'. This accords with the impression given by authorities such as Browne and Long, that the better quality Jamaica wood was that obtained from the interior of the island. According to Long, the 'chief difference' between Jamaican wood and that from the Spanish Main 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

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<sup>109</sup> 'When, however, its great value was known - the ease with which it can be cut, the effect that varnish gives to its colours, the firmness with which it holds in glue, and the improvement which, when properly taken care of, it gains in time - it was found that good mahogany was much too valuable a timber for being used solid; and it began to be employed as the staple timber of veneering.' *The Library of Entertaining Knowledge*, London, 1829, pp.168-9.

<sup>110</sup> Browne, *op.cit.*, p.17; Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843.

<sup>111</sup> 'Trees, indeed, which have grown in low alluvial situations never give a rich hard wood.' Macfadyen, *op.cit.*, I, p.176.

<sup>112</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843; Browne, *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>113</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.497. One of the problems facing the mahogany cutters was the lack of navigable waterways on Jamaica. Black River was the only river of any size, and was navigable by raft or shallow draft vessel for most of its forty miles into the interior. In the 1760's mahogany from the Black River catchment area was floated downriver and marketed at Black River mouth. Elsewhere, the roads made by the cutters opened up previously inaccessible areas to settlement and cultivation.

for...'<sup>114</sup> Something of the character and quality of this mid-century mahogany can be seen in the internal fittings of bureaux and cabinets. These have rarely been exposed to air or sunlight, and were often left unpolished. They represent 18th century Jamaica mahogany in almost its natural state. Of particular note are the distinctive white crystalline deposits or plugs in many of the pores. This last feature, although common to all mahoganies in some degree, is particularly pronounced in slow grown timber, sometimes giving the wood the appearance of having been rubbed with chalk.<sup>115</sup> The deposits quickly dull the edge of whatever tools come into contact with them, giving rise to a reputation for hardness and difficulty of working.<sup>116</sup> They disappear as soon as oil or polish is applied.

The employment of harder, darker and heavier wood, coincides with the 'Chippendale' period of English furniture making, c.1750-1765. Most authorities from 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 were 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.'<sup>117</sup> Mahogany, he argued, became an essential part of what is popularly known as the 'Chippendale 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...'<sup>118</sup> A few year later he put the case rather more emphatically. 'The employment of mahogany by the chairmaker soon resulted in chairs becoming lighter in design. It was found that the strength of this new timber permitted the use of open work splats and the reduction in thickness of all constructional

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<sup>114</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843.

<sup>115</sup> Tredgold, *op.cit.*, p.241. He described the pores in Jamaica wood as often 'filled with a white substance in Jamaica wood, but generally empty in the Honduras kind.'

<sup>116</sup> It was for this reason that Dr Gibbon's carpenters discarded the mahogany planks imported by his brother as unfit for use. Lunan, *op.cit.*, p.472. The plugging should not be confused with the white speckled appearance of repolished or 19th century mahogany. This is caused by the filler used to fill the grain before french polishing.

<sup>117</sup> R.W. Symonds, *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, p.138.

<sup>118</sup> R.W. Symonds, 'Early Mahogany Furniture', p.70.

members - legs, arms, and uprights.<sup>119</sup>

Most historians have considered that the peculiar characteristics of hardness and toughness which permitted these designs to be carried out were the product of a particular variety of mahogany, variously cited as Cuban, Spanish or St Domingo. As we have seen, there is no evidence whatever for wood from these source being available before the 1760s, and on the basis of the trade statistics the high quality carving wood of the mid-eighteenth century must have been Jamaican. No doubt the cutters' move away from the coastal plain to more mountainous areas had something to do with the perceived change in the type and quality of mahogany timber, but there is an additional point to be made. This is that the process of selection and of fitness for purpose largely determine how the wood will be used. Dark, hard and straight grained wood was particularly suited to chairmaking, and was reserved for this use. This is borne out by the observations of several later authorities. In 1782 Gillow wrote to a Liverpool supplier asking for small logs of dark, hard wood to make 'Chair Banisters and top rails'.<sup>120</sup> 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...'.<sup>121</sup> In 1837 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...'.<sup>122</sup> Blackie's *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.'<sup>123</sup> The same observations applied to wood used for table pillars, stands and other articles in which strength is more important than figure. As with chairs, the more expensive of these articles were enriched with carving to which the wood was undoubtedly suited.

At the same time that this harder, darker wood became available for particular

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<sup>119</sup> R.W. Symonds, *Masterpieces of English Furniture and Clocks*, London 1940, p.2. See also 'Craftsmanship in Mahogany', *Antiques Review* 1948, pp.15-19, in which Symonds discusses '...the fine quality of the wood, the strength of which, owing to the straight and close grain, permits the arms, legs and uprights to be formed by slender and elegant curved members'. This is one of the classic arguments in furniture history for materials determining style, and is widely accepted by furniture historians. But how true is it? These notions of hardness, crispness and strength arose not out of scientific testing but out of the need to support a stylistic argument. No historian has offered any contemporary 18th-century evidence, in the form of written testimony or comment, to support these views. In order to substantiate the argument, it would have to be shown a) that it was physically impossible to carry out 'Chippendale' period designs in other timbers, especially walnut, and b) that the huge preponderance of mahogany chairs in this style is not simply the consequence of the fact that vastly more mahogany was available than walnut. It should also be remembered that the stylistic developments observed in seat furniture are matched by similar developments in other furniture forms such a girandoles, pier tables, pier glass frames and mirror frames, in whose construction mahogany plays no part.

<sup>120</sup> Letter Book 344/170, Gillow to Beetham, 20 September 1782.

<sup>121</sup> *The Library of Entertaining Knowledge*, London 1829, p.168.

<sup>122</sup> Edward Chaloner, *Remarks on the St Domingo Mahogany Trade*, Liverpool 1837, p.7.

<sup>123</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.32.

uses, a greater emphasis began to be placed on figure and colour in carcass work. This was partly due to an increasing awareness of the aesthetic potential of mahogany as a surface veneer. It was also due to a steady increase in price, so that it became prohibitively expensive to employ the better figured and more costly wood in the solid. The differential in price between well figured and plain wood, together with their different physical properties, led to the sort of selective employment of timber apparent in many examples of mid-18th century furniture. For instance, where commodes or chests of drawers are raised on a carved frame instead of the more usual bracket feet, there is often a marked difference in character and colour between the dark, hard wood used for the carved frame and the brighter, figured wood on the carcass (Figure 3.8).

**Figure 3.8:**  
Mahogany commode,  
c.1755.



Photo: Christie's.

The repertoire of cut and figure was at first fairly limited. The most commonly employed veneer was quarter cut, which displays the striped or roe figure for

which mahogany is justly famous. This is frequently found in combination with various mottles, with fiddle-back being the most common. Fortunately, the extraordinary variety of colour and figure which mahogany possesses meant that even the most unsophisticated cabinet-maker could achieve good decorative results with ordinary cuts of timber. The 'curl' or 'flame' figuring so characteristic of later Georgian furniture is only rarely found before c.1760.<sup>124</sup> It is not, as is commonly believed, the product of a particular variety of mahogany (inevitably cited as Cuban), but of the part of the tree where a branch separates from the trunk or the trunk itself forks into two. In the early days of the trade it was usual to cross-cut mahogany logs below the fork to avoid wasting shipping space. This was the practice even in the 19th century, when curls were 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.'<sup>125</sup> The curls, therefore, were in the early days left behind, until it became apparent that their shipping costs were outweighed by their decorative value as veneers. There was a further reason why importers were reluctant to bring in curls. They commonly contained much waste due to faults in the timber, particularly 'inbark, or gall' which 'arises from the two centres forming the curl never having perfectly united'.<sup>126</sup>

There is relatively little contemporary information on what qualities mid-18th century cabinet-makers looked for in mahogany. Extant invoices of known makers rarely attach any adjective other than 'fine' or, occasionally, 'very fine' to their descriptions of mahogany furniture. In May 1759, for instance, Thomas Chippendale invoiced the Earl of Dumfries for (among other things) 'a pair of Mahog: Card table of fine wood...' and 'a Mahog: Library Table of very fine wood'.<sup>127</sup> The records of the Gillow firm are therefore invaluable in casting some light over this murky subject. In Robert Gillow's correspondence the manifold virtues of best mahogany timber were usually encompassed by the phrase 'Right Good Jamaica'.<sup>128</sup> 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. At various times Gillow mentioned the desirability of colour and

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<sup>124</sup> On this matter, at least, I can agree with Cescinsky and Symonds, who both made similar observations. Symonds, *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, p.155-7; Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, p.293; *The Gentle Art*, p.112.

<sup>125</sup> Chaloner, *op.cit.*, p.8.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.9-10. In this context Blackie described curls which were formed by the growth of a branch from the main trunk as 'a serious blemish'. *Op.cit.*, p.36. For further discussion of this topic see chapter four.

<sup>127</sup> Gilbert, *Chippendale*, p.138. It is probably asking too much to expect any cabinet maker charging Chippendale's prices to describe his mahogany furniture in more truthful terms such as 'dull' or 'badly coloured'.

<sup>128</sup> 344/164. Gillow to Rathbone 13 November 1759.

'brightness' or lustre.<sup>129</sup> Good figure was implied by the phrase 'well vein'd', and 'fine' quality timber possessed both colour and figure.<sup>130</sup> Wood which had colour but not figure was, as we have seen, suitable for good general purpose work, such as chair frames, bed posts and mouldings. It was also cheaper than well figured wood. For carcase work figured wood was a positive disadvantage, since it was often unstable.<sup>131</sup> 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,<sup>132</sup> and the difference in price between tables in 'good hard wood' and inferior or 'softer' mahogany was often quoted in Gillows's correspondence with clients.<sup>133</sup> Indifferent or average timber with respect to colour and figure was sometimes described as 'middling' or 'plain'.<sup>134</sup> Width was a particularly valuable attribute, since for snap tables and dining tables wide planks were essential. Width combined with figure, colour and brightness constituted the acme of perfection. Such wood was described as 'fine table plank' and fetched the highest prices.<sup>135</sup> 'Soundness' implied freedom from shakes or other faults, and hence a 'sound parcel' of mahogany was one in which working losses were minimal.<sup>136</sup>

In the first half of the 19th century the timber dealer's vocabulary became considerably extended, and most of the modern terminology has its origins in this phase of the mahogany trade. Chaloner and Fleming's analysis of quality, colour and figure, although specifically referring to St Domingo wood, is worth quoting

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<sup>129</sup> 344/165, Gillow to Jos. Beetham, 9 September 1768. In late 1782 Gillows were sent a parcel of mahogany which, when cut up, 'appears to be all Stain'd of the Colour faded w<sup>ch</sup> we presume has been Occasion'd by its laying a long time after it has been felled if it had been a good colour tho' plain it would have been worth near L100 more than it is.' 344/170. Gillow to Swarbreck, 23 September 1782.

<sup>130</sup> 344/165. Gillow to Jos. Beetham, 11 October 1768. 344/166. Gillow to Gillow and Taylor, 22 October 1770. Gillow to Swarbreck, 24 February 1775, 18 February 1776. 344/162. Gillow to Swarbreck, 11 June 1775.

<sup>131</sup> 344/175. 'The last log of Mahogany turns out bad for the Money - It is not good enough for Tables but just so for chairwood.' Gillow to Henry Sharples, 1 January 1803. On one occasion in 1775 Gillow ordered Rattan plank from Wm Rathbone, specifying that 'plain Streight Baisted Wood will do best...' 344/166. Gillow to Rathbone, 23 June 1775.

<sup>132</sup> 344/164. Gillow to Rathbone, 13 November 1759, 26 October 1760. 344/166 Gillow to Wm Law, 11 October 1771. 344/170 Gillow to Charles Udale, 19 October 1784.

<sup>133</sup> 344/171. Gillow to Mr Matt. Campbell, 16 May 1786.

<sup>134</sup> 344/165. 'We have opened very little of your Mahog: as yet it proves middling.' Gillow to John Heard, 7 May 1769. 344/167. 'As to the Mahog: Plank they are of a pretty Size & good breadth & thickness plain in Quality.' Gillow to Swarbreck, 20 September 1776.

<sup>135</sup> 344/171. 'The Price of Dining Tables will depend more upon the quality of the Wood than any other Furniture.' Gillow to Phillip Saltmarsh esq., 13 January 1786.

<sup>136</sup> 344/161. Gillow to Wm Fletcher, Jamaica, 1749(?). 344/166 Gillow to Wm Strickland, Liverpool, 28 December 1773. Chaloner and Fleming defined soundness as 'freedom from shakes, inbarks and similar defects'. *Op.cit.*, p.55 For further details on allowances and losses due to faults see chapter six.



at length.

## QUALITY

The beauty of Mahogany arises from its being cross-grained, or presenting the fibres endways or obliquely, on the surface, - these positions of the fibres, as well as their different colours, give a clouded and mottled variety to the surface; and when some parts are partially transparent, they give rise to a variety of lights and shades, as the observer shifts his place, and reflects them in the most varied manner, like the surface of a crystal. This overlapping of the fibres, and their varied colours, are the occasion of the singular appearance which the surface of a dining table will present to two persons when seated opposite to each other. From one side of the table portions will seem quite light, but in the same seen from an opposite point of view, the contrary effect of deep shade will be produced; and this is the reason why no painter can correctly imitate mahogany.

Quality, or the grain of the Wood, is of the highest importance. Good quality consists in the Wood being close in the grain, and of firm texture, or fine, and free in the working, in contra-distinction to a coarse, harsh, or brittle hardness; and bad quality is when the grain is porous, and of a grey or smutty appearance. The quality is materially influenced by the soil on which the tree grows, a matter worthy of attentive observation by those occupied in this trade. Logs produced from low, marshy soils are much less figured than those from more elevated and rocky districts.

## COLOUR

Mahogany is defective in colour when its paleness approaches to that of Fir or Pine Timber; and is too highly coloured when of a deep red. It is of a good colour when between these two extremes and is accompanied by a bright ruby appearance. The lighter Mahogany (but not pale) is preferable, unless indeed the high colour has much life, or brightness...

## FIGURE

Figure is mostly divided into two kinds - roe or shade, and mottle.

Roe, is that alternate streak or flake of light and shade running with the grain, or from end to end of the log. If the streak be regular in size and unbroken, it is thought little of; but if the flakes be broad, and the light and dark parts have a tendency to blend, yet strongly contrast, are are variedly broken in their progress, then it is considered fine.

Mottle, is that mark in the wood which, in a polished board, at first view, appears like something raised upon the surface, and a person not unfrequently feels if it be smooth. It is variegated in form so much, that many names have been used to designate its several kinds, of which the following are some. Stop mottle chiefly arises from angular grain, and is in broad flashes, frequently diverging from a centre like the foot of bird,

in contradistinction to Fiddle mottle, which runs in nearly even streaks, as you see on the back of a fiddle, and Rain mottle is somewhat similar to Fiddle, only it is in larger and longer marks. As these two kinds are rarely found except near the surface, much cutting may destroy or diminish them. Stop mottle is the most esteemed, and when united with broad roe, accompanied by fine quality and good colour, constitutes the highest perfection of mahogany. Mottle runs ever across the grain. However beautiful in itself, mottle should always be in union with shade, to produce that stop roe and mottle figure so much valued. There are also the Plum and the Peacock mottle; this last resembles the tail of the bird.<sup>137</sup>

That Chaloner and Fleming should analyse mahogany figures in such detail is testimony to the value attached in the 19th century to well figured wood.

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.'<sup>138</sup> 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 19th-century press reports, came from Central America. Nevertheless, boards of 30" width and more are common in mid-18th 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...'. Gillows could find many uses for 'little Jamaica Loggs... especially if a part of it will be fitt for mouldings &c...'.<sup>139</sup> Mahogany carcasses on early mahogany furniture were often made from relatively narrow boards - twelve to eighteen inches - butted together, since boards of really good width were usually reserved for 'table wood'. Evidence from the Gillow archives of the 1770s and 1780s suggests that trees of sufficient girth to provide table wood became scarcer as time went on, resulting in an inevitable escalation of price.

### The Seven Years' War 1756-63

The Seven Years' War was a turning point for British imperial fortunes, and no less so for the mahogany trade. As during the War of Austrian Succession, rapid price inflation followed immediately on the outbreak of hostilities. Between 1755 and 1759 the wholesale price of mahogany in London leapt from sixteen to

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<sup>137</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, pp.56-7. This is a slightly amplified version of Chaloner's original 1837 pamphlet on St Domingo mahogany. Very similar information is contained in Blackie's Cabinet Maker's Assistant, probably plagiarised from this source.

<sup>138</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.238.

<sup>139</sup> 344/165, Gillow to Jos. Beetham, 9 September 1768.

thirty-six guineas per ton (8-18d/ft), and remained at this level until 1763.<sup>140</sup> As a consequence Jamaica mahogany became for the first time a comparative luxury. The shortage of timber occasioned by the war is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that for the latter half of the conflict the British enjoyed almost complete naval superiority. The French were swept from Canada, and their most important West Indian colonies, with the exception of St Domingue, were occupied by British forces. Martinique and Guadeloupe both became British colonies for the duration, exporting large quantities of sugar and other commodities to Britain.<sup>141</sup> Among these latter was mahogany, exported in small shipments from Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1763.<sup>142</sup> The most significant conquest of all was the capture and occupation of Havana in August 1762. Hugh Thomas has commented that '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...'.<sup>143</sup> Among the minor outcomes of this bonanza was the introduction for the first time of Havana or Cuban mahogany into the British market.

Scarcity of timber and consequent inflation inevitably caused difficulties for furniture makers. In Lancaster Robert Gillow certainly felt the squeeze. As early as January 1757 he wrote to his cousin complaining that 'Mahogany Planks is very Dear...'. In fact, his troubles were just beginning.<sup>144</sup> One of the notable effects of war was the disruption of customary channels of trade. Ordinarily Gillow dealt directly with his Jamaican agents and imported mahogany into Lancaster. In wartime the trade was engrossed by bigger dealers. Both merchants and insurers favoured big, well armed ships, and these sailed from the larger ports such as London, Liverpool and Bristol. The convoy system also concentrated shipping into the larger ports, obliging vessels from minor ports to join the fleet or run the gauntlet of enemy privateers. As a consequence Gillows was forced to buy through the nearest port served directly by convoys, which was Liverpool. His principal supplier was William Rathbone, one of the port's most

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<sup>140</sup> In later years one of the Board of Trade's correspondents remarked that he was unable to supply them with accurate prices for mahogany during this period because 'very small quantities came to market'. BT6/50. William Ryder to Lord Hawkesbury, 16 March 1790.

<sup>141</sup> In the Caribbean, British forces occupied Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia, and St Vincent. Florida was also taken, and remained British after the Peace of Paris. According to Edward Long, Guadeloupe alone sent L600,000 of produce to Britain in a single year. Long, *op.cit.*, p.561. Other authorities put the figure somewhat lower, but it was still substantial. The Customs returns for 1763 give a figure of L423,000 for Guadeloupe and L356,000 for Martinique.

<sup>142</sup> Cust 3. Two tons of mahogany were imported from Guadeloupe, 2.5 cwt from Martinique. In 1764 Thomas Chippendale supplied two patrons with pieces of furniture described as 'Guadelupe wood'. These appear to be satinwood rather than mahogany. Gilbert, *op.cit.*, pp.156, 159, 163, 164, pl.470.

<sup>143</sup> Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*, London 1971, pp.49-51.

<sup>144</sup> Letter Book 344/166.

prominent timber merchants.<sup>145</sup> Gillow's relations with Rathbone seem to have been on the whole good, which was fortunate, since much depended on Rathbone's goodwill and sound judgement.<sup>146</sup> His usual practice was to write to Rathbone enquiring about availability, price and quality. If Rathbone's reply suited his needs, Gillow then ordered his mahogany. The following exchange of letters is typical, beginning with a request for timber in mid-November 1759:

Am informed that Mahogany Plank is 11<sup>d</sup> p foot w<sup>th</sup> you, therefor if at that price, (or even 12<sup>d</sup>) & Right Good Jam<sup>a</sup> Wood Should be glad you'll purchase forty or 50 Pounds worth & send it per first Opportunity. Also if there is any good Soft Mahog: to be had at 8<sup>d</sup>, 9<sup>d</sup>, or 10<sup>d</sup> p ft desires you'll buy us 20 or 30 pounds Value.<sup>147</sup>

Rathbone's reply came within a week, but was not encouraging. Gillow wrote back:

With regard to Mahog: as the price exceeds our expectation must deffer purchase.<sup>148</sup>

A week after this Gillow wrote again, having heard that some Jamaica ships had arrived in Liverpool:

As you've a Quantity of Mahogany arrived w<sup>th</sup> you, hopes t'will be something lower, therefore if you can purchase us forty, fifty, or 60 Pounds worth of Good Jamaica Wood at 12<sup>d</sup> or under desires you will - are not willing to give above 12<sup>d</sup> except it be a better Parcel than Common...If you can light of a few Plank of extraordinary stuff please buy 'em for us if you can have 'em worth the Money.<sup>149</sup>

As the timber became scarcer and prices climbed higher, Gillow tried other

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<sup>145</sup> William Rathbone was one of the *elite* of Liverpool's merchants. He is recorded in the earliest Liverpool trade directory of 1766 as one of nine timber merchants in the port. His father Richard was a seaman turned merchant who established the business in the first half of the 18th century. His son Joseph married in 1768 Mary Darby, the daughter of Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale thereby cementing a powerful alliance of manufacturing and trade. Despite his commercial interest in the West India trade Rathbone was a committed opponent of the slave trade and an active abolitionist. Perry's map of Liverpool (1769) shows Rathbone's yard as the largest on the South Dock, completed in 1753.

<sup>146</sup> The volume of correspondence with Rathbone in the Letter Books increased markedly in wartime. This may be significant, reflecting the difficulty Gillow experienced of importing on his own account at these times. It is to be greatly regretted that the Gillow letter books preserve only outgoing correspondence. The content of Rathbone's letters to Gillow can only be inferred from Gillow's replies.

<sup>147</sup> Letter Book 344/164. Gillow to Rathbone, 13 November 1759.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Rathbone, 20 November 1759.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Rathbone 27 November 1759.

suppliers. In February 1760 he wrote to another Liverpool merchant, Christopher Parkinson, and to a London firm, Basnett and Hargreaves.<sup>150</sup> This correspondence is interesting on several counts, not least because of the way its importunate message is couched in careful insouciance:

...have an Inclination to Try a Small Parcel of Mahogany from your place - therefore if they'll either of 'em [the captains of the coasting vessels] take it in at 6<sup>d</sup> p Solid ft (Invoice Measure) w<sup>ch</sup> believes is the Customary Freit to Liverpool, desires you'll purchase us about 50-60-70- or 80 pounds worth of Plank of the best sort you expect to by at 10<sup>d</sup> p ft, the breadth you mention from 2 ft or better being quite agreeable - 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 choice of Right Jamaica Wood, & see that proper allowance in Measure is made for defficiency.<sup>151</sup>

In this letter Gillow was careful to state the price he was prepared to pay, both for mahogany and for freight, and to insist on accurate measurement. Because this was a previously untried source, he also twice emphasised the importance of obtaining good quality wood. Gillow calculated that buying in London at 10d per foot would work out cheaper than buying at Liverpool at 12d. Freight to Liverpool was 6d per cubic foot, or a halfpenny per superficial foot, and freight from Liverpool to Lancaster a further 2 1/2d per cube.<sup>152</sup> The total cost still amounted to less than 11d per foot. On such small margins did commercial survival depend.

A little later in 1760 the situation was much improved by the arrival of the first of that year's Jamaica ships at Liverpool. In March Gillow bought 380 planks from Rathbone, and in April he got wind of a large consignment of 520 planks which he hoped would lower the market price somewhat.<sup>153</sup> However, wide planks were still hard to come by, and even poor quality Rattan mahogany was fetching up to 11d per foot.<sup>154</sup> Even in late 1763, when the war was at an end and mahogany importations had leapt from just over L17,109 in 1762 to L41,588, mahogany was both scarce and dear in Lancaster. In October Gillow 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

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Parkinson, 15 February 1760; Gillow to Messrs Basnett & Hargreaves, 24 February 1760.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Rathbone, 9 March 1760.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Rathbone, 9 March, 14 March, 6 April 1760. A notable effect of the convoy system was to cause episodes of scarcity and glut in most West Indian commodities. Pares, *War and Trade*, p.497.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Rathbone, 15 April, 2 December 1760.

Jamaica at Market at the Present, shou'd be glad to know how it is with you....'<sup>155</sup> Not until 1764 did the market return to some kind of normality.

Despite record importations in 1763 and 1764 the average price of Jamaica mahogany in London never again fell below L24 per ton (12d/ft). The fact that after each war mahogany prices failed to return to their pre-war levels suggests that there were longer term inflationary factors at work. Between 1722 and 1763 the average peacetime price of mahogany in London rose by 300 per cent, from 8 to 24 guineas per ton. Of all 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.<sup>156</sup> The phenomenon can only partly be explained by the market becoming accustomed to higher prices. Nor can it be attributed to higher importation costs. The total cost of importation scarcely changed throughout the century, and indeed, in real terms it actually fell. Freight ratios for mahogany (i.e., the proportion of shipping costs to market price) fell from 60+ per cent in 1720 to around 35 per cent in 1777 and 20 per cent in 1784 (a full breakdown of shipping costs is given in chapter six).<sup>157</sup> The rate of commission or profits of the mahogany brokers also remained the same at a flat 5 per cent in Jamaica and 3 per cent in England.

There can be little doubt that the cause of long term price inflation was to be found on Jamaica itself. In the 1720s prime mahogany could be bought at Kingston for less than 1d per foot. By the mid-1760s this had risen to 6d.<sup>158</sup> There were two main inflationary factors at work. The first was the progressively 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. Edward Long wrote that '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.'<sup>159</sup> Long estimated that the difficulty of extraction added L6 sterling to the price of a ton of mahogany in the 1760s.<sup>160</sup> This was a hefty penalty, 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 costs*, of 300 per cent between the 1720s and the 1760s. The rise was almost certainly due to market demand. The fact that

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Messrs Wilson and Brown, 9 October 1763.

<sup>156</sup> Richardson, *op.cit.*, pp.747-8. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery*, pp.496-7.

<sup>157</sup> These are average figures. Freight ratios varied greatly according to market price.

<sup>158</sup> The Liverpool port books for the 1720s record cost at source below 1d per foot (above, chapter one.) By contrast, Gillow was paying 9d and upwards in the 1780s.

<sup>159</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.497. In another place (I, p.497) Long remarked that mahogany was 'chiefly found in the deep recesses of St Anne, Clarendon, St James, St Elizabeth and Westmoreland.'

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

prices continued to climb throughout the eighteenth century, albeit with short term falls, and despite ever increasing exportations, must imply that demand 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-18th 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 500*l.* 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'.<sup>161</sup>

Jamaica mahogany remained profitable to the planters so long as it was commercially accessible, 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.<sup>162</sup> The rapid expansion of the trade in Hispaniola mahogany in the 1780s was a more serious threat. The development of these trades, and the consequences for Jamaica mahogany, are discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>161</sup> Browne, *op.cit.*, p.17; Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843.

<sup>162</sup> 'Havanna Wood, a kind of mahogany that grows in the island of Cuba, usually called Cuba wood... It is termed Havanna wood, because Havanna is the chief town in the island of Cuba.' Sheraton, *op.cit.*, II, p.251.

## CHAPTER FOUR - THE JAMAICA TRADE, 1763-1793

### Jamaica after the Peace of Paris

The Peace of Paris (1763) confirmed Britain's military and commercial dominance in the West Indies and Canada. Guadeloupe and Martinique were returned to the French, but Dominica, strategically placed between the two, was retained, and so was Grenada. Havana was restored to Spain in return for important concessions on the coast of Honduras. But for the merchants and planters of Jamaica the peace was anything but profitable. Throughout 1764 and 1765 correspondence between Kingston and Whitehall contained little but complaints of hardship, scarcity and loss. Jamaican trade was at a virtual standstill, and the responsibility for this, so far as the Jamaica merchants were concerned, lay squarely with the home government. A correspondent of the *Gentleman's Magazine* spoke for all Jamaica's merchants when he wrote the following:

The commercial concerns of this part of the world were never known so bad... That part of the trade which was the support of these islands and its credit at home, is entirely subsided by orders from home to suppress all commerce with the Spaniards who were the only people that brought us money here for our British manufactures and enabled us to make our remittances to England. Not a Spanish vessel can now come with money to this island, but what is seized by officers either under the Admiralty or Governor. We have been prevented in receiving in this island since I arrived here near a million dollars... They now carry this money to the French and Dutch islands, which otherwise would have centred on us.<sup>1</sup>

The orders which aroused so much fury were those passed by Act of Parliament in 1763 and 1764, intended to stamp out smuggling and reinforce the Acts of Trade and Navigation.<sup>2</sup> The legislation was chiefly directed against those North American colonists who had traded treasonably with the French islands during the war, supplying them with food and munitions in return for sugar and molasses. By an Act of 1763, which increased the financial interest of both naval and revenue officers in seizures of contraband goods and craft, the government encouraged a more rigorous enforcement of existing laws.<sup>3</sup> An Act of September 1764, popularly known as the 'Hovering Act', made it an offence for any foreign vessel to remain within two leagues of the shore of a British

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<sup>1</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* July 1764, quoted in A. Christelow, 'Contraband Trade', p.319.

<sup>2</sup> The most important of these Acts were *3 George III cap.22* and *4 George III cap.15*. For a detailed account of these events see A. Christelow, *op.cit.*, pp.309-343, and F. Armytage, *The Free Ports System*.

<sup>3</sup> *3 George III cap.22*, 'An Act for the further encouragement of His Majesty's revenues and customs, and for the prevention of the clandestine running of goods into any part of His Majesty's dominions.'



possession for more than forty eight hours, on pain of seizure of both ship and cargo.<sup>4</sup> It was this latter act to which the Jamaican merchants took greatest exception, since it seemed certain to prevent Spanish vessels from trading in their customary manner with the Jamaican coast. Without Spanish trade the island was without cash, and without cash all trade was at a standstill.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent research has suggested that although the Jamaica merchants' difficulties were real enough, their true cause lay elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> William Lyttleton, the Governor of Jamaica, told the Board of Trade in July 1764 that the merchants' complaints were without foundation, since he knew of no Spanish vessels seized either on his orders or on the orders of anyone else.<sup>7</sup> The Hovering Act itself was short lived, since new instructions were issued to customs and naval officers in May 1765, to the effect that Spanish vessels were not to be interfered with. Nevertheless, the Spanish trade failed to revive. Many Jamaica merchants believed that the Spaniards had been warned off for good, and were now taking their bullion to the French. However, a very different interpretation was offered by Joseph Salvador, a Portuguese Jew with extensive involvement in the bullion trade and an advisor on occasion to Pitt and Newcastle. He maintained that the Spanish markets were glutted with British goods, particularly after the Havana bonanza of 1762-3. The Spanish therefore had no need to come to Jamaica in search of British manufactures; neither was there much point in the Jamaicans taking goods to the Spanish.<sup>8</sup>

Salvador's reasoning may well have been correct, but this was not the way the Jamaica merchants saw it. The letter books of Benjamin Satterthwaite, Kingston agent for the shipping firm of Satterthwaite and Co. of Lancaster, provide ample evidence of the difficulties of trade at this time. In March 1764 he was already complaining of lack of cash. In reply to a Lancaster correspondent, he wrote: 'I Observe what you say about Mahogany and Cotton; could I raise money you may be Assured I would miss no Opportunity of following your Instructions, that is, to purchase it and stow it ready...'<sup>9</sup> In April he remarked he was finding trading of any kind almost impossible, 'this Island being Drained of cash and no likelihood of more coming from the Spaniards'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 4 *George III cap.15*.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the condition of Jamaican trade at this time see A. Christelow and Armytage, *op.cit.*; Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class*, pp.120-123; Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*, Bell, 'The West India Trade before the American Revolution', pp.272-287.

<sup>6</sup> Christelow, *op.cit.*, p.329 and *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> CO 137/33. Lyttleton to the Board of Trade, 16 July 1764.

<sup>8</sup> Christelow, *op.cit.*, p.330. See also Edmund Burke, *Observations on the Present State of the Nation, 1769*, in Armytage, *op.cit.*, p.24.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to Messrs Thomas and William Dillworth, merchants, Lancaster, 4 March 1764. Lancaster University Library.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to Sam. Gardner, London merchant, 8 April 1764.

Like his fellow merchants, Satterthwaite was in no doubt where the blame for this situation lay, and was particularly bitter about the Hovering Act: 'The ... proposers of this Scheme ought to be hanged, it has utterly ruined the trade of this Island, and a great detriment to the mother Country.'<sup>11</sup> It was a sentiment he expressed more than once.

If cash was short, payment in kind was better than no payment at all, and Satterthwaite was forced to haggle and barter for goods and money. At the same time he was calling in debts, since he planned to return to Lancaster the following year. One of his debtors was Mrs Sarah Israel, who had just inherited a plantation at Black River, and found it encumbered with invoices outstanding. She was unable to pay Satterthwaite's bills in cash, and so in March 1764 he wrote to her as follows:

If you could find means to pay of the Old Account early this Crop in either Good Mahogany Plank or Cotton laid here at Kingston, I should make no scruple to supply you with Goods in future...<sup>12</sup>

Another debtor, Henry Cross in St Elizabeth parish, also offered in late August 1764 to pay off his account in mahogany. Satterthwaite was not keen to receive the timber, since most ships had already sailed for England, and as a consequence mahogany was now in 'little or no Demand'.<sup>13</sup> He agreed to take it for want of anything better, and told Cross that prices had recently been between 55 and 80 shillings per hundred feet, depending on quality.<sup>14</sup> Cross naturally wanted the best price for his timber, and stalled for seven months in the hope of better prices the following year. Early in 1765 Satterthwaite was still waiting for the promised shipment of mahogany plank. By the time it finally arrived at the end of March, Satterthwaite's usually mild, Quakerish temper forsook him:

This day week was landed on Reads Wharfe 102 pcs Moho<sup>y</sup> out of the Schooner Tryall, we have had many bad parcells of Mohogany upon our Wharfe but none so ordinary as this of yours, I have offered it for Sale to severall people but can't get one to offer any price, indeed one of 'em told me it was not worth 25/ p/C, its Such Stuff as will not answer at our market, you say you could have had 50/- for it at your Bay & 70 for about 10pl, I wish you had sold it there & Remitted me the money... pray lett me know what I must do with this mohogany of yours. NB Shall I put up your mohogany at Vendue for I can't see any other way of

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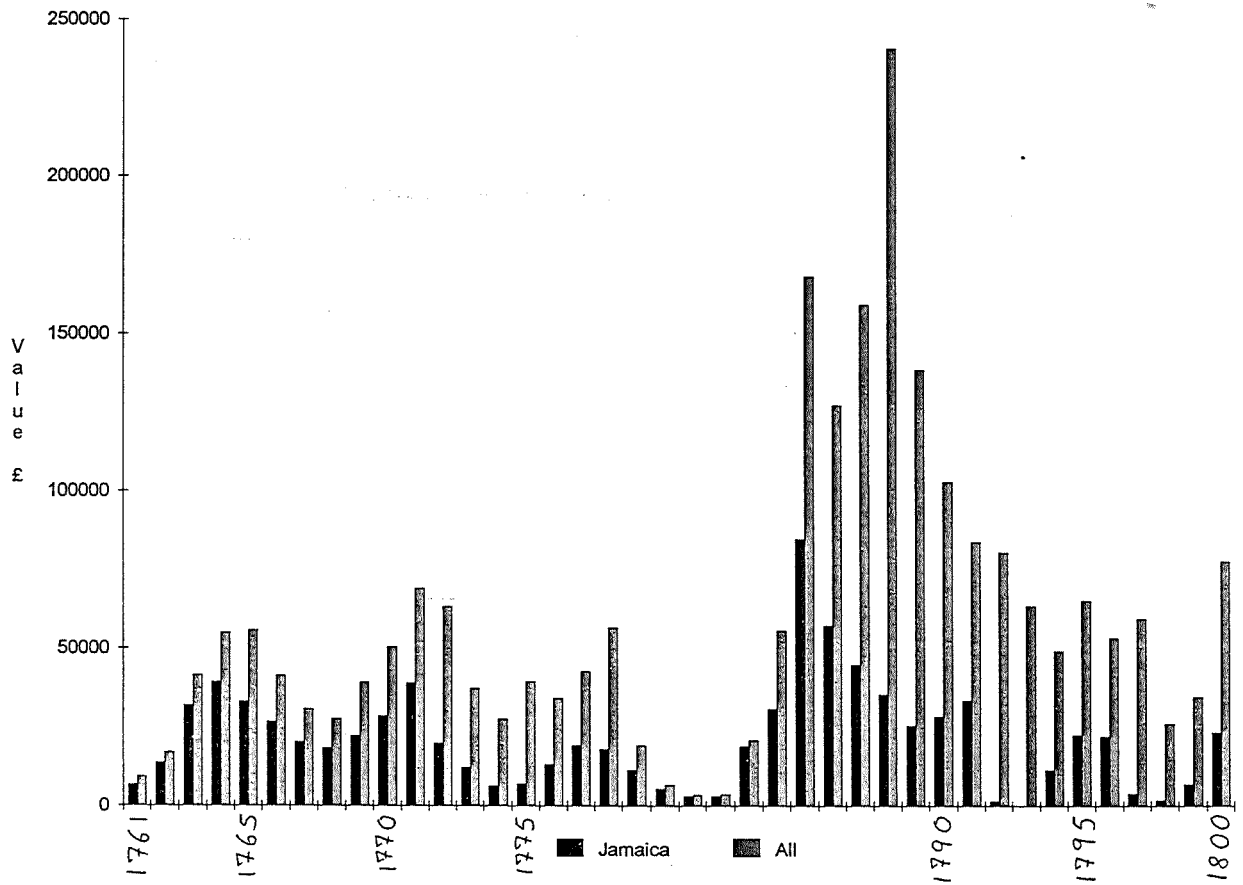
<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to his brother in Lancaster, 10 October 1764.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to Mrs Sarah Israel, Black River 109 March 1764.

<sup>13</sup> Shipowners preferred their vessels to depart Jamaica before the hurricane season began at the beginning of August.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to Henry Cross, Santa Croix St Elizabeth, 25 August 1764. The prices quoted are Jamaica currency, not sterling.

**Figure 4.1:** Value of mahogany importations into England 1761-1800.



**Source:** Cust 3, Cust 17.

- Notes:**
1. Importations from Jamaica are shown alongside importations from all sources.
  2. The Act of 11 George III cap.41 took effect from 1771, resulting in notable increase of mahogany imported from Honduras.
  3. American Revolutionary War began 1775. The effect of the entry of France (1778) and Spain (1779) into the war is clearly shown. A very marked 'release cycle' is apparent after the Treaty of Versailles (1783).
  4. Jamaican figures not available for 1793.
  5. French Revolutionary War began 1793. The overall impact appears slight until 1798, when the Spaniards attacked the British settlement at Belize.

getting it disposed off.<sup>15</sup>

Satterthwaite's correspondence suggests that although the years 1764 and 1765 may have been bad for trade in general, this was not necessarily the case with mahogany, since if cash or crops were short mahogany was always an alternative. From May to July 1764 Satterthwaite attempted to obtain freights for two Lancaster ships, the Lively and the Tryton. Mahogany was easy to come by, and by the end of May the Lively already had 15,000 feet aboard. It took another two months to complete the freight with 48 hogsheads of sugar and it was 11 July before she sailed for home. There were similar delays in obtaining freight for the Tryton. Again, mahogany was loaded first, and she eventually sailed on 18 July with sugar, cotton, and about 2,000 feet of mahogany.

The evidence of the customs returns supports the notion that the mahogany trade benefitted from the slump. Figure 4.1 shows that in 1764 importations of mahogany from Jamaica reached their highest level to date. At the same time, demand for mahogany was undoubtedly high at home as a result of wartime scarcity, and high prices constituted a great incentive to the trade.<sup>16</sup> Even in 1770, seven years after the Peace of Paris, good Jamaica wood fetched around 30 guineas per ton, or almost double its value before the war. High prices brought problems as well as profits, however. As demand in Britain began to exceed the capacity of Jamaica to supply it, so Jamaica's merchants had to look elsewhere to supply the deficiency.

### Cuban mahogany

In the early 1760's, Kingston merchants began to deal for the first time in substantial amounts of mahogany from foreign sources. The most abundant of these sources was Honduras; the history and development of this trade is discussed in the following chapter. The other major sources were the neighbouring islands of Cuba to the north and Hispaniola to the east. Of these two, Cuban mahogany was the first to make an impact on the English market.

The trade in Cuban mahogany arose as a by-product of the British capture of

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to Henry Cross, 6 April 1765. This episode seems to have induced Satterthwaite to take a more circumspect view in the future. In July the same year, shortly before he left Jamaica, Satterthwaite wrote to a merchant at Black River, saying that payment of his debts in 'Fustick, Logwood or Mahog'y would not do'. Benjamin Satterthwaite to Humphrey Colquhoun, 3 July 1765.

<sup>16</sup> There is some evidence that the record volume of importations in these years occasionally constituted something of an embarrassment to the mahogany dealers in England. In April 1766 Henry Cruger Jnr, a Bristol merchant, had more mahogany on his hands than he knew what to do with. 'I am sorry that so much more Mahogany is coming by the [ship] America. I can't tell what I shall do with it. I have halled about a quarter of the Newport Packet's away, in order to lessen the quantity in the Eyes of the Buyer's, as well as to make room on our Keys. The great piles that now remain on the Key get me a rap over the Nuckles every time I fall in company with our Mayor, but I laugh it off, saying it will soon be removed and so forth.' *Commerce of Rhode Island 1726-1800*, Vol.I, Boston 1914, p.153. In the mid- to late 1760s Gillows were plentifully stocked, declaring in a letter to a prospective client 'We now have an extraordinary Stock of well seasoned and Curious Wood both Mahog: & Walnut &c...' 344/165, 7 May 1769.

Havana on 13 August 1762.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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'.<sup>19</sup> Other Havana timber was shipped via Jamaica, and later in the year Gillow made a similar enquiry of the Jamaica firm of Wilson and Brown, asking for prices of Jamaica, Havannah and Rattan wood.<sup>20</sup>

Direct importations from Havana to England ceased after 1764 when the Spanish had re-established control of the port, but once opened the channels of commerce were never again closed completely.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> These vessels carried 'dry goods' (i.e., British manufactures) and slaves into south and east Cuba.<sup>23</sup> They found the Cuban market glutted and short of cash, and it is possible that, as was the case in Jamaica, shortage of ready money encouraged the trade in mahogany. At the same time, high demand and high prices in Britain outweighed the double disincentive of additional freights and the attentions of the *Garda Costas*. As well as their usual cargos of hides, mules and cattle, these small traders now brought mahogany into Jamaica. Some of their vessels sailed out of Kingston, but the majority plied between Montego Bay and the south Cuban coast. It was a short trip; the 45 ton sloop *Two Friends*, entering Montego Bay with 150 pieces of mahogany on 12th May 1769, was back again on the 25th with a further 140 logs.<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult to be certain how much Cuban mahogany entered Jamaica in this fashion, since the shipping register is incomplete, particularly for smaller ports like Montego Bay and Savannah la Mar. Recorded entries between January 1764

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<sup>17</sup> For an account of this event see Thomas, *op.cit.*, pp.49-51; N.V. Russell, 'The Reaction in England and America to the Capture of Havana, 1762,' *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1928, pp.303-316.

<sup>18</sup> Customs 3. In 1763, L182 of cedar and L2187 of mahogany were imported direct into London. A further L182 of mahogany and L123 of cedar came into outports. The following year Havana mahogany worth L34.10 entered London, and L40 the year after.

<sup>19</sup> Letter Book 344/164, Richard Gillow to William Rathbone, 31 July 1763.

<sup>20</sup> Letter Book 344/164, Richard Gillow to Messrs Wilson and Brown, 9 October 1763.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, *op.cit.*, pp.64-70; BT 6/185 records some direct trade between England and Havana until 1766, then nothing until 1794. The same source does however record trade via minor Cuban ports in the 1780s.

<sup>22</sup> CO 142/17,18.

<sup>23</sup> CO 142/17. According to Hugh Thomas (p.70) '[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.*.

<sup>24</sup> CO 142/17.

and December 1769 amount to 1988 logs, 1567 pieces and 50,000 feet.<sup>25</sup> At official valuations this amounted to something like L4387, and is likely to be a very conservative estimate. Not only are the registers incomplete so far as British shipping is concerned, but they contain no information at all on the numbers of Spanish ships involved in the trade prior to 1766. Both British and foreign vessels used many points of entry which were entirely unregulated by Customs officials.<sup>26</sup>

### **Merchants and Planters: the evidence of Edward Long**

The new trades in foreign mahogany exposed a divergence of interest between those who traded and shipped mahogany, principally the merchants of Kingston, and the planters on whose land mahogany grew. To a great extent this was a traditional and longstanding difference. It is reflected, for instance, in the planters' insistence on retaining the inland town of St Jago de la Vega (Spanish Town) as the colonial capital, and in opposing measures intended to benefit the coastal port of Kingston.<sup>27</sup> It is also reflected in the formation of the London Planters' Club some time before 1740; not until 1780, with the formation of the Society of West India Planters and Merchants, was a common interest formally recognised.<sup>28</sup> The planters were concerned above all things to maintain the commercial monopoly in sugar and other plantation produce which underpinned the value of their land and the price of their produce. It was this fundamental point of the planters' self interest which determined British naval and military strategy in both the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War. It reached its high water mark in the restoration of Guadeloupe and Martinique, both rich sugar islands, to the French in 1763. In the case of mahogany, importations of foreign timber also had the effect of lowering the capital value of their Jamaican estates. As we have seen, planters treated their mahogany as a cash reserve when times were hard, and in the years immediately following the Peace of Paris times were undoubtedly hard. Foreign importations cheapened

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<sup>25</sup> CO 142/17,18.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Gillow liked to buy timber at Black River, reckoning he could get mahogany there better and cheaper than at Kingston. As well as being a source of good Jamaica mahogany, it was also an entrepot for foreign timber; in October 1768 Gillow inspected a parcel of short Cuba logs recently unloaded on the Lancaster quayside and imported from Black River. 344/165 Gillow to Jos. Beetham, 11 October 1768.

<sup>27</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica*, II, pp.15, 105, 116. The two towns developed into opposing poles of political and commercial power. When Admiral Charles Knowles was appointed Governor in 1752 he soon ran foul of the planters by appearing to favour the merchants' interests. At one point he was forced to retire from St Jago de Vega to Kingston for safety, and in 1755 forced a vote through the Assembly to transfer the Assembly from St Jago to Kingston. The planters employed their interest to lobby the government in London, and Knowles was recalled in 1757. The Assembly returned to St Jago the following year, and Kingston did not become the official capital of Jamaica until 1872.

<sup>28</sup> Pares, *Merchants and Planters*, pp.36-7; Ragatz, *op.cit.*, p.51.

the reserves of timber on Jamaica estates and even rendered them commercially unviable. In the *History of Jamaica*, published in 1774, Edward Long put the planters' case:

This article [mahogany] is now far less beneficial to the island than it formerly was. Most of the trees that grew near the coast having been cut down, the cutters are now obliged to seek them several miles within the country; and they are chiefly found in the deep recesses of St Anne, Clarendon, St James, St Elizabeth and Westmoreland. The length and difficulty of carriage occasions an expense, at an average, of not less than 6l. sterling a ton; so that the nett produce of the ... best quality brought to Great Britain, after payment of all contingent charges, does rarely exceed ten shillings per ton. The greater part of what is shipped from this island has been imported from the Spaniards, with whom it grows in great abundance near the coast, and is cut and carried at a very trifling expense, so that they can afford to sell it extremely cheap; but it is sappy, and very inferior to the Jamaica wood. The 11th Geo.II. cap.7 imposes a duty of 8L a ton on mahogany of foreign growth imported into Britain: this duty is entirely evaded; for it is brought free into Jamaica, and goes from thence as Jamaica wood; where, even if it is sold at the lowest price, it clears to the shipper nearly the same as the Jamaica cutters clear for theirs of the best quality: the losses this occasioned to several cutters obliged them to desist, so that few at present are concerned, and they are persons who have large capitals, and make a saving gain, by the greatness of their exports. The legislature of the island passed an act, about the year 1764, to put a stop to the importation of Spanish mahogany, unless clogged with the duty, which if demanded, and paid to the custom house at Jamaica, would soon give a check to it: but I have heard, this act was not approved at home. It is certainly but just, that the mahogany of Jamaican growth should have all the benefit intended for it by the acts of parliament which permit its importation into Britain duty free; but of this it is deprived, so long as the Spanish mahogany comes to market on the same terms, in actual breach of the statute which tends to prohibit foreign woods...<sup>29</sup>

This key passage has been used by furniture historians to support the assertion that much, or even most, of the mahogany used in eighteenth century English furniture originated in the Spanish islands in general and Cuba in particular. Some objections to this thesis have already been raised in chapter three; it is apposite now to examine the issue more closely.<sup>30</sup>

We have already seen in the previous chapter that there is no statistical

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<sup>29</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.497.

<sup>30</sup> This passage was first quoted in R.W. Symonds, 'Early Imports', and reiterated in 'The New Wood'. It was Symonds who, as a result of Long's remarks, first made the assumption that Spanish mahogany came into England via Jamaica from *circa* 1725 because of the Act of 11 George I ('Early Imports', p.219.).

evidence to bear out Long's assertions, at least for the period prior to 1763. It has also been suggested that since Long's *History* was not published until 1774 it cannot be reliably used as evidence for an earlier period. There are several more objections to Long's case, and to the inferences that have been drawn from it. First, Long was not specific about the source of the Spanish importations. It has been assumed that the Spanish islands (particularly Cuba and Hispaniola) were implied, but his complaints could equally well be directed at importations from Honduras. Indeed, in a further passage he makes clear that he includes both Cuban wood and mahogany from the Central American mainland in his complaint.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, and most importantly, Long was by no means an impartial witness. His sympathies lay firmly with the planter class to which he belonged. Some exaggeration must be allowed for, and when he states that 'the greater part' of Jamaica's exports was imported from the Spaniards, a degree of scepticism is not only permissible but advisable. Thirdly, Long misinterpreted (perhaps deliberately) most of the legislation relating to the trade in foreign mahogany, and his views are consequently misleading on a number of key points. Nevertheless, because the issues which he raised were of paramount concern to the traders and planters of Jamaica, and because they relate to key developments in the mahogany trade after 1763, Long's statement demands detailed consideration.

Long refers to two Acts relating to foreign mahogany importations. The first was the Act of Parliament of 1724 (*11 George I cap.7*). Neither Long nor subsequent historians (Cescinsky in particular) have correctly understood the application of this Act. It did not, as Long believed, impose a duty of L8 per ton on foreign mahogany. Rather, L8 was the rateable value on which duty was charged. In 1724 the amount of duty was L2.0.0.<sup>32</sup> By the 1760s the duty had risen to L2.4.0, comprising 25% (40 shillings) import duty plus two additional imposts of 2 shillings each imposed in 1748 and 1758.<sup>33</sup> This duty applied only on arrival in England, and was not levied at West Indian ports. There was no question, therefore of 'smuggling' into Jamaica; foreign mahogany imported in British bottoms was legal and free of English duty until it reached England. The legality or otherwise of foreign mahogany imported in this way then became the concern of the Commissioners of Customs in England, and not the Jamaican legislature. Indeed, other commodities from Spanish colonies - mules, cattle, hides, etc., had been freely imported for a century, without raising any protest from Long or his contemporaries. However, mules, cattle and hides were staples

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<sup>31</sup> In describing the growth of mahogany trees Long emphasises the difference between Jamaica wood 'and that which is collected from the coast of Cuba and the Spanish Main [i.e., Central America]; the former is mostly found on rocky eminencies [sic]; the latter is cut in swampy soils, near the sea-coast. The superior value of Jamaica wood, for beauty of colouring, firmness and durability, may therefore be easily accounted for; but, as a large quantity of balks and planks is brought from the Spanish American coasts to this island, to be shipped from thence to Great Britain, the dealers are apt to confuse all under the name of Jamaica wood, which in some measure hurts the credit of this staple production'. Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843.

<sup>32</sup> As shown in George Carkesse, *The Act of Tonnage and Poundage*, p.900.

<sup>33</sup> *21 George II cap.2; 32 George II cap.10.*



of the plantation economy, for which there was in Jamaica a constant demand. The trade in these articles was necessary to the planters and encouraged as a consequence. Mahogany was a different matter, since foreign importations threatened the planters' monopoly in that article. In addition, wrote Long:

There is a still stronger reason why it [the foreign trade] ought to be suppressed: the mahogany cutters of Jamaica, in carrying on their business, are obliged to cut roads through the interior tracts of country, which before were inaccessible; by which means, settlements are promoted in those parts, where otherwise there might have been none; the public security and advantage are therefore so greatly augmented by the necessary efforts of their employment, that it is highly impolitic to leave them under such a discouragement.<sup>34</sup>

The second Act referred to by Long was passed by the Jamaican legislature on the 29th December 1763, and received the Governor's assent the following day. It was intended to protect the monopoly enjoyed by the Jamaican planters for the past forty years. Its full title was as follows:

An Act to encourage the cutters of & Dealers in Mahogany of the growth of this Island and to prevent the fraudulent exportation of foreign Mahogany from this Island as & for Mahogany of the growth thereof & to lay a duty upon all Mahogany imported into this Island from the French Spanish Dutch & Danish Colonies in America in British Bottoms.<sup>35</sup>

The legislature proposed to charge a duty of one shilling per foot on foreign mahogany imported into Jamaica, equivalent to L24 per ton.<sup>36</sup> In framing the Act some nicety was required, since the legislature, by taxing the trade, believed they were tacitly 'allowing an importation forbid by the Acts of Parliament for regulating the Plantation Trade'. However, they reasoned that since such a high rate of duty would effectively constitute a prohibition, the Act could therefore sit comfortably alongside the Acts of Navigation.<sup>37</sup>

The response of the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations is not recorded in detail, but the Jamaican Act of 1764 never became law. As Long remarked, it was 'disallowed at home'. There are a number of plausible

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, I, p.496. Long's concern for security is an oblique reference to the problem of runaway slaves or Maroons, whose presence in the mountainous interior of Jamaica was a constant, though rarely material, threat underlying plantation life.

<sup>35</sup> CO 140/41 Minutes of the Jamaica Assembly. CO 140/43 Journal of the Council of Jamaica.

<sup>36</sup> CO137/33, f56. Lyttleton to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, 29 January 1764.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*. The legislature demonstrated obvious confusion over the true meaning of the Navigation Acts, since these did not forbid importations from foreign islands in British bottoms, and the inclusion of foreign mahogany in the 1724 Book of Rates (11 George I cap.7) clearly envisaged that such a trade might develop.

conjectures why the Act was disallowed, the first being that it contravened the Act of 11 George I cap.7, in which mahogany from non-British possessions was specifically rated, and hence considered legal. Secondly, if passed, it would have threatened the livelihoods of the mahogany cutters on the Mosquito shore and those newly established in Belize. Thirdly, the government was customarily reluctant to sanction measures which tended to raise the price of raw materials to British manufacturers. Moreover, this was at a time when Jamaica needed all the foreign trade it could get. Whatever the reasoning, the planters had little time to rue their failure, since the issue of foreign mahogany importations was quickly overtaken by a radical shift of policy represented by the Free Ports Act.

### **The 1766 Free Ports Act**

The background to the Free Ports legislation is complex, and has been fully discussed by various authors.<sup>38</sup> In essence, the Free Ports Act of 1766 was intended to restore Jamaica's Spanish trade, and in addition to enable Jamaica and Dominica to act as entrepôts for produce from all over the Caribbean and the Spanish Main. From November 1 of that year, Prince Rupert's Bay and Roseau in Dominica, and Kingston, Savannah la Mar, Montego Bay and St Lucia in Jamaica were declared Free Ports. Foreign vessels of not more than 70 tons and having one deck were permitted to import into the designated ports produce from any part of America, and in return to export slaves and British goods, with the exception of naval stores, tobacco and North American iron. Certain foreign commodities were specifically excluded from Jamaican free ports in order to protect that island's staple products.

The idea of free ports in the Caribbean was not new - the Dutch had operated a free port at St Eustatius since 1737, and in 1764 the Danes established two more at St Thomas and St John in the Virgin islands. The French, too, had opened free ports at Guadeloupe, Martinique and St Domingue in 1764. Nevertheless the 1766 Act represented a significant break with established British mercantile policy, which since 1651 had been based on premise that (with rare exceptions) foreign vessels should be excluded from any share of British colonial trade. Furthermore, by separate agreements with Spain (1670) and France (1686) the British government had agreed in principle to respect similar trade monopolies exercised by both these governments in their colonial trades. Hence trade under the Free Ports Act was, in effect, legalised smuggling. Most of the commodities entered from foreign colonies - mules, cattle, hides, dyewoods - had been imported into Jamaica for more than a century but, if brought in a foreign ship, were technically contraband. The Act of 1766 provided for the first time a legal channel for this trade, and at the same time facilitated the exportation of British manufactures to foreign colonies.

In actively encouraging the importation of goods from foreign colonies, the Free Ports Act posed a real threat to the monopolies enjoyed by the British planting interest. The Jamaican legislature opposed the Free Ports idea from its

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Armytage and Christelow, *ops.cit.*

inception, and only gave way when their own interests had been fully safeguarded by the exclusion of foreign sugar, coffee, molasses, pimento, ginger and tobacco.<sup>39</sup> Despite these concessions, which undoubtedly supported the price of these Jamaican commodities at home, the planters' opposition to the Free Ports policy remained entrenched. Edward Long believed that: 'The act of parliament was certainly well-meant, but it has produced an effect very contrary, in some respects, to what was intended.'<sup>40</sup> Twenty years after the passing of the 1766 Act, the Jamaica Planters and Merchants (essentially a planter dominated body) informed the Board of Trade of their continuing opposition in the form of a resolution: 'That this Meeting knows of no benefit arising to Jamaica from establishing free Ports in the British West Indies.'<sup>41</sup>

As might be expected, the mercantile interest took a very different view. Whatever the commodity, be it sugar, cotton, tobacco or mahogany, merchants and shippers could only benefit from the increase in trade through the Free Ports. Merchants of Kingston were as strong in support of the policy as the planters were opposed.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps because of their instinctive dislike of the very idea of Free Ports, the Jamaican Assembly appear either not to have understood the full implication of the policy or to have wilfully misinterpreted it. As Edward Long's writings illustrate, they failed (or refused) to grasp the fact that goods imported into Jamaica under the provisions of the 1766 Act were by definition free of duty, and were treated equally with the products of British possession on importation into England. Even if the legality of importing foreign mahogany prior to 1766 was arguable, there was no question of its status after this date. All foreign timber imported via Jamaica's Free Ports was treated equally with that of Jamaican growth.<sup>43</sup> A further Act of 1771, passed at the behest of the mahogany cutters

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<sup>39</sup> For discussion of this issue see Armytage, *op.cit.*, pp 31-42; D.B. Goebel, 'British Trade to the Spanish Colonies, 1796-1823', *American Historical Review*, 1938, pp.288-320. Goebel emphasises the illegal nature of the free ports trade, so far as the Spanish authorities were concerned, e.g., p.291: 'The acts thus legitimized in the British West Indies what was punished as smuggling at Havana or Vera Cruz.'

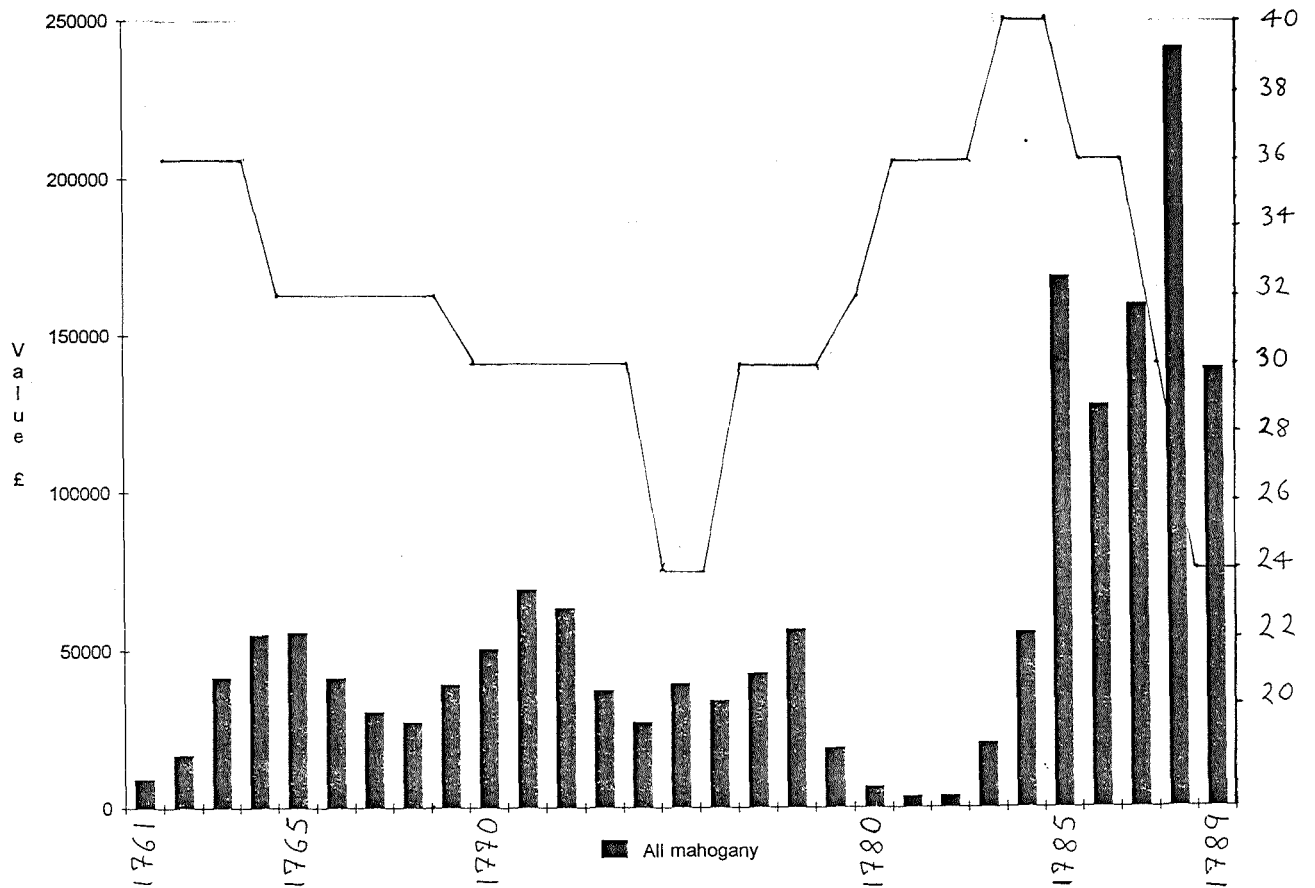
<sup>40</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, II p.197.

<sup>41</sup> BT6/75 f23. Minutes of the Standing Committee of West Indian Planters and Merchants, 1 May, 18 May 1787.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, ff:35-49. See also BT6/75, ff:35-49, for correspondence from Jamaica merchants regarding the desirability of extending the Free Ports system, including the admission of foreign vessels of more than one deck and 70 tons. The arguments for and against Free Ports in Jamaica were based on the purest self interest: 'I know of not a single reason, nor have I heard of any argument from the West India Merchants, or Planters, which was not founded upon partial and interested grounds, why Foreign Plantation Sugar... and in general every other Article, the Growth of the For<sup>n</sup> West Indies ... should not be imported through the medium of our Islands, on the same terms as the like Goods of British Plantation Produce.' BT6/75, f.749, Mr Thomas Irving to the Lords Commissioners of the Board of Trade, 28 November 1786.

<sup>43</sup> This fact was made explicit in the wording of an extension of the Free Ports policy passed in 1787, which enumerated 'Mahogany and all other Woods for cabinet Ware' among the commodities permitted under the Act of *27 George III cap.27*. A similarly wilful ignorance regarding legislation concerning foreign mahogany importations was displayed by the Honduras merchants in their bid to monopolise the trade in

**Figure 4.2:** Wholesale mahogany prices compared to level of importations 1761-1789.



**Source:** BT6/50, Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790. Cust 3, Cust 17.

**Notes:** 1. Prices given on the right hand vertical axis are the maximum for Jamaica mahogany, wholesale at London, in guineas per ton of 480 superficial feet.

2. Note gradual decline in market price 1761-1775 and very rapid rise 1778-1783 followed by collapse due to record importations after 1784.

in Honduras, rendered the planters' arguments finally redundant, by permitting all mahogany imported from any part of America to be imported into Britain duty free.<sup>44</sup> The ramifications of this Act are discussed in the next chapter; it is sufficient to note here that the Act of 1771 meant that Long's arguments against the trade in foreign mahogany were out of date even before they were published.

the 1780s. For more on this see chapter five.

<sup>44</sup> 11 George III cap.41.

For all his inaccuracies, Edward Long correctly predicted the probable effect of foreign mahogany importations on the Jamaica trade. Prices of Jamaica mahogany in London fell from 32 guineas immediately after the war to 24 guineas by 1772-3. It is not possible to say how much of this fall was due to foreign competition, (the available statistics certainly do not bear out Long's assertion that 'the greater part' of Jamaica's exports were of foreign origin at this time) but it is reasonable to suppose that the ready availability of alternative supplies from Belize and from the foreign islands resulted in a downward pressure on prices. As prices fell, so Jamaica's remaining stocks of mahogany became less viable. Figure 4.2 shows the price of Jamaica mahogany on the London market 1763-1789 measured against the total volume of importations, demonstrating the relation between availability and price.

The effectiveness of the Free Ports legislation in encouraging the trade in foreign mahogany is not easy to estimate with any accuracy. After 1766 entries of foreign vessels into Jamaica were recorded at the Customs House, but these records were notoriously inaccurate and are now incomplete. Moreover, it is impossible to know how much of the trade that now came into the Free Ports represented a genuine increase, and how much was formerly hidden and now entered legally for the first time. With these reservations in mind, figure 4.3 shows the quantities of mahogany officially entered through Jamaica's Free Ports between 1767 and 1784.

**Figure 4.3:** Importations of mahogany into the Jamaican Free Ports in foreign bottoms, 1767-84.

Year	No. of Vessels	Mahogany carried.
1767	50	520 planks
1768	74	763 pl.
1769	86	399 pl.
1770	169	332 pl.
1771	144	335 pl, 690 ft.
1772	185	461 pl, 2000 ft.
1773	117	21 pl.
1774	172	154 pl.
1775	192	712 pl.
1776	212	659 pl, 300 ft.
1777	279	4324 pl, 23,000 ft.
1778	126	1808 pl.
1779	84	35 pl.
1780	40	-
1781	3	-
1782	102	1727 pl, 12,000 ft.
1783	210	9951 pl, 34,000 ft.
1784	250	11751 pl, 9,000 ft.

Source: CO 142/19 ff105-106<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Another set of figures is given in T64/72, and although the general pattern is the same, the amounts of mahogany imported are calculated differently, and the figures therefore vary, as shown below.

It is not easy to extrapolate from these figures an idea of value. As a very general rule, the customs returns allow L1 per plank, and 480 feet to the ton worth a nominal L8. By applying these values to the above figures, the value of foreign mahogany imported into Jamaica in foreign bottoms in 1767 appears negligible, at about L520, and remained so until after the American War. In 1784, by contrast, importations of foreign mahogany in foreign vessels amounted to L11901, 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. At the same time, foreign mahogany continued to be imported in British bottoms. The shipping register for much of this period is incomplete, but a Treasury document gives the following figures for the years 1775-84:

**Figure 4.4:** Number of planks and logs of mahogany imported into Jamaica in British bottoms.

1775	929	1778	1489	1781	830	1784	5969
1776	764	1779	1556	1782	380		
1777	2068	1780	870	1783	27059		

Source: T64/72

When importations in foreign and British vessels in Jamaica are combined (and these include importations from Honduras), the total for 1784 amounts to L17870, or just over 58 per cent of the Jamaican total. These figures actually flatter Jamaican production, since the extraordinary price of mahogany on the British market immediately after the American war made it briefly profitable to cut and ship otherwise unviable stocks. As we shall see, the price of mahogany fell in the during the 1780s, causing Jamaican timber to become increasingly uncompetitive, and the proportion of foreign timber increased accordingly.

### Hispaniola mahogany

After 1766 there was a decline in the number and frequency of British vessels trading from Montego Bay to Cuba, and the trade appears to have stopped entirely by 1784. At the same time relatively few Spanish vessels made the trip from Cuba into Montego Bay. From 1784 onwards the great majority of foreign mahogany imported *via* the Free Ports came not from Cuba but from

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Planks or logs of mahogany imported into Kingston in foreign bottoms January 1775-December 1784.

1775	758	1778	1667	1781	11	1784	12,194.
1776	622	1779	229	1782	2725		
1777	4161	1780	229	1783	5467		

Hispaniola, and was imported into Kingston.<sup>46</sup> Kingston's position on the southern coast of Jamaica did not favour trade with Cuba, but on the other hand it was ideally placed to trade with Hispaniola, some 120 miles to the east. Furthermore, the foreigners came to buy British goods, and Kingston was undoubtedly the principal mart for such commodities.

The trade in Hispaniola mahogany (also known as St Domingo or Spanish mahogany) began as an adjunct to that of another, more important commodity, which was cotton.<sup>47</sup> In the 1760s the cotton production of the British West Indies was quite small, insufficient even to meet the relatively small demand of that time. Between 1760 and 1769 total importations into England from all sources averaged 3 million pounds weight per annum. As spinning and weaving machinery was introduced into the north of England in the 1760s and 70s, so the cotton cloth industry developed rapidly, and with it the demand for raw cotton. By 1778 importations had risen to 5 million pounds, and by 1787 to just over 22.5 million.<sup>48</sup> Most of this cotton was of foreign origin, and came into England via the Jamaican Free Ports. The greatest part came from the French colony of St Domingue at the western end of Hispaniola. Of 6,747 bags of cotton entered at Kingston in 1787, 5748 (85%) came from St Domingue.<sup>49</sup> The rapid growth in importations of St Domingo cotton was matched by an equally rapid growth in the trade in Hispaniola mahogany.

In the 1760s a handful of British ships entered Kingston from various parts of Hispaniola; only one of these, the sloop *Sea Flower*, entering Kingston in February 1764, is recorded as carrying mahogany.<sup>50</sup> In March 1765 an Liverpool newspaper advertised mahogany planks and logs for sale, adding: 'The greatest part of the Wood is the Produce of *Hispaniola*, and deemed equal to the best Jamaica Mahogany.'<sup>51</sup> This is the earliest English reference to Hispaniola or St Domingo mahogany so far discovered.

After 1766 importations of cotton and mahogany from Hispaniola into the Free

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<sup>46</sup> CO 142/21. The official figures for importations into Kingston 1784 are:

From Cuba	1 vessel
From Hispaniola	38 vessels

No foreign vessels are recorded entering the other Jamaican Free Ports in this year.

<sup>47</sup> For a summary of the cotton trade through the Free Ports see Armytage, *op.cit.*, pp.72-79.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> CO 142/20. For a discussion of this topic see also Ragatz, *op.cit.*, pp.199-203.

<sup>50</sup> CO 142/18. *Sea Flower* was a small vessel of 25 tons burden, and entered 30 tons of mahogany and 6 casks of indigo. It is interesting that Edward Long does not include Hispaniola among his objections to Spanish importations, which suggests that at the time he left Jamaica in 1769, Hispaniola mahogany was not a significant commercial article. This tallies with the evidence from the Gillow Letter Books and the shipping registers.

<sup>51</sup> *Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser and Mercantile Register*, 1 March 1765.

Ports gradually increased. It was at this time that the trade began to make a distinction between the familiar *Cuban* wood and a superior type which they called *Spanish*. In September 1768 Gillows wrote to Joseph Beetham, a Liverpool timber merchant, in response to an offer of Spanish mahogany he had then in stock:

... w<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>ot</sup> it of you to fill up a vessel, Short Laden with Balk Br<sup>ot</sup> 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 italics].<sup>52</sup>

The origin of this Spanish timber was apparently unknown to Gillow and to Beetham. The wood was similar in appearance and quality to good Jamaica wood, and was sometimes sold as such. Nevertheless, Gillow had his suspicions, as he 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<sup>a</sup> Planks.<sup>53</sup>

In the 1770s Gillows regularly purchased both Cuban and Spanish wood, but were usually careful to distinguish between the two. They developed a decided preference for Spanish plank as an alternative to Jamaica wood, and were prepared to pay much better prices than for Cuban. The distinction between Spanish and Cuban wood is made clear in this letter to their Jamaican factor, John Swarbreck, in 1776:

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 w<sup>ch</sup> we call Spanish Planks are Commonly from 10 to 13 Ft long & from 16 to 26 Inches broad & from 3 to 4 1/2 or 5 Inches thick & have Generly an Auger Hole bored thro the end of each Plank there. if sound & of the usual good Quallity are worth 1/- Per ft or more. Where they grow we cannot say but supose that some of 'em come from St Domingo...<sup>54</sup>

This passage, containing the first explicit reference to St Domingo mahogany in

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<sup>52</sup> 344/165. Gillow to Beetham, 9 September 1768.

<sup>53</sup> 344/166. Robert Gillow to Gillow & Taylor, London, October 1770.

<sup>54</sup> 344/166. Gillow to Swarbreck, Kingston, 26 January 1776.



the Gillow archive, heralds a trade which was to assume paramount importance for British furniture makers for the next one hundred years.

### **The American Revolutionary War 1775-1783**

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 Gillow 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 (Figure 4.1).<sup>55</sup> Between 1775 and 1778 the level of importations climbed again, probably 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 apparent defiance of the usual laws of supply and demand, prices also rose (Figure 4.2). Part of the increase can be accounted for by routine wartime rises in both freight and insurance.<sup>56</sup> Further upward pressure was applied by increasing demand, as timber merchants and cabinet-makers laid up stocks.<sup>57</sup> Anticipating future scarcity, Gillows bought heavily in 1775, and at the end of 1775 were fully stocked with Jamaica wood.<sup>58</sup> The following year they had no difficulty in getting supplies, although prices were "never so high

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<sup>55</sup> The Gillow Letter Books contain ample evidence of the abundance of mahogany at this time, describing themselves as having 'a great overstock' in October 1772, and even sending 1000 cubic feet (25 tons) of mahogany on to London in December 1773. 344/166, Gillow to Wm Chambre, Whitehaven, 31 October 1772, Gillow to Wm Strickland, Liverpool, 28 December 1773.

<sup>56</sup> Insurance rates were initially doubled, from 2 1/2 to 5%. Freight rates rose from 1 1/2d to 2d per foot. 344/168, Gillow to Swarbreck, 20 September 1776. Also, Liston Papers 88793, Alexander Houston & Co, Foreign Letter Book. Writing to a customer near Peterborough, Gillow agreed to supply more furniture 'as near the same prices as the present advance of good mahogany will permit'. He blamed high insurance as a consequence of American privateers. *Ibid*, Gillow to Wm Peckard, 8 February 1777.

<sup>57</sup> For instance, in January 1776 Gillow wrote to John Swarbreck asking for 'Good Jama Mahog...[it] is likely to run high this year...' 344/168, 26 January 1776. Later the same year they wrote 'All kinds of Jama and Spanish Wood mahog<sup>y</sup> is in Demand...'. *Ibid*, Gillow to Swarbreck 18 October 1776.

<sup>58</sup> 'As Jama: mahog: is likely to be very Scarce and Dear You need not Purchase any on our Acct as we Bo<sup>t</sup> a large Parcel of Capt<sup>n</sup> Russel wch will keep us doing awhile.' Invoices 344/162, Gillow to Swarbreck 15 December 1775.

other years as they are now".<sup>59</sup> Indeed, overstocking allowed Gillow to send 101 planks of mahogany for sale at Liverpool in June 1777.<sup>60</sup>

On 6 February 1778 France signed a treaty of commerce and alliance with the American rebels, setting that country on course for an armed collision with England. Neither side declared war, but as early as March mahogany prices were moving upwards. Gillow was offering 22-26d for 'Table Planks' and 13d otherwise, and expected prices to rise higher still if France entered the war in earnest.<sup>61</sup> By summer, naval action between France and Britain had commenced, and the rate of insurance rose immediately to over 20 per cent, with a rebate of 8 per cent if convoyed. For Gillows and other cabinet makers the most serious consequence of war with France was the interruption of supplies of mahogany from St Domingue. The entry of Spain into the war in June 1779 completed the severing of trade with the whole island of Hispaniola and trade through the Jamaican Free Ports, which had continued unaffected for the first three years of war, halved in 1778 and collapsed in 1779.<sup>62</sup> Baywood was also in very short supply as a consequence of the destruction of the British settlement at Belize (for an account of this episode see the next chapter).

As the military and naval situation deteriorated the shortage of mahogany became serious. In 1780 Gillows' correspondence with their Jamaica agents, Swarbrick, Yate and Co 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...<sup>63</sup>

This became a familar refrain in the following months. Mahogany became more and more scarce, and by early 1782 Gillows began to worry about their ability to remain in business.

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<sup>59</sup> Book 344/168, Gillow to Swarbreck 9 October 1776. There was also plenty of choice, Gillow being able to ask for Jamaica, Spanish, Cuban and Bay wood in various lengths and breadths. Invoices 344/162, Gillow to Swarbreck 19 December 1775, 27 January 1777.

<sup>60</sup> *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. One effect 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 Swarbreck to send no more mahogany 'as a great plenty is come and expected'. *Ibid.*, Gillow to Swarbreck 6 September 1777. After the arrival of the autumn convoy in 1780 Gillow enquired of Willam Rathbone 'whether they have any Quantities on Board to lower your market'. 344/169, Gillow to Rathbone 24 November 1780.

<sup>61</sup> 344/168, Gillow to Rathbone, 13 March 1778, Gillow to Wm Rowndell, 18 March 1778.

<sup>62</sup> CO 142/19 ff.105-6.

<sup>63</sup> 344/169, Gillow to Swarbreck, Yate and Co., 11 July 1781. See also 5 September 1781, 15 & 28 February, 7 March 1782.

We hope you have complied with our repeated request of Shipping Mahog<sup>y</sup> for Lanc<sup>r</sup> or Lple by various Vessels that we may not be disappointed of part at least to carry on our M[anufactor]y if you have not Enlarged in this Article we beg you wd or we must pay thro the Nose for it...<sup>64</sup>

In order to spread the risk of loss to enemy privateers, Swarbreck was instructed to send small parcels of timber by various vessels destined for any British port. In May 1782 they were 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.<sup>65</sup> (Earlier, in 1777, Gillows had themselves armed a ship with ten four pounders and ten swivel guns in order to trade without convoy.)<sup>66</sup> At the same time Gillows were trying every possible source, even, in May 1782, writing direct to a planter at Black River:

If you cannot Ship much please to Ship a little by every Opp<sup>ty</sup> 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 Manufact<sup>y</sup>.<sup>67</sup>

By the beginning of 1782 wholesale mahogany prices had reached L38-40 per ton in London. At Liverpool Gillow were paying 24d per foot (L48p/ton) in mid-February and 30d (L60 p/ton) a fortnight later.<sup>68</sup>

The extraordinary price of timber 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.'<sup>69</sup> 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 Landaff, 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...'.<sup>70</sup> 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

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Swarbreck 15 February 1782.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Swarbreck 29 May 1782.

<sup>66</sup> 344/179 Memorandum Book, 22 January 1777.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Matthew Smith, Mount Libanon, St Elizabeth, 21 May 1782.

<sup>68</sup> 344/170, Gillow to Swarbreck Yate & Co, 15 February, 28 February 1782. For an explanation of the different methods of pricing mahogany in Liverpool and London see chapter six.

<sup>69</sup> 344/169, Gillow to Richard Pedder, 10 November 1780.

<sup>70</sup> 344/170, Gillow to Thomas Wilson 4 December 1782. Bishop of Landaff, 31 December 1982.

squeezed as mahogany prices rose.<sup>71</sup> 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. In doing so they used only half the timber, which because of its great width was very difficult to get hold of. When challenged, the firm claimed that the underframe offered sufficient support to the thinner board, but some customers were not mollified.<sup>72</sup>

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 enters Gillows' correspondence.<sup>73</sup> 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 neutral Danish ships were plying between Kingston and Hispaniola, proving once again the efficacy of the Free Ports system.<sup>74</sup> By September 1782 things must have been looking up, since in a number of petulant notes Gillow criticised Swarbreck for sending overpriced and poor quality mahogany:

The Parcel of Mahog<sup>y</sup> w<sup>ch</sup> you Shippd per the Rawlinson to Lple & Hinde to Lancast<sup>r</sup> 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 w<sup>ch</sup> we presume has been Occasion'd by its laying a long time after it has been fallen...<sup>75</sup>

Swarbreck was even shipping roots and branches, which Gillows supposed would be 'good for little'. He was right, since having cost L70 per thousand feet in Jamaica (equivalent to 16.8d per foot or nearly L34 per ton, Jamaica currency, before shipping and other charges), this consignment was sold for only L9 sterling. Swarbrick was advised to stop buying until the outcome of peace negotiations was known.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Swarbreck 28 July 1782.

<sup>72</sup> There is a notable increase in letters to Rathbone and Beetham concerning the purchase of deal and oak during the war years. This may be an accident of survival, but may also reflect the greater employment of these timbers as carcase wood in place of bay mahogany.

<sup>73</sup> For instance, 344/170, Gillow to Swarbreck 29 May 1782.

<sup>74</sup> 344/70, Gillow to Swarbreck, 23 September 1784. '... I have been Inform'd that good Mahog<sup>y</sup> may be procured in Neutral Bottoms from Hispaniola...' See also 344/70, 10 November 1783, Gillow to Swarbreck. Gillow's information is not confirmed by the shipping register, but T64/72 clearly shows mahogany being imported into Kingston in foreign vessels throughout the war years.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Swarbreck 23 September 1782. Letters in a similar vein were sent 10 November, 27 December 1782.

<sup>76</sup> 344/170, Gillow to Swarbreck 27 December 1782. Invoices 344/162, Gillow to Swarbreck 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. 344/170, Gillow to John Burrow, Kingston 3 May 1784.

## Trade Relations with the United States after 1783

The emergence of the United States as an independent power in the Americas raised momentous questions for all those involved in West Indian trade. For more than a century the North American and West Indian colonies had been regarded as part of a single economic entity. The dependence of the West Indians on North American lumber and provisions was almost complete, and in return, North America was a primary market for West Indian products such as sugar, rum and molasses.

Trade between North America and the British West Indies had virtually ceased in 1776, after the passing of the Prohibitory Act. The question now was, how should that trade be resumed? As an independent foreign power, the United States would be excluded by the Acts of Navigation from any share of the colonial trade of Great Britain. North American shipping, formerly the mainstay of trade between the islands and the northern continent, would become illegal in British West Indian ports. However, the planters in Jamaica and other British West Indian islands regarded the continuance of North American trade as essential to their economic survival. A meeting of the Committee of the Society of Planters and Merchants in London in April 1783 resulted in an emphatic statement of their case:

... the Committee entertain no doubt but such a share of the American Trade may be preserved to the Sugar Colonies as will greatly tend to their support... To this Intercourse, the Committee apprehend, the permission of American Ships, as heretofore, freely to bring the Produce of the Dominions of the United States to the Sugar Colonies, and take back our Produce in return, is so obviously essential that they need not adduce any farther arguments in support of that proposition.<sup>77</sup>

The Council of Jamaica urged much the same in the same month, and in the absence of any government directives to the contrary, American vessels were allowed to enter and clear Jamaican ports as before.<sup>78</sup> The Americans were likewise keen to maintain the trade, since the West Indies constituted their most important market for exported timber and foodstuffs.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, British shipowners, American loyalists, and the many supporters of government mercantilism opposed any hint of concession to the former rebels. Lord Sheffield, a noted authority and doctrinaire mercantilist, offered powerful arguments against admitting American vessels into British colonial ports:

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<sup>77</sup> Minutes of the West Indian Planters & Merchants, 29 April 1783.

<sup>78</sup> C.O. 137/83. Governor Campbell to Lord Sydney, 29 April 1783. Campbell to Lord North, 28 June 1783.

<sup>79</sup> For more information on this topic see Ragatz, *op.cit.*, p.173 *et seq.*, Armytage, *op.cit.*, pp.52-55, and S.H.H. Carrington, 'The American Revolution and the British West Indies' Economy', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVII:4 Spring 1987, pp. 823-850.

'The Navigation Act, the basis of our great power at sea, gave us the trade of the world. If we alter that Act, by permitting any state to trade with our islands ... we desert the Navigation Act, and sacrifice the marine of England. But if the principle of the Navigation Act be properly understood and well followed, this country may still be safe and great.'<sup>80</sup>

The home government was faced with a real dilemma: on the one hand the West Indian plantations depended wholly on stores imported from North America. On the other the admission of United States vessels meant abandoning the principles on which the whole system of British colonial trade was founded. Such admissions would reward rebellion and injure loyalty, in addition to antagonising the entire British shipping interest. Orders in Council of 2 July, 5 September and 26 December 1783 laid out the terms and conditions under which trade could be carried on between the United States and the British West Indies. North American commodities were permitted to be carried into the British West Indies only in British vessels, whilst West Indian produce was permitted to be exported in the same vessels to the United States on the same terms as to any British colony. American vessels were wholly excluded from trade with any British West Indian possession, even through the Free Ports. These Orders were made permanent by statute in 1788.<sup>81</sup>

The results of these measures were a rise in the price of imported plantation stores and the loss of a large share of the export markets for sugar, rum and molasses in the United States.<sup>82</sup> Mahogany exports to North America also slumped. As we have seen in a previous chapter, it was New Providence and not Jamaica which supplied the bulk of mahogany to the North American market. Nevertheless, during the 1760s the North Americans had taken an increasing share of Jamaica's exports. In 1767, for instance, a total of 11968 planks and 10024 board feet, worth approximately L12,131, were cleared from Jamaica to North America. Jamaican exports to England in the same year totalled just over L20,000.<sup>83</sup> The following year, according to Bryan Edwards, 443,920 feet of mahogany were exported to Britain, and 424,080 feet were exported to North America.<sup>84</sup> After 1783 trade between the British West Indies and North America continued in British bottoms, but very little mahogany was carried. In 1787 and 1788 not a single vessel clearing Kingston for the United States carried

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<sup>80</sup> Lord Sheffield, *Observations of the Commerce of the American States*, London 1783, ed. 1784, pp.264-5. Sheffield was a recognised authority on trade, commerce and agriculture. His book was widely regarded as the ablest exposition of the anti-American case, and went through six editions within a year of publication.

<sup>81</sup> 28 *George III cap.6*.

<sup>82</sup> See Carrington, *op.cit.*, for details of commodities and prices.

<sup>83</sup> CO 142/17, 19. Cust 3.

<sup>84</sup> Edwards, *History*, Book II, p.245.

mahogany.<sup>85</sup> It seems clear that mahogany which had formerly gone to North America now went to England, and the dislocation of American markets was a significant factor in sustaining the high level of importations from Jamaica into England after 1783.

By denying British ports to United States shipping the Orders in Council caused a permanent shift in North American commerce towards the French and Spanish islands. The establishment of a free port at Havana in 1776 resulted in the immediate emergence of the inchoate United States as Cuba's largest foreign trading partner.<sup>86</sup> Although Cuban ports were closed again in January 1784, the authorities were unable to prevent widespread smuggling. War between Spain and France from 1793 to 1795 forced the Spaniards briefly to reopen Cuban ports to United States trade, and the American wares also able to profit when war broke out between Spain and Great Britain in 1796. The following year Cuban ports were opened to neutral shipping by Royal decree, and by 1798 the value of Cuban trade with the United States exceeded that with Spain.<sup>87</sup> From 1783 onwards, therefore, Cuba became the most important source of mahogany timber for the North American market.<sup>88</sup>

### **Jamaica as entrepot, 1784-1793**

With the conclusion of the American war West Indian trade exploded into life. Between 1784 and 1790 nearly 900,000 pounds' worth of mahogany was imported into England, equivalent to over 124,000 tons (Figure 4.1). This was

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<sup>85</sup> CO142/19 & 20. This is confirmed by Bryan Edwards, who gives the following figures for 1787: mahogany exported to Great Britain, 5,783 tons; to Ireland, 95 tons; to the independent states of North America, none. Edwards, *op.cit.*, Book II, p.232. Some mahogany was cleared from Montego Bay to the United States in 1784, but records are patchy.

<sup>86</sup> F.W. Knight. 'Origins of Wealth and the Sugar Revolution in Cuba 1750-1850. *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol 57, 1977, pp.231-253. There is very little evidence of Cuban mahogany being imported into North America prior to the Revolution, apart from during the British occupation of Havana in 1762-3. For instance, two vessels brought mahogany into South Carolina in November and December 1762, and several more in early 1763. CO 5/510. According to Mrs Theus, a shipment of mahogany from the Isle of Pines, Cuba, entered Savannah in September 1766. C.M. Theus, *Savannah Furniture, 1735-1825*, New York 1967.

<sup>87</sup> For more on the development of US trade with Cuba see Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba*, New York 1962, pp.27-69; Hugh Thomas, *op.cit.*, p.68 et seq; D.B. Goebel, *op.cit.*, pp.288-320.

<sup>88</sup> North American trade and newspaper advertisements reveal this shift clearly. For instance, in March 1788 the *Columbian Herald* (N. Carolina) announced the arrival of 'a choice Cargo of Mahogany and Spanish Hides from the coast of Cuba.' In April were landed 'Two cargoes of Choice mahogany ... now landing at Mr Corchran's wharf from the Island of Cuba.' Brad Rauschenberg, 'Timber Available in Charleston, 1660-1820,' *MESDA Journal*, XX, No2, p.77. There continued to be a demand for Honduras mahogany, however. Although American vessels were technically prohibited from carrying mahogany from Honduras, the Belize Superintendent was allowed discretion to exchange mahogany for much needed lumber and plantation stores. BT6/50, 'An Account of the Imports and Exports of the District Allotted to the British Settlers in Honduras, 1 October to 31 December 1788.'

the official valuation, based on the rateable value of L8 per ton, and the true figure was much greater. Jamaica contributed handsomely to the boom, and in 1785 importations of mahogany from Jamaica reached their peak, a total of L84,770. In real terms, with Jamaica and Spanish mahogany selling wholesale at L36 per ton, the value of these importations was four and a half times greater. The post-war boom was short lived, however, and from 1786 onwards, the Jamaica trade went into a steady and terminal decline. Figure 4-4 shows the level of importations from Jamaica compared with the total of importations from the West Indies (excluding Honduras) between 1761 and 1793. Between 1764 and 1774 Jamaica's share of the trade had averaged 90 per cent of the total. Between 1784 and the commencement of the French Revolutionary war in 1793 Jamaica's share fluctuated between 84 per cent and 17 per cent and averaged only 57 per cent. The widening gap between importations from Jamaica and the other West Indian islands is indicative of Jamaica's declining importance in the trade as a whole.

One factor in this decline was the exhaustion of commercial stocks of Jamaican timber. Immediately after the American war the extraordinary price of mahogany on the home market enabled Jamaican landowners to cut and ship previously untouched stands.<sup>89</sup> But the steady fall in prices from 1784 onwards, as record quantities of Spanish mahogany came onto the market, rendered remaining stocks increasingly unviable. 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...<sup>90</sup>

Bryan Edwards relates that even at the end of the 18th 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...'<sup>91</sup>

The point at which Jamaica mahogany became commercially unviable naturally varied from one plantation and another. Market price, timber quality, ease of

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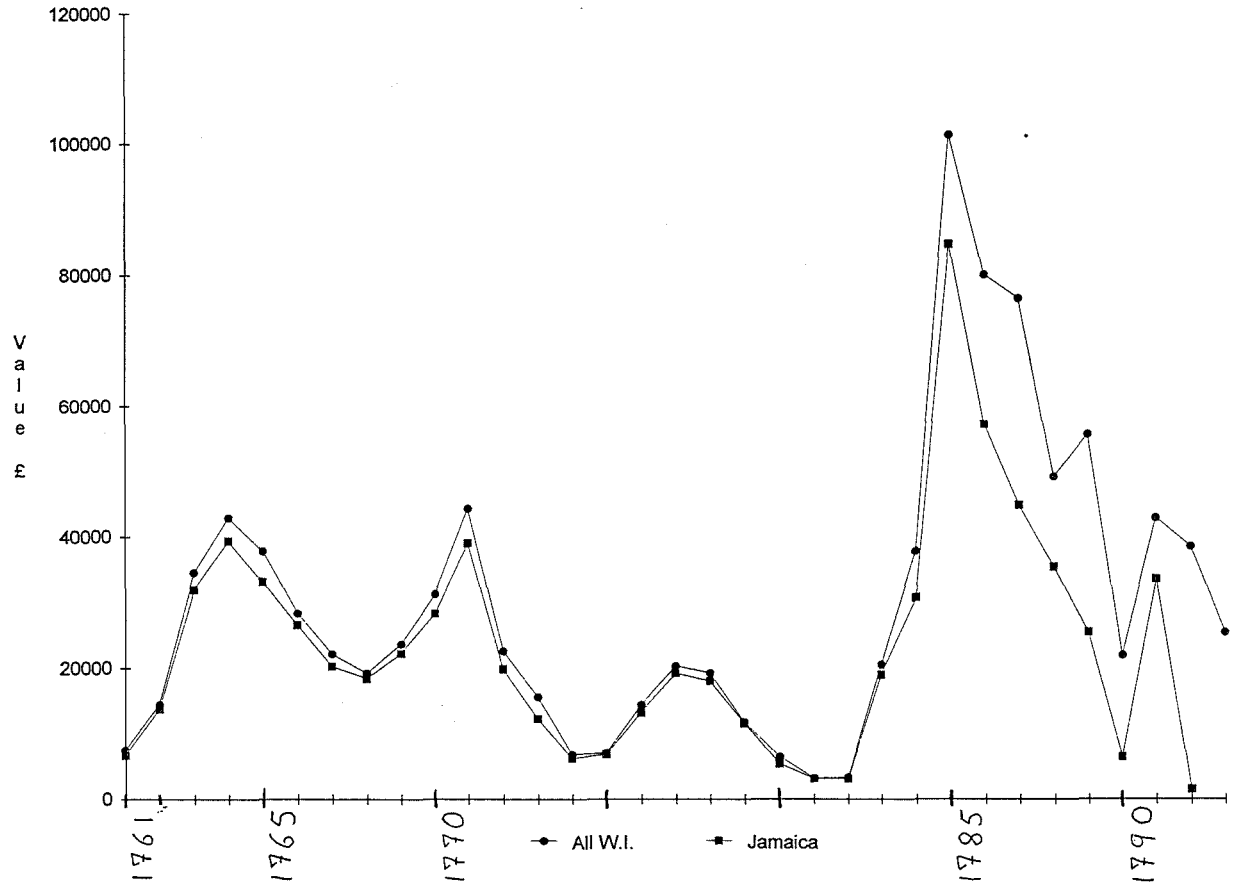
<sup>89</sup> For instance, in 1783 the Goshen plantation in St Elizabeth parish cut 3,782 feet of mahogany plank, 600 feet of bullytree boards, and 39 tons of fustic. The neighboring Long Hill plantation cut 9,385 feet of mahogany the same year. B.W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, Kingston, 1988, p.201.

<sup>90</sup> BT6/75 f51. John Whitaker Esq., to the Hon. Capt. Carpenter, Jamaica 6 June 1786.

<sup>91</sup> Edwards, *op.cit.*, Book II, p.187.



**Figure 4.5:** Value of mahogany importations from Jamaica compared with those from all the West Indies, 1761-1793.



**Source:** Cust 3, Cust 17.

- Notes:**
1. Upper line shows the level of importations from all the West Indies, including foreign possessions but excluding Honduras and the Mosquito Shore.
  2. Importations via North America are not included.
  3. Note the effect of the convoy system during wartime (1761-3, 1775-83) channelling most trade through Jamaica.
  4. Jamaica figures not available for 1793.

access, cutting and haulage were all considerations which landowners had to take into account, but increasingly these all weighed against the Jamaican article. The last reference specifically to Jamaica mahogany in the Gillows letter books 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.<sup>92</sup> After import duties were reintroduced in 1795 an Act of Parliament listed only three sources of mahogany: Bahamas, Honduras, and 'Mahogany being the growth of any other Country or Place'.<sup>93</sup> Mahogany from the first two sources was considered British, and paid a duty of L1.10. 0. per ton, whereas mahogany from the last was considered foreign, and paid a heavier duty of L3. 0. 0.<sup>94</sup> Importations from Jamaica were included in the third category, which suggests that by this date all mahogany imported from Jamaica was deemed to be of foreign origin.<sup>95</sup> In this respect the graph in Figure 4.5 fails to convey the true condition of Jamaica's mahogany trade. From the mid-1780s little of the mahogany exported from thence was of Jamaican growth, and the island's role had changed from producer to entrepot in the space of a decade.

Some of the timber entering Kingston in the 1780s was shipped from Belize in Honduras. In 1784, 196,000 feet, 764 planks and 329 logs and slabs of mahogany were recorded as entering Kingston from Belize. The official value of these imports was at least L4359, which is about 25 per cent of the total exported from Belize that year, and 15 per cent of the total exported from Kingston to England.<sup>96</sup> By 1787 these figures had considerably diminished, to 45,300 feet and 573 logs.<sup>97</sup>

Of much greater importance were importations from foreign islands. In 1784 these were double those from Honduras, at 12,194 planks and logs.<sup>98</sup> At a conservative estimate this amounted to an official value of L12000 or nearly 40 per cent of Jamaica's mahogany exports that year. Undoubtedly the most important source of these importations was Hispaniola; from 1784 onwards Hispaniola mahogany was the dominant commodity on the market.

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<sup>92</sup> 344/170, Gillow to Charles Udale, Unrigger Hall, Cockermouth. 344/173, Gillow to Richard Edmundson, timber merchant, Liverpool, 22 March 1796. Gillow to Caleb Crookenden, 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.

<sup>93</sup> 35 *George III cap.20* imposed a duty of 1 1/2d 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.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

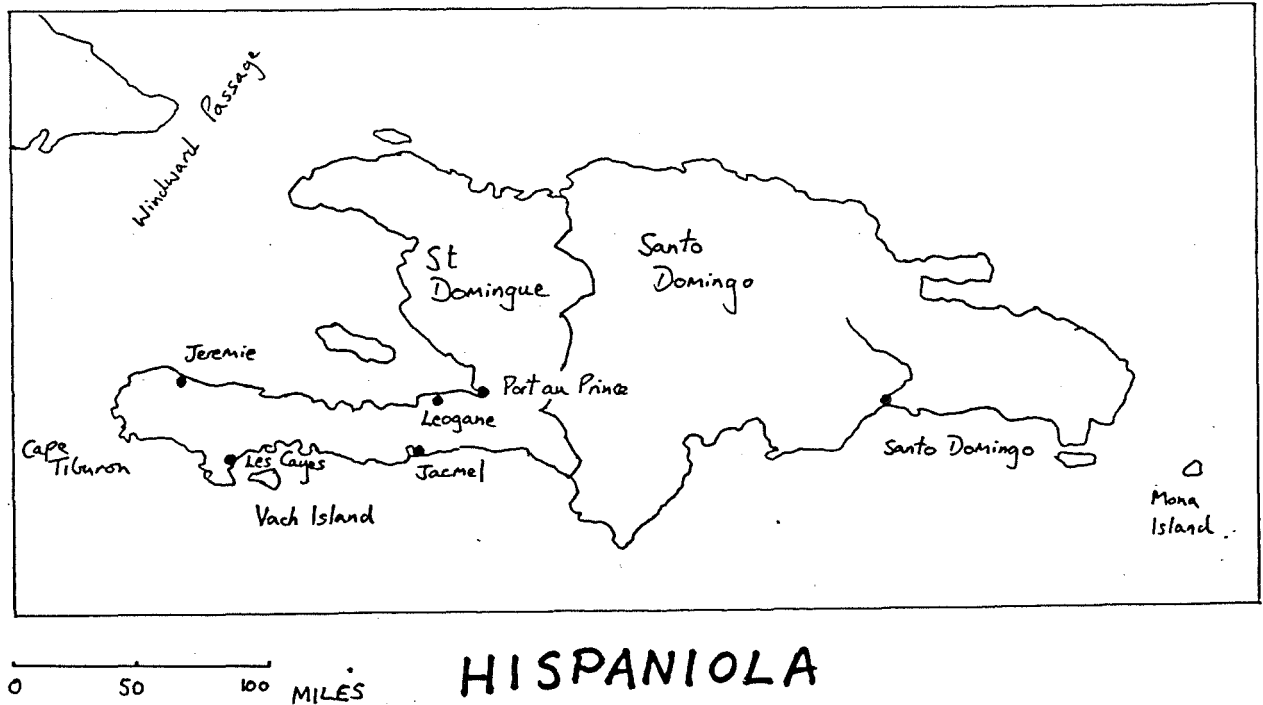
<sup>95</sup> 36 *George III cap.78*. These three categories were maintained when duty was raised in 1803 (43 *George III cap.68*), 1809 (49 *George III cap.98*) and 1819 (59 *George III cap.52*).

<sup>96</sup> CO142/19. Cust 17.

<sup>97</sup> CO142/20. Exports from Belize to Kingston rose again with the commencement of war in 1793. In 1794 over L8000 of mahogany came into Kingston from Honduras, out of total exported from Jamaica of L11502. The following year the respective figures were L3364 and L22419. Cust 17.

<sup>98</sup> T64/72.

**Figure 4.6:** Points of loading for vessels carrying mahogany from St Domingue into Kingston



**Figure 4.7:** Foreign vessels from Hispaniola inwards at Kingston.

	<u>Nationality</u>	<u>No. of Vessels</u>	<u>Qty mahogany</u>
1784	French	46	8925 pl. 8426ft boards
	Spanish	-	-
1788 (three quarters only)			
	Spanish	29	2221 pl. 157 pcs. 40 logs.
	French	15	2974 pl.

Source: CO 142/20

In the early 1780s the majority of ships trading from Hispaniola were French, and sailed from ports in St Domingue - Port Au Prince, Cape Tiberoon, Cape Francois, Jeremie and Jacmel were the usual points of loading (Figure 4.6). Cuba, on the other hand, was only rarely cited as a source in the 1780s. This imbalance in favour of St Domingue underlines the close link between the trade

in cotton, of which the French colony was the major producer, and mahogany. Another factor in the growth of the St Domingue trade was the role played by that colony as a conduit for North American plantation goods, badly needed in Jamaica after 1783.<sup>99</sup>

A minority of vessels came from the Spanish part of the island, principally from the port of St Domingo itself, and most of these too were French, with one or two British. By the end of the 1780s, however, the Spanish had entered the trade on a significant scale. Whilst the French continued to carry mahogany from St Domingue, the Spanish (with the exception of one or two Dutch interlopers) were carrying their own mahogany from St Domingo to Kingston. Figure 4.7 illustrates clearly this shift in the balance of trade between 1784 and 1788. After 1791 the number of French vessels in the trade declined sharply as a result of the slave revolt in St Domingue, and the Spanish emerged as the principal shippers of Hispaniola mahogany into Kingston.<sup>100</sup>

### **The 1787 Free Ports Act**

As Jamaica's own mahogany production declined in the face of foreign competition, other British islands increased their share of the trade. A substantial part of this increase was made possible by the wider application of the Free Ports policy in the 1780s. In the years immediately after the Treaty of Versailles a number of British islands had applied for Free Port status. Their combined pressure resulted in the 1787 Act, which restored Free Port status to Dominica, and bestowed it for the first time on St George in Grenada and Nassau in New Providence. In some years, for instance in 1789, the value of mahogany imported into England from these three islands amounted to nearly 70 per cent of that imported from Jamaica.

The ports of Roseau and Prince Rupert's Bay in Dominica had been opened by the original Free Ports Act of 1766. It was intended that Dominica would become a conduit for French sugar, coffee and cotton, siphoning off the produce of Guadeloupe and Dominique and redirecting the trade through British channels.<sup>101</sup> In order to overcome the objections of British planters on Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, all commodities exported from Dominica were deemed to be French, and taxed accordingly. Small quantities of mahogany were

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<sup>99</sup> Carrington, *op.cit.*, p.843.

<sup>100</sup> Cust 17. British vessels played very little part in the Hispaniola trade. The Jamaica shipping registers for the 1780s are patchy, but enough survive to give the impression that commerce between Hispaniola and Jamaica was left largely to the French and Spanish. In the last quarter of 1784, six British ships entered Kingston from Hispaniola, of which three carried mahogany. In the whole of 1787 the total was only four ships, none carrying mahogany. Figures given in the British customs returns confirm this general picture. In the 1790s, however, British vessels once more entered the trade on a small scale, and when war was declared against France their contribution became significant, as vessels plied between Kingston and St Domingue in support of the British occupation. CO 142/19,21. Cust 17.

<sup>101</sup> Armytage, *op.cit.*, pp.42-45.

**Figure 4.8:** Value of mahogany importations from Dominica, 1765-1795.

1765	110	1773	1200	1781	-	1789	8320
1766	25	1774	-	1782	-	1790	160
1767	41	1775	4	1783	-	1792	279
1768	103	1776	87	1784	149	1793	67
1769	-	1777	48	1785	2070	1794	-
1770	-	1778	128	1786	8511	1795	32
1771	154	1779	-	1787	203		
1772	160	1780	-	1788	1361		

Source: Cust 3, Cust 17.

shipped from Dominica in the years after 1763, but these exportations never amounted to much, probably because of the 'French' tariff.<sup>102</sup> After the duty on foreign mahogany was removed in 1771 there was brief surge in exportations before the American war,<sup>103</sup> but between 1778 and 1783 Dominica was occupied by the French and Roseau itself was burned. After the war Dominica's trade languished and the island's estates were in such a parlous condition that the owners petitioned for a remission of debts.<sup>104</sup> It may be for this reason that exports of mahogany reached significant levels in the mid-1780s, as timber was cut to raise cash for destitute planters. After repeated petitions and memorials to the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, Dominica's ports were re-opened by the 1787 Free Ports Act.<sup>105</sup> According to the Commissioners, the primary object of the Act was 'to bring in from Foreign Settlements, Coffee, Cocoa, Cotton, Indigo, Pimento, and other spices: Roucon (?) Dyeing Woods, Woods for Cabinet-Makers, Green Hides, Tallow, Tortoiseshell, Gold and Silver, Mules and Cattle, Tobacco'.<sup>106</sup> As a result of the Act mahogany (and probably other woods) began to be imported into Dominica in significant quantities in

<sup>102</sup> Imports of mahogany from Dominica are first recorded in 1765, when 110 planks were brought in to London. This timber may well have been cut on Dominica itself, since the island was well wooded when taken over by the British.

<sup>103</sup> Dominica was certainly capable of producing timber on a commercial scale. Sir Charles Whitworth's *State of the Trade of Great Britain* (1776) reported 'The sides of the hills bear the finest trees in the West Indies; and the island abounds with timber of every kind.' BT6/185, lxii. The Act of *13 George III cap.73* permitted Dominican timber to be exported to other British colonies. The preamble states; '... whereas there are growing in the said Island of Dominica great Quantities of Timber and Wood fit for building Sugar Mills and other Purposes.... It may have been this act which stimulated a record level of mahogany exportations of L1200 in 1773.

<sup>104</sup> C.O. 71/9. See also C.O. 71/10, *Humble Address and Petition of the Council and Assembly to the Crown*. Voluminous correspondence of the subject of re-opening the Dominican Free Ports is contained in BT6/75.

<sup>105</sup> *27 George III cap.27*.

<sup>106</sup> BT6/75 ff 657-661, *Considerations for the renewing of Dominica free Port*, 3 June 1785.

Spanish bottoms from Puerto Rico, Hispaniola and the Spanish Main.<sup>107</sup>

Grenada (ceded to the British in 1763 under the terms of the Treaty of Paris) was chosen as a Free Port in 1787 because of its proximity to Trinidad and the Spanish Main. Until 1783 mahogany exportations from Grenada amounted to no more than a few tons in any one year, but in the mid-1780s Grenada's mahogany exports assumed a substantial size, increasing noticeably after 1787. Little, if any, of this timber was of Grenadian growth, but was carried into the island in Spanish bottoms sailing out of Trinidad and the Spanish Main.<sup>108</sup>

**Figure 4.9:** Value of mahogany importations from Grenada, 1783-1795.

1783	-	1788	669	1793	N/A
1784	120	1789	1757	1794	889
1785	499	1790	1640	1795	1785
1786	891	1791	892		
1787	560	1792	169		

Source: Cust 3, Cust 17.

The pattern of events in New Providence differed significantly from those in Dominica and Grenada. New Providence had long been the lynchpin of trade between North American and the West Indies, and had supplied the North Americans with much of their mahogany timber. The decline in North American trade after 1783 caused New Providence merchants to look for new markets, and the surge in mahogany exportations to Britain after 1783 suggests that timber which had formerly gone to North America now went across the Atlantic instead (Figure 4.10). The opening of the Free Port had little effect on this trade. After 1787 small quantities of mahogany were imported into New Providence in Spanish bottoms, presumably from the north coast of Cuba.<sup>109</sup> These importations never amounted to more than a few score logs or planks, and it is therefore probable that the majority of Providence's exports were of Bahamian

<sup>107</sup> The 1787 Free Ports Act differed from previous legislation in that whereas the 1766 Act had made specific exclusions (sugar, tobacco, coffee, pimento, ginger, molasses) from the policy, the new Act enumerated the varieties of goods permitted. Among these were 'Logwood, Fustic, and all sorts of wood for Dyers' Use... Mahogany and all other Woods for Cabinet Ware'. In the 1780's Gillows bought mahogany and satinwood through their Dominican agents Worswich and Allman, but the origin of these timbers is not specified. Letter Book 344/170, 2 September, 19 October 1784, 25 January, 10 March 1785.

<sup>108</sup> Cust 17. See also BT 6/75, ff.79-93, *Letter of the Merchants and Traders of Grenada to His Honour William Lucas Esq., President of H.M. Council, Commander-in-Chief of the Island of Grenada*, 8 June 1786. The Spaniards of Trinidad lacked cash, and hence had to pay for goods in kind. 'Their Cattle, their Mules, and the Produce of their Plantations, consisting chiefly of Cotton, Indigo, Lignum Vitae, Mahogany and the various kinds of Dying Wood constitute their principal funds...'

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

growth. This supposition is supported by the fact that when import duties were re-imposed in 1795, mahogany from the Bahamas received preferential treatment, paying the same duty as that shipped from Honduras.<sup>110</sup> Hence Bahamas mahogany was deemed to originate in the islands themselves, rather than from foreign settlements.

**Figure 4.10:** Value of mahogany importations from New Providence, 1765-1800

1765	1828	1775	800	1785	9827	1795	101
1766	718	1776	111	1786	12536	1796	7539
1767	380	1777	442	1787	5141	1797	4782
1768	99	1778	-	1788	4611	1798	267
1769	4	1779	-	1789	7468	1799	409
1770	264	1780	-	1790	-	1800	635
1771	2000	1781	-	1791	-		
1772	1664	1782	-	1792	-		
1773	3	1783	80	1793	4395		
1774	816	1784	4170	1794	1019		

**Note** 1. New Providence was attacked by American Revolutionary forces in 1776, and remained under constant threat of attack thereafter. It was occupied by the Spanish from May 1782 to April 1783.

**Source:** Cust 3, Cust 17.

### Importations from foreign Free Ports

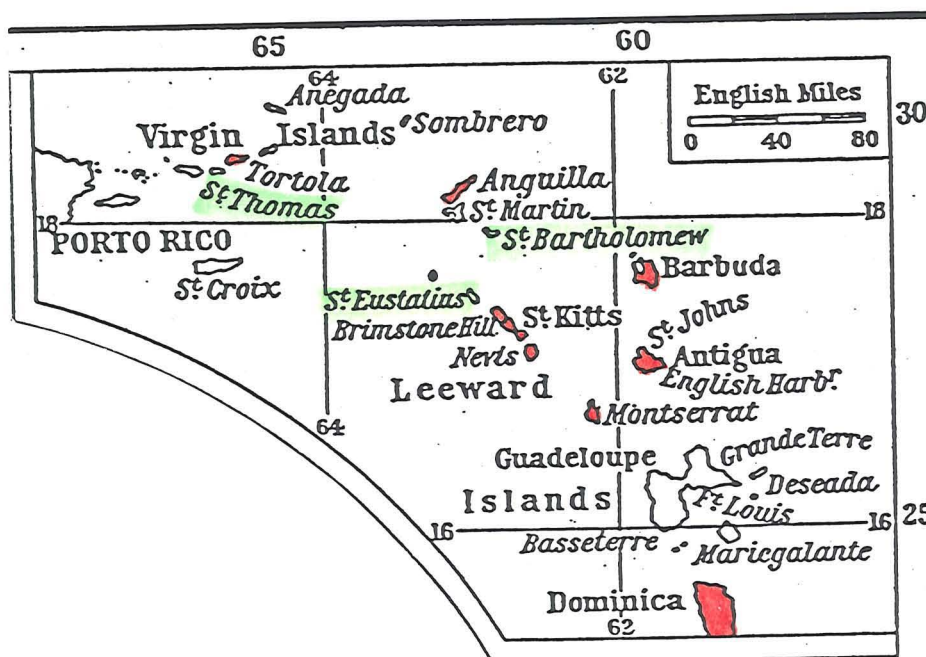
The Free Ports trade was, by definition, carried in foreign bottoms. However, in the last quarter of the 18th century there was a gradual increase in the volume of British vessels trading to foreign West Indian ports. Once again the American war proved a turning point in this process, for the loss of naval dominance between 1779 and 1782 forced British vessels to search for trade in the neutral ports of St Eustatius (Holland), St Bartholomew (Sweden) and St Thomas and St John (Denmark) (Figure 4.11).<sup>111</sup> After 1783 this trade increased markedly, as these same ports became entrepots for badly needed North American plantation stores.<sup>112</sup> They also developed into important markets for mahogany shipped from elsewhere in the Caribbean.

<sup>110</sup> 35 *George III cap.20*, 36 *George III cap.78*.

<sup>111</sup> 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.

<sup>112</sup> Carrington, *op.cit.*, pp.828 *et seq.*

Figure 11: Foreign free ports in the Virgin islands.



Note: British colonies are marked in red.

Figure 12: Value of importations of mahogany from Tortola 1788-1800

1788	2433	1792	1444	1796	2275	1800	3465
1789	5526	1793	na	1797	1709		
1790	1932	1794	370	1798	768		
1791	1592	1795	?	1799	104		

Source: Cust 3, Cust 17.

British vessels traded at these markets in two ways. Smaller vessels plied between the foreign free ports and some British islands, notably Tortola and St Kitts. In the late 1780s Tortola suddenly became a notable exporter of mahogany, which, on the face of it, the island itself was quite unable to supply. Since the American war the island had developed into Britain's pre-eminent centre of smuggled trade in the Caribbean.<sup>113</sup> It was ideally situated to trade with the Danish free ports of St Thomas and St John, and with the Spanish island of Puerto Rico. The great majority of mahogany entering Tortola came

<sup>113</sup> Ragatz, *op.cit.*, p.103.



in British ships from the Danish free ports, but the original source was almost certainly Puerto Rico and other Spanish islands.<sup>114</sup> Consequently, Tortola must rank as a source of Spanish mahogany. In 1806 and 1807 Tortola's mahogany exports exceeded those of Jamaica, but were brought to a sudden end by the opening of direct trade with Puerto Rico in 1808.

St Kitts is another small island of the Virgin group, and had exported small quantities of mahogany to England since the 1730s. Like Tortola, St Kitts suddenly assumed unexpected importance in the mahogany trade after 1783. Importations into St Kitts are recorded in British, Dutch and Danish bottoms, suggesting St Eustatius and the Danish free ports as the probable source.<sup>115</sup> From 1784 onward Gillows bought both mahogany and satinwood from their agent at St Kitts, and a bill of lading at St Kitts, dated 30th August 1784, contains a computation of charges incurred at 'Statia', which confirm St Eustatius as the source.<sup>116</sup> When war with Spain broke out in 1796 St Kitts's brief career as a mahogany entrepot came to an end.

**Figure 13:** Value of importations of mahogany from St Kitts 1784-1798.

1784	436	1790	2292	1796	-
1785	1439	1791	3663	1797	-
1786	44	1792	433	1798	-
1787	2481	1793	N/A		
1788	203	1794	33		
1789	1141	1795	1154		

Source: Cust 3, Cust 17.

**Figure 4.14:** Value of importations from the foreign West Indies, 1783-1800.

1783	106	1791	1265	1799	5295
1784	-	1792	12319	1800	10273
1785	467	1793	1407		
1786	485	1794	1035		
1787	515	1795	18485		
1788	40	1796	3480		
1789	3147	1797	2737		
1790	7981	1798	1286		

Source: Cust 17.

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<sup>114</sup> Cust 17.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Letter Books, Gillow to Worswick and Allman, various dates 1784-88. Memorandum Book 344/181, Worswick and Allman to Gillow, 30 August 1784.

As well as this inter-island trade there was an increase in direct importations from the foreign West Indies to England (Figure 4.14.) Until the Act of 1771 such importations were subject to import duty, and were consequently something of a rarity. From 1783 onwards importations in British ships from 'Foreign West Indies' became a regular entry in the customs returns, gradually increasing in volume. Although the entries are rarely specific, the sources of this mahogany were almost certainly the neutral free ports, i.e., St Thomas and St John, St Eustatius, and St Bartholomew.

### **Cuban mahogany: quality, character and utilisation**

Among 20th-century pundits, 'Cuban' is a synonym for excellence in mahogany. Writing of the early importations of mahogany in the 1720s and 30s Cescinsky commented: 'The wood of this period is a straight-grained hard Cuba, with little or no figure, with silky grain and beautiful golden colour.'<sup>117</sup> It is largely as a result of Cescinsky's emphatic encomiums that so-called Cuban wood still has a very high reputation among modern connoisseurs. In the timber trade *S.mahogani* is now designated 'Cuban type' to differentiate it from central and south American *S.macrophylla*. However, this designation is an anachronism, a product of the trade in the late 19th century, when Cuban wood dominated the quality end of the market. In the 18th century, by contrast, the reputation of Cuban timber left much to be desired. Gillows, for instance, preferred to avoid Cuban wood for veneers or quality work. In 1768 they wrote to Joseph Beetham regarding good quality Spanish mahogany, adding that Cuban wood 'won't do at all'.<sup>118</sup> Sheraton described Cuban wood as 'close and hard, without black speckles, and of a rosy hue, and sometimes strongly figured'.<sup>119</sup> Elsewhere he called it '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'.<sup>120</sup> Blackie agreed with Sheraton, recording that it was nearly equal to St Domingo wood in hardness, but generally paler in colour, and even when well figured 'wants the force of expression which distinguishes good Spanish wood'.<sup>121</sup> It also was reputed not to improve its colour with age.

Edward Long attributed the poor quality of Cuban wood in the 1760s to the fact that it grew 'in swampy soils, near the sea-coast'.<sup>122</sup> It seems logical that

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<sup>117</sup> Cescinsky, *English Furniture*, Vol II, p.24.

<sup>118</sup> 344/165, Gillow to Jos.Beetham, Liverpool, 9 September 1768.

<sup>119</sup> Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, II, p.254.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p.184.

<sup>121</sup> Blackie, *Cabinet-Maker's Assistant*, p.30.

<sup>122</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843.

early importations of Cuban wood tended to be those most readily to hand, growing around the creeks and inlets where clandestine trade was carried on. According to Chaloner and Fleming, the best Cuban wood grew on the open plains of the interior, where the ground was dry and stony. These trees were probably slower grown (producing denser timber) than those in better watered coastal areas which, however, grew to a greater size.<sup>123</sup> As the more easily accessible timber was cut out, so the cutters moved inland where, fortuitously, the better timber grew. The modern reputation of Cuban wood rests on the quality of these later 19th-century importations.

In the 18th century Cuban logs tended to be short, usually 5 to 9 feet long, and from about 14 inches upwards, but very wide wood of more than 24-26 inches was scarce.<sup>124</sup> The shortness of the logs cannot have been due to the smallness of Cuban trees, since in the 19th century Cuba logs ran to 40 feet and more. It is more likely to have been the result of cross-cutting to facilitate hauling and stowage on the small vessels engaged in the trade. British vessels sailing out of Montego Bay were generally between 25 and 45 tons burden, and the Free Ports legislation limited foreign vessels to 70 tons and a single deck. These short logs presented problems for the furniture trade, particularly in the selection of table wood:

In selecting a table log, it is important to observe the length of it, whether it is long enough to yield two boards, or is not much longer than one board. Either of these is preferable to a log of intermediate size, which would necessarily leave a considerable portion of the wood to be used for inferior purposes, and thus enhance the price of the table-boards. But good table-wood is often so scarce, that the purchaser must frequently buy logs, which otherwise suitable for his purpose, are yet of an inconvenient length.<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps the most intractable difficulty with Cuban wood lay in the frequency of defects in the log, among them 'dark brown spots and streaks', attributed by Blackie to insect attack. This had a notable effect on its price: 'the liability of Cuba wood to this defect, renders the purchase of it uniformly troublesome and hazardous.... It is no uncommon occurrence to find a log giving strong indications of show or figure, and having no appearance of dark spots or streaks, which yet, when opened, proves to be worth a far less price than has been paid for it.'<sup>126</sup> Hence, although occasionally 'well Veen'd' and figured, Cuban mahogany rarely fetched top prices. On the English market it was usually quoted a little above Baywood and well below Jamaica. In October 1770, for instance,

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<sup>123</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree*, p.43

<sup>124</sup> Letter Book 344/165 Gillow to Beetham, 11 October 1768. 344/168 Gillow to Swarbreck 26 Jan 1776. Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, p.43. Sheraton, *op.cit.*, II, p.254.

<sup>125</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.30

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

prices at Liverpool were as follows: Baywood 4 1/2d; Cuban 6 1/2 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.<sup>127</sup> These price differentials are fairly typical and consistent for the last quarter of the 18th century.

Despite its variable quality, Cuban wood found ready employment among British furniture makers. Large logs for table wood fetched the highest prices. In the 18th century very little Cuba wood was used for this purpose, for the reasons given by Blackie above. A set of gate-leg dining tables with half-round or D shaped ends needed boards from logs 24 inches wide and upwards, and logs of this size were rare.<sup>128</sup> In the 19th century extending dining tables employed additional leaves of 19-24 inches width, allowing smaller logs to be used, and thereby increasing the employment of Cuban wood for this purpose. As a general purpose wood, for 'bed pillars, chair wood, table legs, sofa feet, &c', Cuba mahogany served well, and despite blemishes, its structural qualities were well regarded.<sup>129</sup> As Blackie commented: 'we know of no material equally free from liability to warp;... Where the veneer employed has a strong tendency to warp and draw, Cuba wood will be found to offer a greater resistance, and to stand better than even Bay mahogany.'<sup>130</sup> Some of the best Cuban mahogany was cut into veneers - 'occasionally considerable prices are paid for it with this in view.'<sup>131</sup>

As Hispaniola mahogany became more widely available in the 1780s, so demand for the Cuban article fell. Very few Cuban vessels entered Jamaican ports in the 1780s, and equally few British vessels traded to Cuba.<sup>132</sup> In the last twenty years of the 18th century the majority of Cuban wood on the British market may well have come via North America. With the closure of British islands to United States vessels after 1783 Cuba became a prime source of mahogany for the North American market, and much of this was forwarded to Britain.<sup>133</sup> When direct trade between the Spanish islands and Great Britain was opened in 1808, the value of importations from Cuba were dwarfed by those from Hispaniola. Not until the 1820s was Cuba mahogany imported into Britain in significant quantities, and as late as the 1860s Cuba lagged some way behind

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<sup>127</sup> Letter Book 344/166, Gillow Lancaster to Gillow & Taylor, 22 Oct 1770. 344/168, Gillow to Swarbreck, 18 February 1776.

<sup>128</sup> Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Blackie, p.31.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> CO 142/19,20.

<sup>133</sup> BT6/50, George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, July 1789.

Hispaniola mahogany in commercial importance.<sup>134</sup>

### Hispaniola mahogany: quality, character and utilisation

From the moment of its introduction in the late 1760's Hispaniola or Spanish mahogany established a reputation for excellence, superceding the Jamaican article to become a benchmark product. It possessed aesthetic qualities of colour, figure and lustre which only the best Jamaican timber could match, and was both dense and hard. From 1783 onwards, due to the increasingly unreliable quality of Jamaica wood, Gillows preferred Spanish mahogany above all others, writing in 1783 to John Swarbreck 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<sup>y</sup> that comes from Hispaniola turns out here the Best Quality.'<sup>135</sup>

Sheraton was in some doubt as to the origin of Spanish mahogany. Hispaniola mahogany, he wrote, was 'not much in use with us'.<sup>136</sup> He concluded therefore, that '.. probably the Cuba and Spanish mahogany are the same, as the island of Cuba is a Spanish colony... That, however, which is generally distinguished by Spanish mahogany is finer than what is called Cuba.'<sup>137</sup> This ambiguity, which has often confused modern historians, was not shared either by Gillows in the 1780s or by Blackie seventy years later: '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.'<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Customs 4. Value of direct importations of mahogany from Cuba and St Domingo, 1810-1860.

	Cuba	St Domingo/Haiti
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1810	4. 1. 2	40.734. 2. 7
1820	60. 4. 9	5,530. 5. 8
1830	2605. 8. 2	30,557. 9. 7
1839	15,055. 7.11	63,942, 4, 0
1850	30,610.12. 1	73,521.18. 8
1860	58,160. 0. 0	84, 473.0. 0

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, Gillow to Jn Swarbrick, 18 July 1783, 8 January 1784. Gillow to John Burrow 3 May 1784.

<sup>136</sup> Sheraton, *op.cit.*, II, p.252. Presumably he did not know that the majority of Spanish mahogany on the British market came indirectly from Hispaniola via Jamaica.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p.184.

<sup>138</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.31. By the 1870s, however, ambiguity had crept back in to the terminology. Laslett describes 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." *Op.cit.*, p258. The confusion probably arises from the tendency of mid-Victorian timber dealers to play on the formerly high reputation of Spanish mahogany from Hispaniola.

In the 1780s Spanish mahogany came into Kingston from a number of sources in both the Spanish and the French colonies on Hispaniola. With the opening of direct trade in the early 19th century, British vessels tended to converge on St Domingo city, the old Spanish capital, since this was the biggest market for British manufactures. As a consequence, the mahogany trade also gravitated towards the capital, and in the mid-19th century St Domingo city had cornered the trade:

It is worthy of remark, that the mahogany imported under the name of St Domingo wood is of varied quality, and is the produce of widely-distant localities. From the celebrity attained by the exports from St Domingo city, it has become customary to carry the growths of other localities coastwise thither, and ship them for foreign markets under the common name. The cargoes thus collected are ordinarily of less value than those which consist of wood grown in districts more adjacent to the city; the latter is therefore usually distinguished by the name of city wood.<sup>139</sup>

St Domingo mahogany was imported in both log and plank. In the late eighteenth century the planks were sawn into 4 to 5 inch thicknesses, and often were bored at one end, presumably to facilitate hauling or loading. At 9-13 feet St Domingo planks were longer than most Cuban wood, but by 19th-century standards still relatively short. These were the preferred lengths, however, since anything 9 feet and over could be cross cut to produce boards of four to five feet long (allowing for waste) to make dining table tops.<sup>140</sup> In width they generally ranged between 16 and 24 inches.<sup>141</sup> Planks or logs over 2ft broad were rare and very dear, facts that Gillow repeatedly impressed on his 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...'<sup>142</sup> Logs or planks under 18 inches in breadth were employed in a variety of ways. Blackie recommended 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.'<sup>143</sup> Some St Domingo wood came in small logs of 9 to 11 inches square. 'We have some reason to think that there are Logs of Mahogany from 9 to 10 Inches square and upwards brought from Hispaniola to

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

<sup>140</sup> Blackie, p.33.

<sup>141</sup> 344/166. Robert Gillow to Gillows London, 22 October 1770. 344/167, Gillow to John Swarbreck, Jamaica.

<sup>142</sup> 344/167 Gillow to Swarbreck, Jamaica, 18 October 1776. Gillow to Swarbreck 14 December 1776.

<sup>143</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.34.

Jam<sup>a</sup> a parcel of which would also be very useful...<sup>144</sup> These small logs were employed for what Gillow called 'Particular Purposes', in other words, for 'Chair Banisters & top rails.'<sup>145</sup>

By the last quarter of the 19th century the best St Domingo mahogany was cut out. In 1875 Laslett described St Domingo mahogany as 'of much smaller dimensions than that of Cuba, and only a few logs exceeding 8 to 10 feet in length, by 12 to 13 inches in the mean thickness of their scantlings, are imported... although they are occasionally seen in well-squared logs, measuring 15" x 15" x 25'.'<sup>146</sup>

## The curl

There are several intriguing references in the Gillow archive to the importations of root and branch timber. These occur particularly during the American war, when mahogany of any sort was scarce, and the implication is that roots and branches were employed only *in extremis*. However, Edward Long remarks that some of the best figured was to be found in the roots:

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.<sup>147</sup>

The method of cutting mahogany here described was the customary one. It was adopted for a number of reasons, the first being that the extensive buttressing about the base of the tree necessitated building a platform to reach the bole

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<sup>144</sup> 344/170. Gillow to Swarbreck, 26 February 1784.

<sup>145</sup> 344/169 Gillow to Swarbreck, Yate and Co, 11 July 1781, 28 July 1782. Gillow to Thomas Beetham, Liverpool, 20 September 1782.

<sup>146</sup> Laslett, *Timber and timber trees*, p.261.

<sup>147</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, III p.843.

proper. If not, the labour of felling was enormously increased. Secondly, the buttresses themselves were an impediment to hauling and stowage. In order to reduce carriage and shipping charges to a minimum, mahogany logs were trimmed and squared (for more on this see chapter six). Thirdly, in the early years when mahogany was both abundant and cheap, there seemed little point in expending labour on cutting out the buttresses and roots. Further costs were also incurred in conversion and use; root and branch timber tended to be unstable, and hence almost always had to be sawn into veneers and laid onto a stable bed of mahogany, oak or deal.

Long's remarks concerning the potential use of root timber are interesting because of their timing. Although the employment of extravagantly figured veneers was not unknown in the early years of mahogany furniture manufacture, it became a distinctive decorative feature from c.1760 onwards. The most commonly used figure is now known variously as curl, crotch, feather or flame, and is a product of the grain disturbance found either in the fork between bough and trunk, or where two buttresses merge.<sup>148</sup> The figure was used to great effect, commonly on the doors of presses, or in matched sets across the face of commodes or chests of drawers. In stylistic terms, the employment of figured mahogany was very much in line with the freer use of colour and figure in neo-classically inspired furniture. In economic terms, it may well tell us something about the state of the mahogany trade, and in particular the cost of timber at this time. Clearly, for the extraction of buttress and root timber to be viable, the market price had to be sufficiently high. Until the Seven Years War this was probably not the case, but the rapid escalation of prices thereafter made mahogany butts eminently marketable. At about this time, a new annotation appears in the customs returns and the shipping registers. As well as logs, planks and boards, mahogany 'slabs' are recorded from the early 1760s onwards.<sup>149</sup> No fuller descriptions are given, but it is possible that these slabs are the sections of root or buttress timber referred to by Long, and from which some of the curl veneers of the neo-classical period were obtained. In the 1770s Gillows were buying Baywood 'crutches' via their Jamaica agents, showing that Honduras was the source of at least some of their curl veneers.<sup>150</sup>

Several authorities remark on the prevalence of curl figure in St Domingo mahogany. 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

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<sup>148</sup> These terms seem to be 19th century usage. Gillows' term for curl veneer was mahogany 'birching'.

<sup>149</sup> Customs 3. CO142/17,18

<sup>150</sup> 344/168 Gillow to Swarbreck, 18 February, 30 March 1776.



tops, on which the curls radiated from the centre.<sup>151</sup>

The popularity of this particular variety of curl reached its height, as Blackie suggests, in the early 19th century, and seems to have been the direct result of the growth in the St Domingo trade. The fashion for curl mahogany prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic, and can be confirmed from contemporary trade advertisements. 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.'<sup>152</sup>

The quality and potential size of a curl in the log was estimated by inspecting the end grain of a log or balk. Blackie's comments on this topic are particularly full.

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.<sup>153</sup>

Chaloner reckoned that St Domingo logs produced the best curl and, 'In point of value, Saint Domingo Curls rank after Table and veneer Logs'.<sup>154</sup> 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 at the head of the curl', and secondly 'at the point where the

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<sup>151</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, pp.32-33. See also Laslett, *op.cit.*, 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."

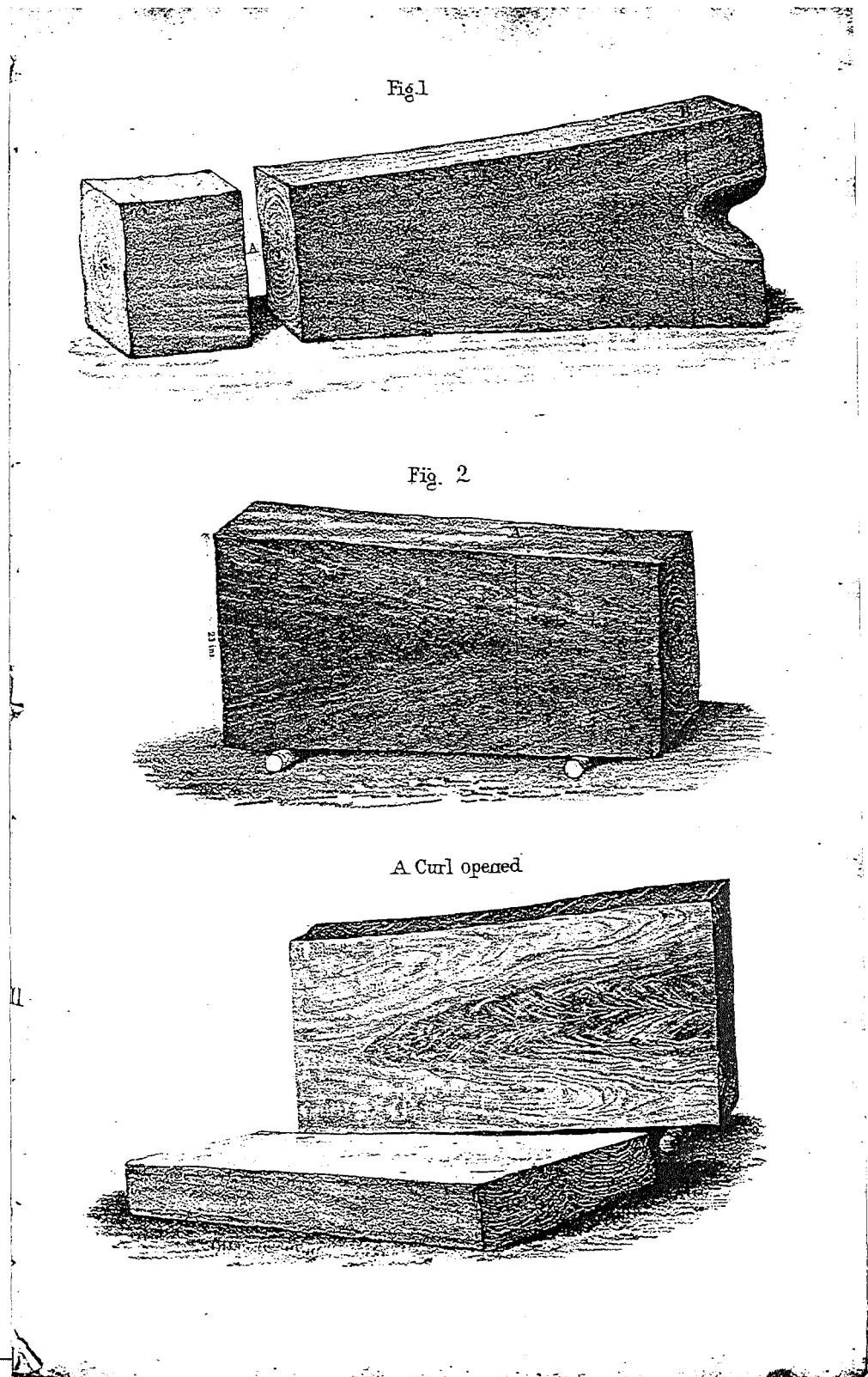
<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Brad Rauschenberg, "Timber Available in Charleston: 1660-1820", *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, MESDA XX 1994, p.84.

<sup>153</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, pp.34-5.

<sup>154</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, p.60.

two hearts run into one.<sup>155</sup> The rest of the log below the curl could then be sold separately.

Figure 4.15: Preparing a curl log for shipping



Source: Chaloner.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.59-60.

## CHAPTER FIVE - THE HONDURAS TRADE, 1763-1793.

### The origins of the trade

The port and settlement of Belize lies on the eastern coast of Yucatan in the Bay of Honduras (Figure 5.1). To the north is Mexico, to the west Guatemala, and to the south Honduras. In the 18th century all these were part of the Vice-Royalty of New Spain, a vast and unwieldy administration which extended from California to Panama. Most of eastern Yucatan was unsettled, except by the indigenous Indian tribes, and the Spanish authorities exercised only a fitful jurisdiction. In the absence of effective Spanish occupation, the English had traded and sometimes settled in the Bay of Honduras since the late 16th century. Of the many natural products of the area - indigo, sarsaparilla, cattle, hides, turtles - the most important was logwood.<sup>1</sup> Logwood was the most abundant of the American dyewoods, growing on the low lying Central American littoral and along the banks of its many rivers. It was a commodity essential to the woolen cloth industries of Europe, where the wood was chipped and steeped to produce a dye varying in colour from red to blue or black. It was also used as an effective mordant for dying cloth in other colours.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1670s the English logwood trade centred on the town of Campeche in western Yucatan, but by 1700 Campeche had been superceded by Belize. The permanent expulsion of English logwood cutters from Campeche in the early 18th century reinforced the growing importance of the Belize settlement. Unlike Campeche, Belize was remote from Spanish settlements, and numerous offshore reefs and cays gave protection from surprise attack. On the banks of the rivers, creeks and lagoons around Belize grew extensive stands of logwood and mahogany.<sup>3</sup> Despite numerous Spanish attempts to remove the cutters, logwood

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<sup>1</sup> Logwood, *Haematoxylon 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 stinted in its growth. In the Logwood the bark in general is more rugged than in the Hawthorn but subject to fewer Spricula. 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...', Liston Papers, *Some thoughts relative to the Trade lately carried on in the Bay of Honduras and Mosquito Shore by our British Settlers, &c., &c.* National Library of Scotland, MS 5528 ff91-2. Undated, but on internal evidence dateable to 1782.

<sup>2</sup> Descriptions of early logwood operations in Campeche and Belize can found in John Esquemeling, *Buccaneers of America*, 1684; Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, etc.*, 1707 & 1725; Nathaniel Uring, *Voyages and Travels*, 1726.

<sup>3</sup> For general histories of the British in Central America, see Alan Burns, *History of the British West Indies*; Cyril Hamshere, *The British in the Caribbean*; Stephen Caiger, *British Honduras, Past and Present*, London 1951. Most of the original sources used in this chapter can be found in CO 123, CO 137, BT 6/50, BT 6/75. Many of these are published in Sir John Burdon, *Archives of the British Honduras*, London 1931.



**Figure 5.1: The Bay of Honduras, Thomas Jeffreys 1775.**

Notes:

1. The Belize settlement is at the mouth of the Belize River, between latitudes 17 and 18, longitudes 71 and 72.

2. The network of rivers, creeks and lagoons used by the logwood cutters is clearly shown, extending from the Rio Hondo south to the Belize (Bellese) River.

cutting soon developed into a substantial industry. Exports from Belize reached 8,000 tons a year in 1750, worth around L160,000, enabling the English to supply virtually the whole European market.<sup>4</sup> The population of Belize and its hinterland varied enormously, both according to the state of the European logwood market, and according to the condition of peace or war with Spain. Around 1750 some 400-500 white cutters, commonly called Baymen, worked from Belize, together with numerous slaves and dependents.

The peculiar topography of Belize and its environs impressed all who encountered it for the first time. The following 19th century account is typical:

The country for many miles along the seaboard is low, and the approach to the coast dangerous, its navigation being intricate amongst the numerous islands and reefs to the eastward of it; but here are good roadsteads in several parts, such as the Ambergris Key, towards the north near the Bay of Bacalar: and Turneff and St George's Keys opposite to and forming the port of Belize, which are safe, commodious, and well protected from the violence of the sea.

The land is low for some miles into the interior, but gradually rises as you advance, and becomes a fine and bold country, covered with immense forests, and in general it has a rich and fertile soil.

This country is intersected with rivers, creeks and lagoons, of which the principal are the river Hondo, the New River, the Belize, the Siboon, Placentia Harbour, Yeacos and Manati Lagoons, all of which, with several others, are available for the purposes of the mahogany cutters.<sup>5</sup> (Figure 5.2).

Furniture historians have offered various hypotheses explaining the introduction of Honduras mahogany to the British market. Percy Macquoid believed that Honduras wood originated in Campeachy, and was exported as a result of the exhaustion of commercially viable stocks on the Spanish islands.<sup>6</sup> Cescinsky scarcely deigned to give it notice, believing that Honduras mahogany was 'not worth the cost of transport and the duty'. He considered it was principally used for inferior 19th century work.<sup>7</sup> In *The Present State of Old English Furniture* (1921), R.W Symonds wrote that the mahogany used in early Georgian furniture came from Central America (i.e., Honduras), and was known as Spanish mahogany.<sup>8</sup> This somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation soon changed, and by 1928 Symonds fell into line with the generally accepted view

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<sup>4</sup> CO 137/57 Robert Hodgson, Superintendent of the Mosquito Shore, to Mr Aldworth, 21 April 1751.

<sup>5</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree in the West Indies*, p.32.

<sup>6</sup> Percy Macquoid, *The Age of Mahogany*, p.49.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Cescinsky, *The Gentle Art*, p.112, *English Furniture*, Vol.II, p.12.

<sup>8</sup> R.W Symonds, *The Present State*, p.76.



**Figure 5.2: A Map of a Part of Yucatan, by A Bay-Man, William Faden 1787.**

Notes:

1. Belize (Bellese) River mouth is in the centre of the map, with St George's Key immediately opposite offshore.
2. Note the shallow water at Belize itself, unsuitable for ocean going craft.
3. The Old Barcaderes, the highest navigable point of the Belize River, is marked about 30 miles upstream, below the Falls where the river forks. Mahogany logs were floated down to this point for collection and loading onto flat-bottomed boats to be taken to the river's mouth.



that Honduras mahogany came into use in the second half of the 18th century.<sup>9</sup> This was the line adopted by the Dictionary of English Furniture in 1924, and which has been generally accepted since.<sup>10</sup> It is usually assumed that the reason for its introduction was, as Macquoid thought, the increasing scarcity of mahogany in the West Indian islands. In fact, the inauguration of the Honduras mahogany trade resulted from a combination of commercial and political conditions which arose as a direct consequence of the Seven Years' War and the Peace of Paris (1763).<sup>11</sup>

Until 1763 logwood was the sole commodity of importance exported from Belize. One of the primary aims of the British Government during the negotiations for the Peace of Paris was to protect and maintain the logwood trade. Hitherto the Spanish had regarded any British presence in New Spain as illegal, and the logwood cutters worked under continual threat of Spanish attack. British vessels carrying the timber from Belize were regularly boarded and confiscated by the *Garda Costas*. In 1759, during the Seven Years War, the logwood trade ceased almost entirely as the Spanish drove the cutters from their works on the Hondo and New Rivers. The Treaty of Paris gave the British government an opportunity to extract long sought concessions from the Spanish crown including, in Article XVII, the right of British settlers to cut logwood unmolested in the Bay of Honduras.

Freed from the threat of Spanish attack, and attracted by the high price of logwood on the European market, cutters returned to Belize in unprecedented numbers. In 1764 at least 1,500 cutters were working from Belize, providing regular employment for twenty two vessels from 50 to 500 tons burden.<sup>12</sup> Record amounts of logwood were cut and shipped, so that by 1767 the market was glutted, and prices in Europe tumbled. In London logwood fell from L11 per ton in 1756 to L8 in 1761 and a mere L3.10.0 in 1767. At this price there was no profit in the article; traders complained that logwood 'drew no more than freight and charges', and neither cutters nor shippers could make a living.<sup>13</sup> In the peak years of the 1760s, '40 to 75 Sail of Ships [were] loading continually in the Bay all the years round'. By 1770 these were mostly

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<sup>9</sup> R.W. Symonds, *English Furniture*, p.157.

<sup>10</sup> Macquoid and Edwards, eds., *Dictionary of English Furniture*, 1924, Vol.II p.296.

<sup>11</sup> The possibility of unrecorded earlier shipments cannot be ruled out. The customs returns record a number of small shipments of mahogany from *Spanish West Indies* before the Seven Years' War. These may have been from Belize, but were more probably from the Mosquito Shore (see chapter three, above). Laslett states (p.262) that the earliest shipments took place about 1724 or 1725, but gives no authority for this view. Thomas Laslett, *Timber and timber trees*.

<sup>12</sup> Adm 1/238. *The Humble Representation and Petition of the Merchants of Kingston... etc., etc.*, 10th April 1764.

<sup>13</sup> CO 123/2 *Memorial of Behalf of His Majesty's Subjects driven from the Bay of Honduras*, 10 February 1783; BT 6/50 Robert White to Rt Hon Lord Sydney, Secretary of State for the Home Department, 24 December 1784, George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, autumn (?) 1789. Long, *Jamaica*, I. p.529; Dawson, *William Pitt's Settlement at Black River*, p.692.

unemployed, and at St George's Cay, once crowded with shipping, 'not above 5 or 6 Sails of Ships loaded at a time...'<sup>14</sup>

As the price of logwood declined, so mahogany appeared an increasingly attractive commercial proposition.<sup>15</sup> For most of the 1760's the price of Jamaica mahogany fluctuated between 20 and 32 guineas per ton, compared with 16 guineas before the Seven Years' War (Figure 5.4). At the same time, since relatively little mahogany had come to market during the war, demand in Britain was high. At Belize, on the other hand, there was mahogany in abundance. There was also a surplus of shipping in the Bay of Honduras, and these vessels were in search of freight. On 7 November 1763 the brig *Inflexible*, inward bound from Belize, entered Kingston harbour. As well as logwood, she carried the first recorded planks of Honduras mahogany. *Inflexible* was followed just over two weeks later by the sloop *Pitt*, carrying 22,000 feet of mahogany. Both cargoes were destined for onward shipment to England.<sup>16</sup>

From the beginning of 1765 mahogany was regularly carried by vessels entering Kingston from Belize (Figure 5.3).<sup>17</sup> At Kingston it was transhipped and sent on to England, where (since there is no record of it in the Customs returns) it was entered as Jamaican produce.<sup>18</sup> In 1765 over 140,000 feet of mahogany went by this route, with an approximate official value of L3791. This amounted to a little over 10 per cent of the value of mahogany exported from Jamaica in that year.<sup>19</sup> The following year L1344 entered Jamaica from Belize, or 5 per cent of the Jamaican total. These figures, although only approximate, show that at least some of the post-war boom enjoyed by the Jamaica mahogany trade was due to timber originating in Honduras. The indirect route was semi-clandestine, since the original source of the timber in a Spanish possession was not revealed to H.M. Customs in England and hence import duty was not levied. The shippers were undoubtedly aware that their cargoes were technically liable to duty in England, although their reaction when duty was eventually charged in 1768 was, as we shall see, remarkably disingenuous. However, the indirect route was a perfectly usual one, since the vessels carrying these early shipments tended to be small, between 25 and 60 tons, and were unsuitable for Atlantic crossings. Furthermore, they were mostly colonial built and registered, and confined

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<sup>14</sup> CO 123/2. *Memorial on Behalf of His Majesty's Subjects etc., etc.*, 10th February 1783. In November 1767 Admiral Parry reported seeing 40 merchant ships and other vessels anchored at St George's Cay. Adm. 1/238. Admiral Parry to Secretary Stephens, 20 November 1767.

<sup>15</sup> BT 6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*

<sup>16</sup> CO 142/18 Jamaica Shipping Register.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> From 1763 to 1765, direct importations of mahogany from *Spanish West Indies* are recorded in the customs returns (Customs 3). It is probable that this mahogany was from Honduras. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that in 1766 entries for *Spanish West Indies* cease, and those for *Honduras Bay* begin.

<sup>19</sup> CO 142/18. Customs 3.

themselves to carrying cargos within the Americas.

**Figure 5.3:** Mahogany importations from Belize into Kingston, January 1763- June 1769.

1763	40 tons mahogany and logwood, 22,000 ft mahogany.
1764	None.
1765	20 tons mahogany, 5 planks, 126,000 ft.
1766	20 logs, 199 planks, 112 pieces, 38,000 ft.
1767	60 logs, 42,500 ft.
1768	15 logs.
1769	175 logs, 130 pieces, 13,000 ft.

Source: CO 142.

Note: The shipping returns are incomplete. The figures shown above should therefore be regarded as conservative estimates.

### The Act of 1771

Direct shipments of Honduras mahogany into London and the outports were first recorded in 1764, when timber valued at L2885 was imported from 'Spanish West Indies'(Figure 5.5).<sup>20</sup> For the next four years it came in duty free, but in a crucial test case of 1768, the Commissioners of Customs charged a parcel of Honduras mahogany with import duty, regarding it as foreign timber, and therefore not covered by the Act of 8 George I. The importer protested, and the case was referred to the Attorney General, who concluded: 'the Bay of Honduras cannot be considered as a Plantation or Territory belonging to His Britannick Majesty...' Consequently, 'the said Mahogany became subject to the same Duties as are payable upon that Commodity Imported from any Spanish Plantation.'<sup>21</sup> The standard rate of duty on foreign mahogany was 25 per cent, or 40 shillings on every ton, plus two additional duties of 5 per cent of the original duty, bringing the total to 44 shillings. Since the selling price of Honduras timber in London at this time averaged only 10 guineas per ton, the amount of duty was significant, and tended to inhibit direct trade. The fact that Rattan mahogany had for years been imported duty free added to the importers' indignation. In their opinion, the Commissioners of Customs either misunderstood the meaning of the 17th Article of the Treaty of Paris, or were simply 'intent upon increasing the Public Revenue committed to their care'.

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<sup>20</sup> See note 18 above. Honduras mahogany does not seem to have been recognised as such on the London market until 1767. BT 6/50 Memorial of Joseph Waugh, 13 March 1790. Honduras mahogany was available at Liverpool in March 1765, according to an advertisement in *Williamson's Advertiser*.

<sup>21</sup> T1 475, f.404. *Memorial of the Commissioners of H.M. Customs to the Rt. Hon. Lords Commissioners of the Treasury*, 11 September 1770.

Either way, the duty was 'a most intolerable imposition upon the Industry and Labour of his Majesty's subjects.'<sup>22</sup>

In the years that followed the Honduras merchants lobbied hard against the duty on foreign mahogany. To support their case they applied to the Jamaica merchants, who had their own reasons for wanting the duty removed.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, a significant proportion of Honduras mahogany was handled by Jamaica merchants. Stands of mahogany on Jamaica itself were becoming increasingly difficult and expensive to work, and so the Jamaica merchants looked either to Honduras or to the Spanish and French islands for sources of commercially viable timber. Whilst the duty on foreign timber remained, it acted as a brake on the exploitation of these promising new sources.

The Commissioners of Customs were eventually talked round, and in September 1770 presented a memorial to the Treasury, outlining the nature of the problem and recommending the abolition of import duty on all American timber, including that from foreign possessions. They also suggested repaying all duties charged on Honduras mahogany imported since July 1770, and submitted a draft for a Parliamentary Bill to legislate for both these measures.<sup>24</sup> This draft was substantially incorporated in the Act passed the following year. The pre-ambule to the Act stated:

And whereas Mahogany, and various other sorts of *American* wood, are become very useful and necessary to Cabinet-makers and other Artificers in this Kingdom, and it would tend to the Improvement of the Manufactures thereof ..... if Liberty was given to import such Goods from all parts of America Duty-free...

Mahogany from the Bay of Honduras and all other foreign possessions in the Americas would therefore be free of duty from 29 September 1771. Additionally, the duty already paid on mahogany imported from Belize since July 1770 was to be refunded.<sup>25</sup>

The impact of the 1771 legislation is revealed in the Customs returns, which show a marked rise in importations from Honduras after 1771 (Figure 5.4). Equally marked is the decline in importations from Jamaica, a phenomenon which demands some explanation (Figure 5.5). It has been shown how prior to 1771, the level of Jamaican importations was to some extent inflated by the inclusion of Honduras mahogany shipped to England via Kingston. If this timber now went direct, then the recorded level of importations from Jamaica could be expected to fall. However, this does not seem to have been the case. It is

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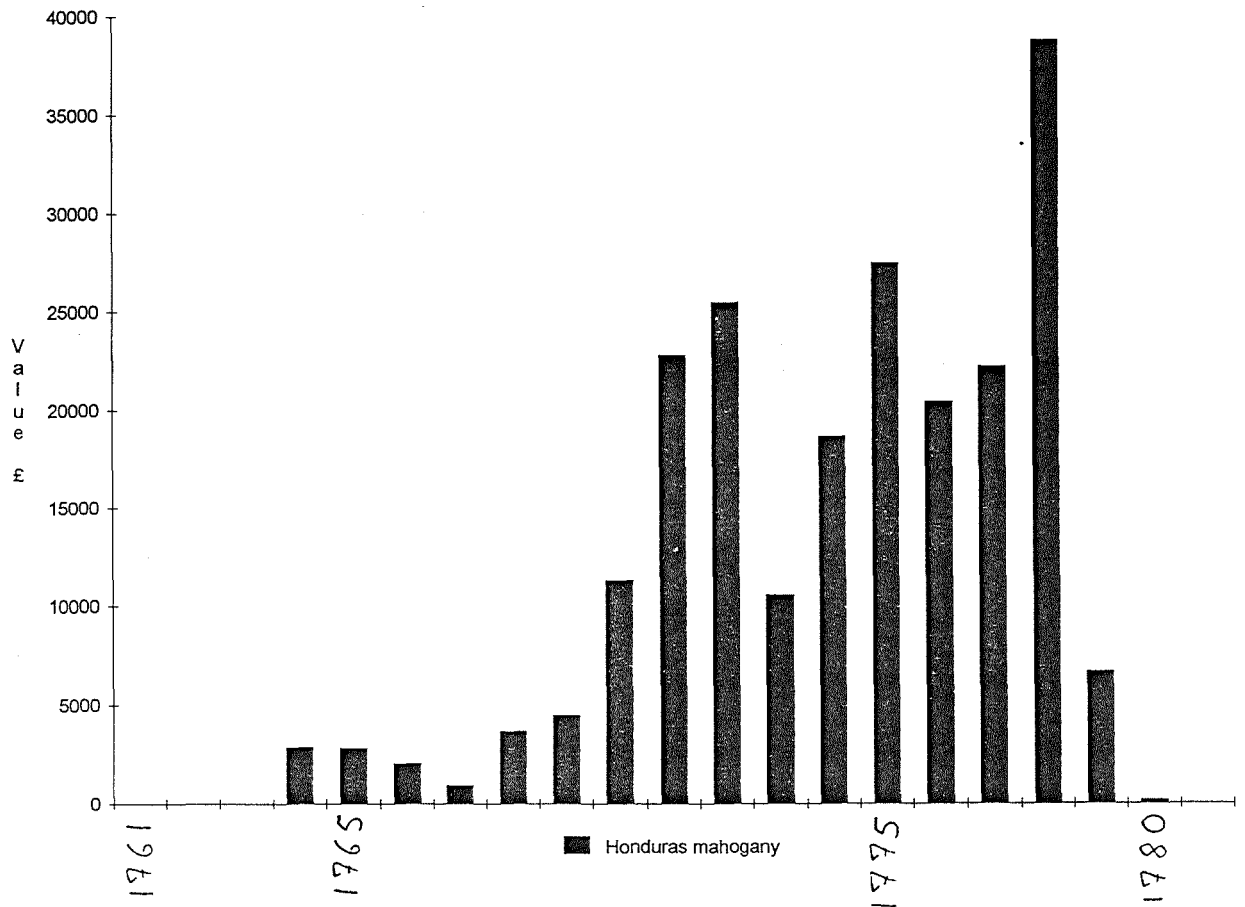
<sup>22</sup> BT 6/50. *Memorial of the Merchants Trading to Honduras Bay to the Rt.Hon. Lord Sidney*, Secretary of State for the Home Department, 24 December 1784.

<sup>23</sup> BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*.

<sup>24</sup> T1 475, f.404.

<sup>25</sup> 11 George III cap.41. This is the first government bill in which the needs of the furniture trade are specifically mentioned.

**Figure 5.4:** Value of mahogany imported from Honduras 1761-1781.



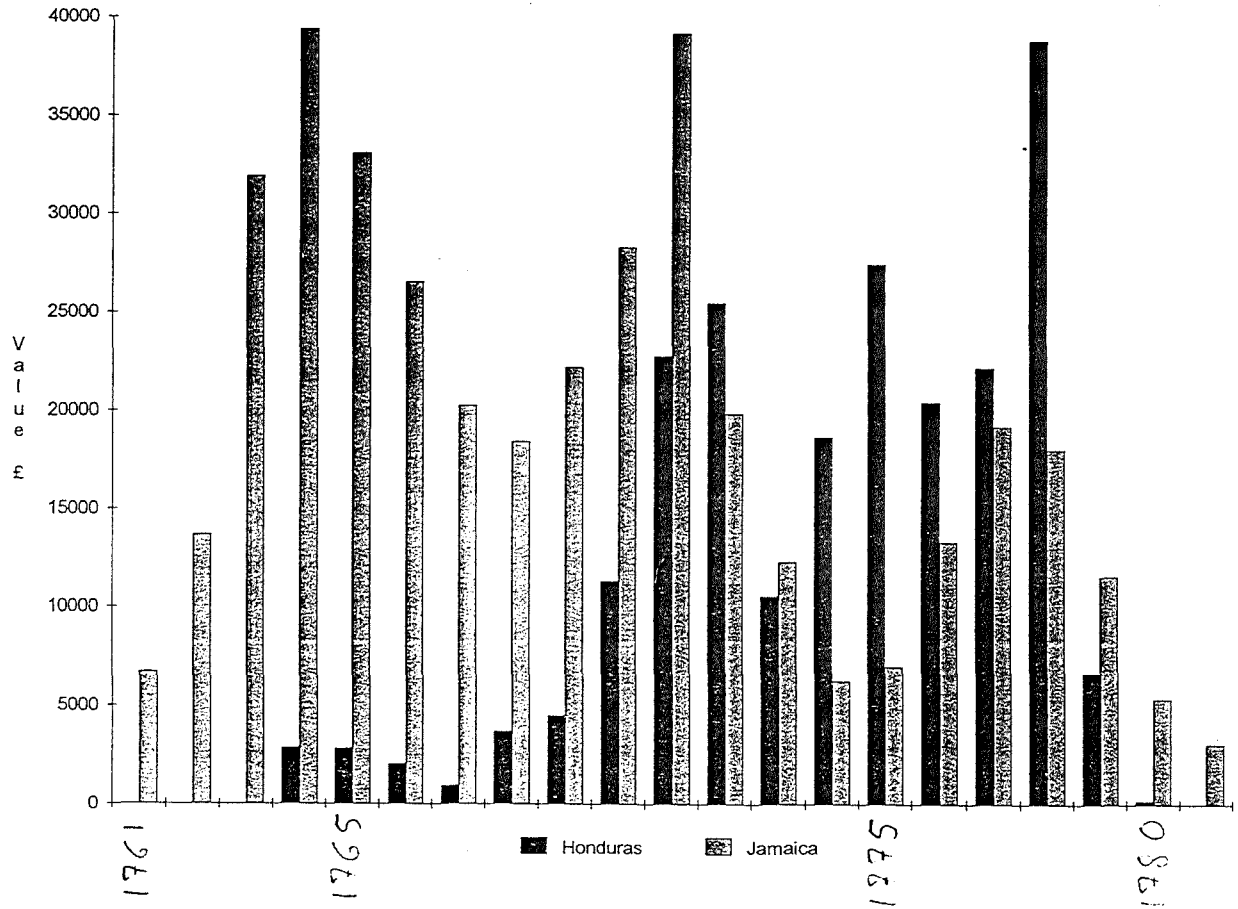
Source: Cust 3, Cust 17.

Notes; Graph includes importations between 1763 and 1765 recorded as from *Spanish West Indies*.

difficult to be specific about this, since the Jamaica shipping registers are lacking for the period immediately after the passing of the 1771 Act. However, figures are available for some of the 1780s. For instance, in the last quarter of 1788, mahogany worth nearly L3,500 was exported from Belize to Kingston.<sup>26</sup> On a *pro rata* basis, twelve months' production should total around L14,000, which was equivalent to 40 per cent of the total exported from Jamaica to England in that year. Clearly, Jamaica's exports were still being buoyed up by Honduras mahogany, and indeed, it seems that the Jamaica merchants were more and not less dependent on Honduras timber to maintain their livelihoods. The cause of the decline must therefore lie elsewhere.

<sup>26</sup> BT 6/50 *An Account of the Imports and Exports of the District Alloted to the British Settlers in Honduras*, 1 October to 31 December 1788.

**Figure 5.5:** Comparative values of mahogany importations from Honduras and Jamaica, 1761-1781.



Source: Customs 3.

Note: Graphs include importations between 1763 and 1765 recorded as from *Spanish West Indies*.

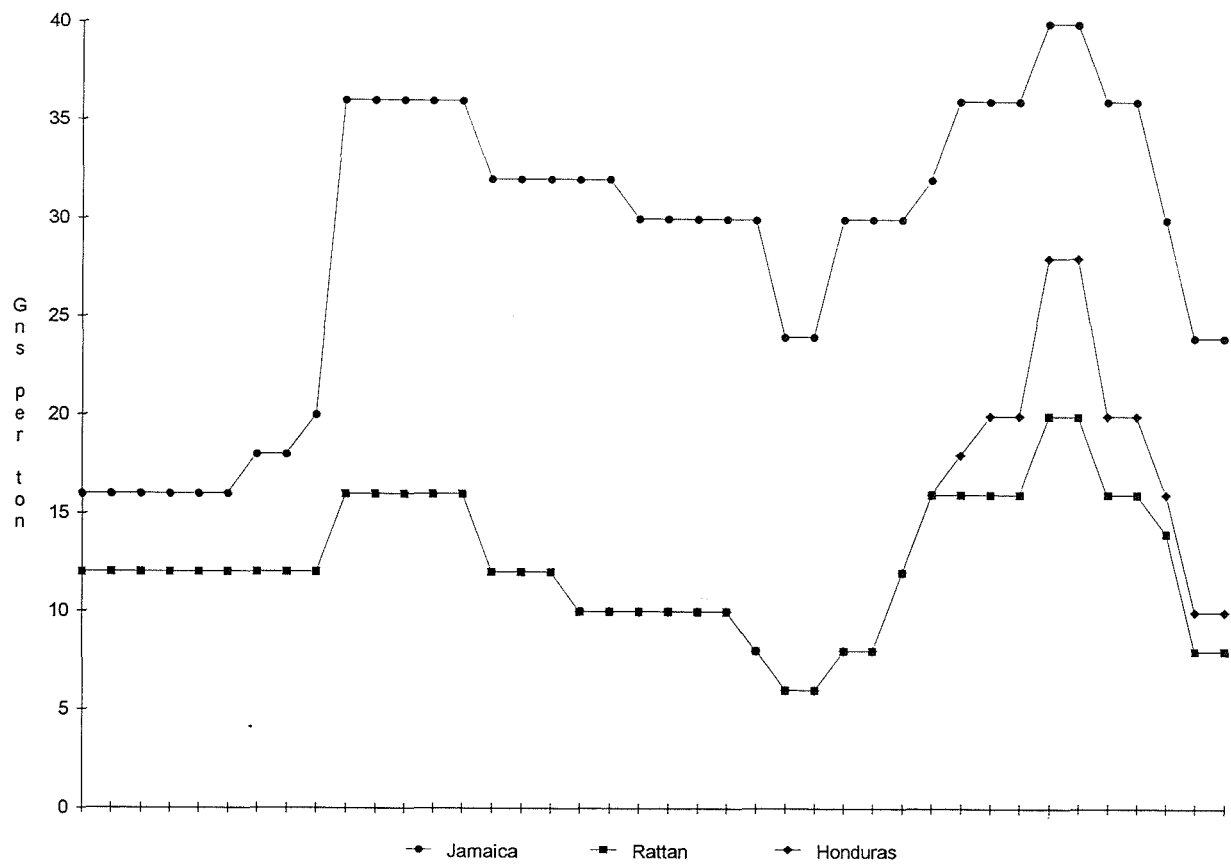
Edward Long was in no doubt about why Jamaica's mahogany exports were diminishing:

The greater part of what is shipped from this island has been imported from the Spaniards, with whom it grows in great abundance near the coast, and it is cut and carried at a very trifling expense, so that they can afford to sell it extremely cheap;... even if it is sold at the lowest price, it clears to the shipper nearly the same as the Jamaica cutters clear for theirs of the best quality: the losses this occasioned to several cutters obliged them to desist, so that few are at present concerned, and they are persons who have large capitals, and make a saving gain, by the greatness of their exports.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.497.

In other words, Honduras mahogany was undercutting the market for Jamaican timber. In the late 1760s the price of Honduras wood averaged 10 guineas per ton compared with 20-30 guineas for Jamaica wood (Figure 5.6).<sup>28</sup> At these prices the poorer quality Jamaican wood was unviable, and only the best was worth shipping. After 1771 the price of Honduras wood fell even lower, so that by 1774 Honduras wood was fetching 6 guineas per ton. Squeezed between Honduras wood on the one hand and Cuban and Hispaniola on the other, even good Jamaica mahogany fell from 32 to 24 guineas, and the poorer quality wood probably went from the market entirely. These figures explain the complaints made by Edward Long against the 'smuggling' of foreign timber into Jamaica. The commercial facts were plain enough - ultimately they made the Jamaica merchants almost entirely dependent on timber imported from foreign possessions.

**Figure 5.6:** Wholesale mahogany prices in London, 1750-1789.



Source: BT 6/50, Memorial of Joseph Waugh, 13 March 1790. Waugh's figures were obtained from the records of George Seddon, probably the largest furniture maker in London at the time.

<sup>28</sup> Similar price differentials, measured in pence per foot rather than guineas per ton, can be found in the Gillows letter books.

## The War against Spain, 1779-1783

In 1772 importations of mahogany from Honduras exceeded for the first time those from Jamaica. In the ensuing few years trade grew steadily, reaching, despite the outbreak of war in the North American colonies, a peak value of over L36000 in 1778 (Figure 5.5). This figure is the official value, based on the Customs rating of L8 per ton. The true value, at the 1778 market price of L12 per ton, was 50 per cent higher. It should also be noted that this figure represents importations into England only; the total of exportations to all parts, including Scotland and North America, was considerably greater. Robert White, Agent for the cutters at Belize, reckoned annual mahogany exportations from Belize at 70,000 tons in the late 1770s.<sup>29</sup> If true, this is an astonishing figure, representing a value of L840,000. However, it is difficult to reconcile this with other contemporary estimates, and particularly with the smaller figure of 20-30,000 tons of shipping involved in carrying both mahogany and logwood to Europe and America.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, even at the official rate, the Honduras mahogany trade in the 1770s was undoubtedly brisk.

Apparent prosperity masked an uneasy predicament for the Baymen. Under the Treaty of Paris the rights of British cutters to cut logwood were granted in principal but not defined.<sup>31</sup> The differences of opinion between the cutters and the Spanish authorities in Yucatan had resulted in inevitable clashes. The Baymen regarded Article 17 of the Treaty as license to cut logwood 'from any part of the Coast of Yucatan', whereas the Spanish wished to confine them to the area immediately around the Belize river.<sup>32</sup> At least logwood cutting was permitted, however; the cutting rights granted under the Treaty did not extend to any other timber. Consequently, the Spanish regarded the trade in mahogany from Belize or any other part of New Spain as illegal. Periodic inspections were mounted of the logwood works, and any cut mahogany was confiscated or burned.<sup>33</sup> British ships involved in the trade ran a continual risk of capture and confiscation by the *Garda Costas*. In order to avoid this the mahogany was often concealed beneath a layer of logwood.<sup>34</sup> Within a short time, however, the scale of the trade grew so great and the breaches of the Treaty so flagrant that the shippers ceased to bother with concealment. Such logwood as was carried

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<sup>29</sup> CO 123/2 Robert White to Secretary Townsend, 10 February 1783.

<sup>30</sup> Liston Papers, *Remarks on certain Queries respecting the Bay of Honduras and Mosquito Shore*, George Dyer to Alexander Munro esq., 17th March 1783. MS 5528 f.

<sup>31</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign*, Definitive Treaty of Peace, 10th February 1763, Article XVII.

<sup>32</sup> Adm 1/238, CO 137/61. Spanish Governor of Yucatan to Joseph Maud, 29th December 1763. BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*, 1789. See Burdon, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p.88 *et seq.*, for Spanish and British correspondence on the subject.

<sup>33</sup> CO 123/3 Robert White to Lord Carmarthen, Secretary of State, 26 November 1785.

<sup>34</sup> BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*



was often only such as was necessary to fill the 'broken Stowage'.<sup>35</sup> The Spanish appear to have been well aware of the scale of the illegal trade but, in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, British interests in Honduras were too strong to be directly challenged.

On its part the British government was bound by the Treaty of Paris to ensure that the terms of Article 17 were not abused. Indeed, there was a clear desire on the part of some ministers to avoid antagonising the Court of Spain. This had to be balanced against the need to support an increasingly powerful commercial interest, both in Belize and at home. So long as the Spanish confined themselves to protests via diplomatic channels, the government chose not to take action against the Honduras trade. If challenged, ministers prevaricated and fell back on the nebulous wording of the Treaty of Madrid (1670), by which the English were to enjoy 'any part of America, which the said King of England and his subjects do at present hold and possess'.<sup>36</sup> The Spanish had never agreed with the British interpretation of this Treaty, and had never conceded that the illegal activities of British subjects on territory claimed by Spain gave them any rights whatever. For some years after the Treaty of Paris, the mahogany cutters felt understandably insecure, many believing that 'His Majesty's Ministers would not countenance a Trade which by the Treaty with the Court of Madrid might be considered an illicit one'.<sup>37</sup>

The Baymen's fears were realised with terrible consequences during the American war. In 1778 the Spanish entered the war on the side of the North Americans, and on 15 September 1779, a strong Spanish force from Bacalar launched a surprise attack on St George's Cay, the administrative and commercial hub of the trade. The settlement was razed and all the inhabitants taken prisoner. About one hundred and forty settlers and their dependents were marched overland to Merida and later shipped to Havana. Many died in captivity, and those that survived were not released until 1782. They reached Kingston in a sorry state, 'all rendered unfit for following their usual occupations either by loss of health or by loss of Property'.<sup>38</sup> Fortunately, the majority of cutters had been working upriver at the time of the attack. These hastily decamped to their customary haven at Ruatan, leaving the Belize settlement deserted. Between 1779 and 1784 no mahogany was shipped from Belize, a fact starkly recorded in the Customs returns. Some Honduras timber appears to have been still available in England during this time, but at hugely inflated prices. Gillows letter books record a steady rise in Bay wood from 6d per foot in November 1778, 7 1/2d in July 1779 and 8d in September 1780. A year later Bay wood reached the extraordinary price of 18d per foot, or L36 per ton.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign*, Article VII, Treaty of Madrid, 18 July 1670.

<sup>37</sup> BT 6/50, George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Liston Papers, *An Appeal to the Public*, Kingston, 7th September 1782. MS 5528, ff.96-7.

<sup>39</sup> Letter Book 344/169, *passim*.

(Whether this was old and increasingly rare stock, or perhaps small quantities being shipped via Jamaica, is uncertain.) John Swarbreck was finally able to procure Gillows a parcel of Baywood in mid-1782, which arrived at Lancaster in November. Although Baywood began to trickle in after the end of the war in 1783, its price remained high relative to Jamaican and Spanish timber. In October 1784 Gillow recommended a customer use Jamaica wood instead of the 'soft kind', adding, 'the latter is much Dearer in proportion to its real Value'.<sup>40</sup>

### The Treaty of Versailles, 1783

In 1781 the Baymen sent a memorial from their refuge in Ruatan to London, pressing ministers to secure better terms for their re-occupation of Belize when the war ended.<sup>41</sup> During the preliminary negotiations for the Treaty of Versailles (1782-3), the British government, prompted by a stream of memorials and letters, sought to clarify and extend the rights of the Baymen.<sup>42</sup> At the very least, the cutters required access to the Rivers *Belize*, *Nuevo* (New River) and *Sheboan* (Sibun), with the indisputable right to cut both logwood and mahogany.<sup>43</sup> The Rio Hondo they could do without, since it was 'almost Exhausted of Wood', and was in any case too near to Spanish settlements. It was also necessary to have access upriver at least 70 miles from the coast (exclusive of the meanderings of the rivers) in order to reach viable stands of timber.<sup>44</sup> The Spanish were in uncompromising mood, however, and the Baymen got much less than they were asking for. Article VI of the Treaty of Versailles, signed on 3 September 1783, reaffirmed British cutting rights for logwood only, and the boundary of their operation was defined as 'between the Rivers Walliz or Bellese, and the Rio Hondo, taking the courses of the said 2 Rivers for unalterable boundaries, so that the navigation of them be common to both nations'(Figure 5.7).<sup>45</sup> As soon as the Treaty was signed the cutters attacked its terms in a pithy memorial, complaining that the limits, fixed on a Spanish

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<sup>40</sup> Letter Book 344/170. Gillow to Charles Udale esq., 19 October 1784.

<sup>41</sup> CO 123/3 *Memorial of His Majesty's Subjects the principal Inhabitants of the Mosquito Shore including the Settlers lately drove from the bay of Honduras...*, 12 April 1781.

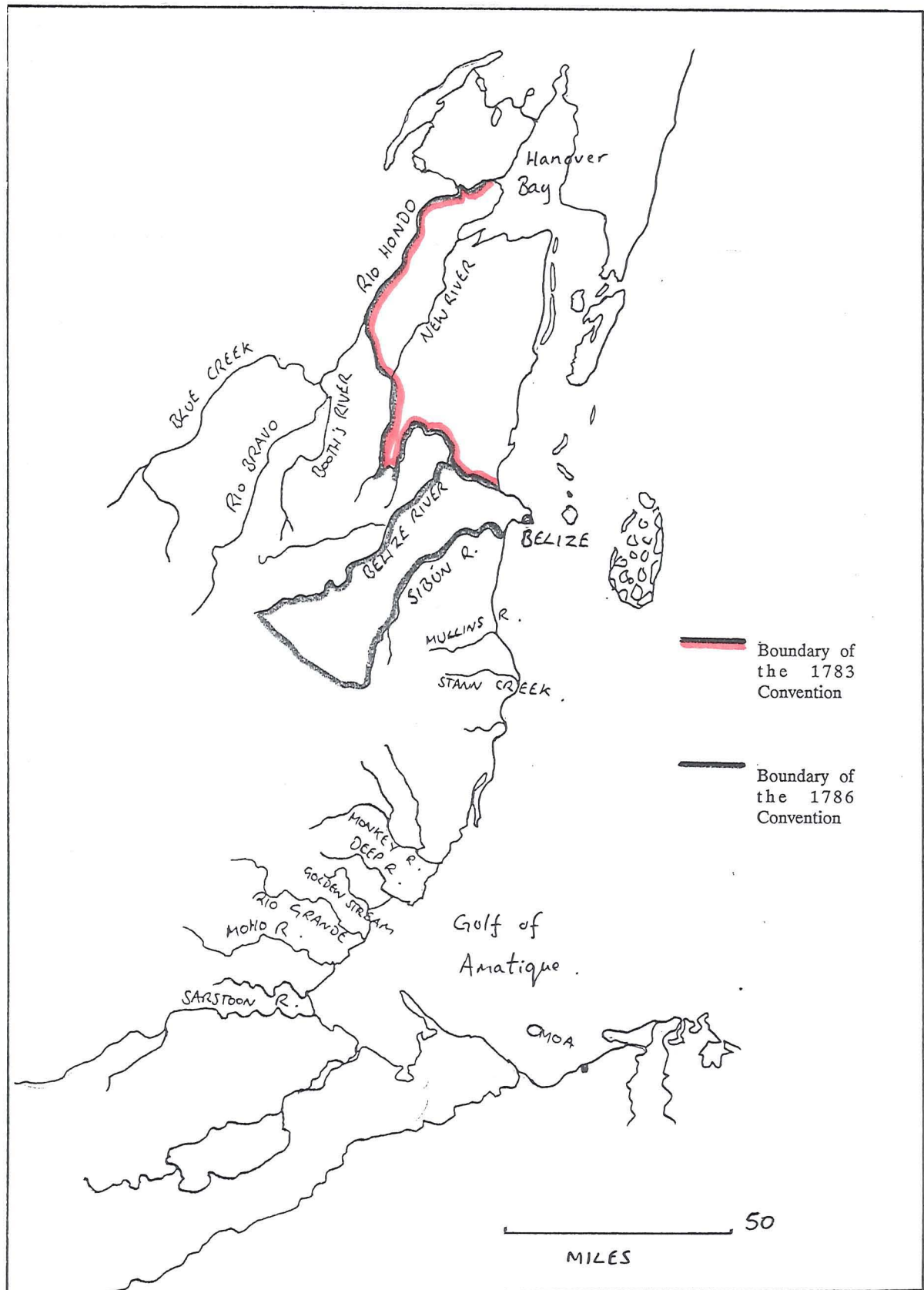
<sup>42</sup> CO 123/2 31 January, 10 February, 5 April, 16 June 1783.

<sup>43</sup> In his memorial on the subject, George Dyer pointed out that the right to cut mahogany must be explicit in any agreement with the Spanish 'because there will be ten times the quantity of mahogany wanted to that of logwood'. Liston Papers, *Remarks on certain Queries...*, f.118. Robert White took the same view: 'As this Article of Mahogany is become so important, they [the Honduras Merchants] wish the Emblem of their privileges and possessions to be expressed in the present Treaty by the two most important Articles of that Country's produce, thus Logwood, Mahogany, and other product of the soil'. CO 123/2 Robert White to Secretary Townsend, Letter covering the Memorial of the same date, February 10th 1783.

<sup>44</sup> Liston Papers, *Remarks on certain Queries*, f.117.

<sup>45</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign*, Article VI, Definitive Treaty of Peace, 3rd September 1783.

**Figure 5.7:** The limits set by the Treaty of Versailles, 1783, and the Convention of London, 1786.



map 'unknown to your memorialists' were 'most unexpectedly and extremely diminished'. It was claimed their rights and privileges were likewise curtailed.

The limits defined by the Treaty of Versailles were certainly unrealistic. George Dyer, the Agent for the London Merchants Trading to Honduras, stated in 1782 that the area occupied by British cutters already extended 'from the southern branch of the Rio Hondo in Hanover Bay almost to the Gulph of Amatique' - in other words, the whole of the eastern coast of Yucatan south of Hanover bay.<sup>46</sup> He rightly predicted that future dispute was inevitable if the British cutters were confined to the Belize and New Rivers. Dyer also commented that 'from the South Monkey River northward to the River Hunda there are no Spanish Settlers, neither on the coast nor as far up the different Rivers as are navigable from Small Craft'.<sup>47</sup> None of the Honduras coast was therefore under effective Spanish occupation.

The rights of the cutters within their limits were also far from satisfactory. Cutting rights were confined to logwood and not mahogany; fishing rights were curtailed and that of Turtles forbidden; there was no right to settle on any of the islands customarily used by the Baymen, i.e., St George's Cay and the South Triangles, where they careened their shipping; no freedom of navigation was established, and powers of arbitrary search and inspection were retained by the Spaniards.

The Baymen asked for the immediate appointment of a joint Spanish/British commission to renegotiate the limits of the settlement and to decide 'the practicability or even possibility of successfully Conducting the Trade of Mahogany and Logwood'.<sup>48</sup> The Governor of Jamaica agreed with the general tenor of the memorial, and instructed the British Commissaries to endeavour to secure better boundaries, together with the use of St George's Cay, the Southern Triangles and the right of Turtle fishing.<sup>49</sup> A joint Commission commenced work on 1 February 1784, agreeing limits and marking the boundaries with crosses at salient points. The task was completed on 27 May, and with this the Baymen had to be satisfied - for the time being.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Liston Papers, George Dyer to Alexander Munro Esq., *Some thoughts relative to the Trade lately carried on in the Bay of Honduras and Mosquito Shore by our British settlers*. MS5528, f92. The document is undated, but from internal evidence can be ascribed to the year 1782.

<sup>47</sup> George Dyer to Alexander Munro Esq., 17 March 1783. *Remarks on certain Queries ....*, Liston Papers MS5528, f.118. Dyer to Sir Robert Liston, f.96.

<sup>48</sup> CO 123/3 *Memorial of His Majesty's Subjects the late Settlers at Yucatan to Lord North*, Secretary of State for the Home Department, 29th September 1783.

<sup>49</sup> CO 137/84 Governor Campbell to Lord North, 23 January 1784.

<sup>50</sup> CO 123/3 *Memorial of His Majesty's Subjects Settled in the Bay of Honduras to Lord Sydney*, 11 November 1783.

## The Convention of 1786 and the resettlement of the Mosquito refugees

Three years after the Treaty of Versailles the dispute between Britain and Spain in Central America was reopened at the Convention of London.<sup>51</sup> (Figure 5.7) A deal was struck, whereby in return for extended rights and limits of the Belize settlement, Britain gave up its claims and settlements on the Mosquito Shore (Article I). The cutting limits in Belize were extended south and west to the source of the Sheboan river (Article II), and the right to cut mahogany and all other wood was at last given (Article III). A sub-clause mentioned that although sugar mills and similar works were forbidden, 'this restriction however does not regard the use of saw mills, for cutting or otherwise preparing the wood.'<sup>52</sup>

The new Convention ostensibly gave the Baymen what they had been demanding since 1763 - clearly stated and exclusive cutting rights within agreed limits (Figure 5.7). However, any hopes that the Bayment might now enjoy a long awaited stability were blighted by the problem of resettling the cutters from the Mosquito Shore, and the years 1787 to 1790 were among the most turbulent in the settlement's history.

When the Baymen returned to Belize in 1784 the settlement had returned as far as possible to the *status quo ante bellum*. Mahogany and logwood works were restored to their former owners, prices of timber were agreed, and their old regulations, known as Burnaby's Laws, were reinstated.<sup>53</sup> These regulations had been drawn up in 1765 by Admiral Sir William Burnaby, who was sent to Belize to re-establish the cutters driven from the Hondo-New River district by the Spanish during the Seven Years' War. Under Burnaby's Laws, the Belize government consisted of a Body of two Justices and five Inhabitants elected by the cutters. Justice was administered by the same Body sitting as a Court with a Jury of thirteen. Any group of inhabitants assembled for a particular purpose was generally called a 'Public Meeting', and such meetings in effect constituted the Legislature of the settlement. Executive powers rested in the two Justices and five others, normally referred to as the Magistrates.<sup>54</sup>

For some years the Baymen had been demanding a more effective government, one recognised and sanctioned by London. This was partly because they badly needed a formal system of justice and arbitration, but also because they hoped the government might thereby be obliged to give proper recognition and protection to the settlement. Ministers had so far been reluctant to acquiesce to the Baymen's wishes, principally because the Spanish would regard any form of

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<sup>51</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign*, Convention of London, 14 July 1786.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Resolutions passed at a Public Meeting, Belize, 12 June 1784. Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.143.

<sup>54</sup> Fuller discussion of the constitution and administration of the settlement can be found in Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, pp.30-39.

British government at Belize as a breach of Spanish sovereignty.<sup>55</sup> In 1784 Lord Sydney, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, at last appointed a Superintendant to oversee and regulate affairs within the Belize settlement.<sup>56</sup> The man chosen, apparently by the cutters themselves, was Colonel Henry Marcus Despard. Despard had recently served with distinction in Jamaica and the Mosquito Shore, where he had been Commandant at Ruatan. He was one of the men elected by the Baymen to settle the limits of 1783 with the Spaniards, and his staunch negotiating on their behalf had earned him the cutters' respect and gratitude. The Governor of Jamaica forwarded notice of the cutters' choice to London, adding, 'The merits of Colonel Despard are so well known that I have much satisfaction in supporting the Recommendation of these Settlers to Your Lordship in his Behalf'.<sup>57</sup>

Despard's appointment has been regarded as an unmitigated disaster by historians of the Belize settlement. The most authoritative of these, Sir John Burdon, has described Despard as 'intolerant of democracy, contemptuously hostile to the existing system, aiming at despotic rule'. He relates, with evident relish, how Despard was later involved in a revolutionary plot in London, and was hanged for High Treason in 1803.<sup>58</sup> Burdon's account accepts the complaints of the Baymen at face value, without seriously considering their underlying motivation. At the same time he gives little credence to Despard's own evidence, in which the real points of contention are clearly stated. What follows is a brief summary of a very complex and acrimonious dispute, whose issues were frequently obscured by the smoke of accusation and counter-accusation, but which at bottom was a struggle for political and commercial control of the Honduras trade.

Superintendant Despard arrived in Belize in June 1786. His immediate responsibility was the implementation of the Convention of London, and in particular the resettlement of British subjects and their dependents evacuated from the Mosquito Shore. Almost all of these, some 537 white settlers and free persons together with 1,677 slaves and dependents, had elected to go to Belize. When it became known that the Mosquito settlers were coming to Belize, the Baymen sent an immediate memorial to the Secretary of State, Lord Sydney, pointing out that the new limits of 1786 were not sufficient to accommodate so many additional cutters, outnumbering the old Baymen by five to one.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Article VI of the Treaty of Versailles stipulated that none of the provisions of the Treaty should be considered as 'derogating in any wise' the rights of Spanish Sovereignty.

<sup>56</sup> In 1782 colonial affairs became the responsibility of the Home Department rather than the Board of Trade.

<sup>57</sup> CO 137/84. Governor Campbell to Lord North, 23 January 1784.

<sup>58</sup> Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.37.

<sup>59</sup> CO 123/5. Superintendant Despard to Lord Sydney, 23rd February 1787. Other estimates roughly agree; according to George Dyer, 5/7ths of the cutters at Belize were resettled from the Mosquito Shore, 1/7 were 'new Adventurers' and only 1/7th were old Honduras hands CO 123/6 July 1787. BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*.

Sydney, however, had already given instructions that the Mosquito refugees were to be settled within the new territories and Despard himself considered that the whole of the new area between the Belize and Sibun rivers would be needed by the refugees, excluding the Baymen from any share of the territory.<sup>60</sup> When this became known the Baymen held a meeting of protest. They agreed, *nem.con*, that hitherto the Baymen themselves had 'always been considered the best judges of their own necessities and uniformly allowed to legislate for themselves, and concluded that the Superintendent had 'no commission or authority empowering him to legislate or parcel out lands'. A Committee of thirteen was appointed 'to frame such laws and regulations as may be necessary to revise the old Laws and ascertain the bounds of works etc...'.<sup>61</sup> A petition of protest was also sent to the Secretary of State, the first of many.<sup>62</sup>

Sydney supported his Superintendent, saying that the Mosquito settlers were to be given preference to 'all other persons whatsoever' in the new districts. He suspected, rightly, that some of the disgruntled Baymen had previously been cutting inside the new limits with the connivance of the Spanish, and herein lay the source of their grievance. Despard's map of 1786 clearly shows that much of the new territory was already claimed by a handful of Baymen (Figure 5.8). These Lord Sydney did not wish to displace unless absolutely necessary.<sup>63</sup> A warning, perhaps, that the Baymen were not without influence in London.

On 21 June 1787 the evacuation of the Mosquito Shore was completed. The refugees needed immediate accommodation, and so in July land on the south side of the mouth of the Belize river was surveyed and marked out in plots of 50 by 100 feet. This area was mostly scrub and mangrove swamp, and moreover lay without the 1783 limits. Nevertheless, some established Baymen objected, claiming prior ownership of the land. Despard's surveyor, David Lamb, was forced to halt his work: 'The greater part of the stakes I put up marking off the Lots were pulled out and I myself was threatened if I proceeded'.<sup>64</sup>

Despard was upriver at this time, supervising the division of the mahogany and logwood works in the new territories. In his absence eight Baymen held a meeting at which they voted themselves fully competent to divide and apportion their 'lands, works, or other emoluments', and the Committee was asked to do so. In an abrupt *volte face* the Committee resolved to divide up the lots on the South Point 'as nearly as possible to the plan laid down by His Majesty's

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<sup>60</sup> CO 123/4 Memorial from the Baymen to Secretary of State, 30 September 1786. C.O. 137/86. Lord Sydney to Colonel Despard, 31 July 1786. Superintendent Despard to Governor Clarke, 1 December 1786.

<sup>61</sup> CO 123/5 Meeting of Inhabitants, 21 Feb 1787

<sup>62</sup> CO 123/5 Superintendent Despard to Lord Sydney, 23 February 1787. CO 123/5 Meeting of the Inhabitants, 21 February 1787. *Ibid.*, Petition of Honduras Settlers to Lord Sydney, 2 March 1787. CO 123/6 Various memorials of the Honduras Settlers to Lord Sydney.

<sup>63</sup> CO 123/5 Lord Sydney to Superintendent Despard, 27 June 1787.

<sup>64</sup> CO 137/50 David Lamb to Superintendent Despard, 16 July 1787.



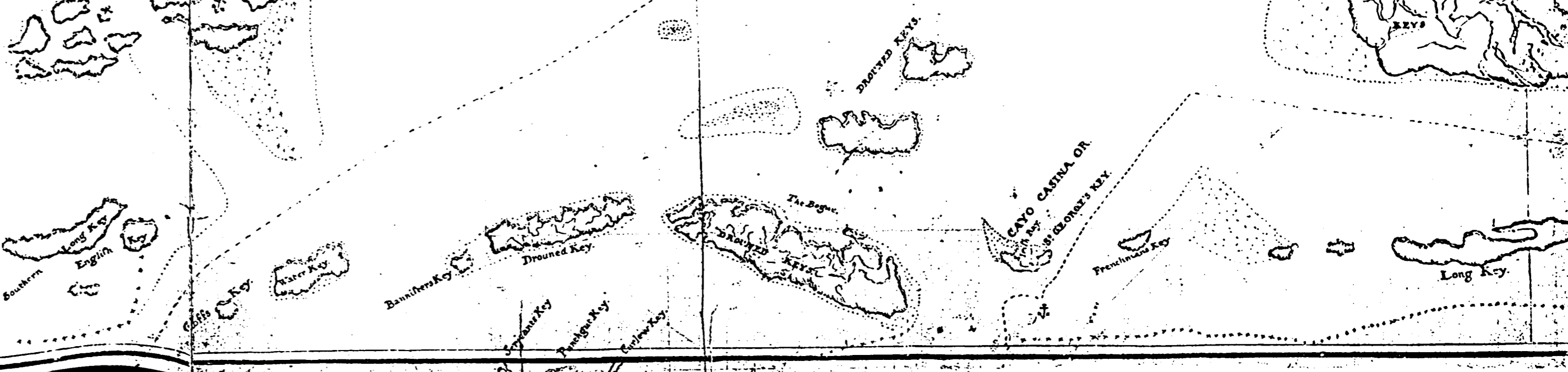
**A MAP**  
**OF THE EXTENDED LIMITS**  
**GRANTED TO THE ENGLISH**  
**IN THE BAY OF HONDURAS**  
 In consequence of the Convention,  
 Signed with Spain the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1763  
 Done from a Survey made by Order  
 of Edward Marcus Duford Esq.  
 By David Lamb 1767.

- REFERENCES**
- Crimson sh. the old Limits so far as it went up the Belize river.
  - Orange line, shows the new Limits as pointed out by the second article of the Convention, and the Islands mentioned by the 4<sup>th</sup> Art.
  - Mahogany or Logwood works, as now occupied.
  - Works claimed by people who refused to quit Bay before the Convention (both within and without the Limits).
  - Pine barrens.

Scale two miles to an Inch.

*Laid down upon a scale of two miles to an inch.*

THE SOUTHERN TRIANGLES





**Figure 5.8:** The map drawn up by Despard's surveyor, David Lamb, in 1787, showing Baymen already established on both banks of the Sibun River.

Superintendent'.<sup>65</sup> It was, after all, in their interest to have the newcomers settled as soon as possible. They then moved on to the business of regulating the mahogany works within the new limits. Among their resolutions were the following:

That no person who is not actually possessed of four able bodied negro men slaves shall be entitled to a mahogany work in any of the Rivers without prior leave.

That three miles in a straight line be considered as a mahogany works and that no person shall possess more than two mahogany works on one River.

That all navigable creeks, Rivers and Lagoons be considered open to any persons entitled to possess works with certain reservations of existing right.

That all persons having withdrawn their servants or slaves from the country shall not be considered a holding any interest in Works or Lots, and that such lots be sold.

That no foreigner who is not deemed a Denizon may directly or indirectly hold a Mahogany or Logwood Works.<sup>66</sup>

These Resolutions were a clear indication that the Baymen intended to retain control of mahogany and logwood cutting in spite of the influx of new settlers. Poor or indigent settlers lacking slaves (i.e., Mosquito Shoremen) would be excluded from working mahogany, as would non-residents of Belize. Existing claims took precedence over new ones. On the other hand, no cutter would be able to own more than two works in any one place, thereby preventing (in theory) undue dominance of any individual. Absentee landlords were likewise prevented from controlling works. The Resolutions were framed by the Committee of thirteen, and adopted at a meeting of only 39 Baymen. Other public meetings making important decisions of policy were held with as few as eight men. In August an important sub-Committee was established to co-ordinate the mutual interests and activities of the Baymen with the London-based British Merchants trading to Honduras.<sup>67</sup>

At the end of October Despard confessed it was impossible for him to execute the plan for reserving the new lands for Mosquito Settlers. The mahogany works in the new territories were already claimed by ten or twelve principal Baymen. Their prior claims, albeit technically illegal because outside the old limits, were insuperable obstacles to the resettlement.<sup>68</sup> Lord Sydney sympathised with Despard's predicament, and confirmed his authority: 'no regulation made by the Committee whereby the Property or Interests of any description of Settlers might

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<sup>65</sup> Laws of British Honduras, 1765-1810. Resolutions adopted July 25 1787, in Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.164.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> CO 123/9 Meeting of the Inhabitants, 20 August 1787.

<sup>68</sup> CO 123/6 Despard to Sydney, 31 October 1787.

be affected, ought to be carried into execution without the previous Consent of His Majesty's Superintendant'. But pressure was being applied in London, and significantly, Sydney criticised Despard's handling of the situation. He wished Despard had 'made some distinction in the extent of Lots so to be disposed of between affluent Settlers and Persons of a different description, particularly people of Colour... I am inclined to think that by good Management and a more conciliatory Demeanour on your part, You might have prevented these Desputes...'.<sup>69</sup>

The Baymen were now determined to have Despard removed, complaining of his 'Visible Spirit of Self-importance and uncontrollable Domination'. The London Merchants were asked to lend their support to the campaign, on the grounds that 'The people ...are the best judges of the local regulations for the good and peace of the Settlement'.<sup>70</sup> Yet Despard seems to have had a majority of the settlers to his side. Several letters to London expressed support, including one signed by 65 inhabitants.<sup>71</sup> In May 1789 he felt secure enough to dissolve the Courts and deprive the Magistrates of office, prior to proposing a new Plan of Police for the settlement. In June the Plan was endorsed by 130 settlers.<sup>72</sup> However, 24 of the principal settlers opposed the Plan. Despard's response was characteristically undiplomatic: 'It cannot be expected that I can now pay attention to the partial objections of a few individuals.'<sup>73</sup> It is clear that Despard underestimated the strength of these few individuals, and particularly their ability to apply pressure where it mattered. An extravagantly worded petition was sent to Lord Sydney:

Englishmen can never brook the despotic government of an individual. We have tasted the sweets of liberty and hitherto have never forfeited our right and title to that valuable blessing.<sup>74</sup>

This was sheer bluster, but in the aftermath of the American war, such language was loaded with political significance. It tied in neatly with accusations that Despard was colluding with the Spanish, in order to undermine the Baymen's

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<sup>69</sup> CO 123/6 Lord Sydney to Despard, 6 February 1788. The reference to 'people of Colour' concerns an incident at the new settlement on the south side of the Belize river, where a negro cutter had been ejected from his plot by the Baymen and reinstated by Despard.

<sup>70</sup> CO 126/6 Robert White to Evan Napean, 21 February 1788. *Ibid.*, James Bartlett and others to the Honduras Merchants, 19 April 1788.

<sup>71</sup> CO 123/6 Mathias Gale to John Gale, 19 May 1788, Despard to Napean, with enclosures, 18 May 1788.

<sup>72</sup> FO Spain 72/15, Despard to Magistrates, 30 May 1789. C.O. 123/8 10 & 15 June.

<sup>73</sup> CO 123/8 Despard to the Signatories of the Petition, 15 June 1789.

<sup>74</sup> CO 123/8 Petition against Despard's Constitution, undated, 1789. The petition appears to have been got up by one of the deposed Magistrates.

constitutional position.<sup>75</sup> There was certainly substance to this; Despard was striving to prevent increasingly flagrant breaches of the new Treaty, and to this end he was in regular correspondence with the Spanish authorities. As he wrote to the Governor of Jamaica, the Spaniards' actions in enforcing the Treaty (confiscation of mahogany, rooting up of plantations) were 'occasioned by the flagrant and repeated acts of infraction of almost every part of the VIth Article [confining the cutters within the new limits] of the Definitive Treaty and the Convention, by the principal inhabitants of the place, particularly by those who take upon themselves the office of Magistrates'.<sup>76</sup>

By September 1789 the situation had reached a crisis, since although the Magistrates had been removed, Despard's Plan of Police could not be implemented. The settlement was in a state of near anarchy. At a meeting in London on 1 October the Merchants trading to Honduras Bay resolved unanimously that 'no Harmony can possibly subsist or any wholesome Regulations be carried into Effect in Honduras Bay under the Superintendency of Edward Marcus Despard'.<sup>77</sup> The next day Lord Grenville, the new Secretary of State, wrote to Despard informing him that his conduct had caused almost general dissatisfaction among the Belize settlers. He was therefore sending an officer to Belize to report on the situation.<sup>78</sup> On 10th November Despard was notified of his suspension and replacement by temporary Superintendent Lieutenant Colonel Peter Hunter.<sup>79</sup> Hunter arrived in Belize in April 1790, and immediately declared Despard's Plan of Police null and void. The settlement thereupon reverted to Burnaby's Laws.<sup>80</sup> For the next 18 months Despard remained in Belize, until finally being informed in October 1791 that he would not be reinstated as Superintendent.<sup>81</sup>

The victory of the Baymen provides a convincing demonstration of the commercial and political power of the principals in the Honduras trade. The core of opposition to Despard was rarely (if the number signatories to petitions is anything to go by) more than four dozen men, among a settlement comprising at least 700 whites. Indeed, among the cutters at large and among the Mosquito refugees in particular Despard commanded popular support. In May 1790, whilst still suspended from duty, Despard topped the poll in the election of new Magistrates.<sup>82</sup> However, it was not penniless refugees but a handful of

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<sup>75</sup> CO 123/7 Richard Hoare to Robert White, 19 August 1789.

<sup>76</sup> CO 123/7 Despard to the Governor of Jamaica, September 1789.

<sup>77</sup> CO 123/8 Meeting of Merchants trading to Honduras Bay, London 1 October 1789,

<sup>78</sup> CO 123/8 Secretary Grenville to Superintendent Despard, 2 October 1789.

<sup>79</sup> CO 123/8 Grenville to Despard, 10 November 1789.

<sup>80</sup> CO 123/9 Acting-Superintendent Hunter, Notice to the British Settlers in Honduras, 12 April 1790.

<sup>81</sup> CO 123/13, Secretary Dundas to Superintendent Despard, 4 October 1791.

<sup>82</sup> CO 123/9 Acting Superintendent Hunter to Lord Grenville, 18 May 1790.

established Baymen that really mattered. Burnaby's Laws enabled a few men to encompass both the legislative and executive functions of the settlement. The same few names appear, whether as Magistrates, petitioners or Committee members, among them Major Richard Hoare, William O'Brien, Richard Armstrong, Thomas Potts, James Bartlett, Major McAulay. Also prominent on their behalf was Robert White, Agent in London. Their interests were long established and well entrenched. Between them they controlled the majority of the logwood and mahogany works. In March 1787 Despard reported that 'by fictitious Collusive Copartnerships' between masters and indentured servants, fifteen men held at least twelve fifteenths (about 80 per cent of the mahogany works in both the old and new territories).<sup>83</sup> This was despite the resolutions of 1765 and 1787, whose ostensible purpose was to prevent individuals obtaining controlling shares of the works. The Spanish attack of 1779 may have been a contributing or even a primary cause of the situation. Many of the smaller cutters had been ruined by the war, enabling the few men with capital to buy them out or to reinstate them in their works as puppets. The egalitarian spirit of the Public Meetings was a sham, and the settlement of Belize, its people, lands and produce, was controlled by a cartel of a perhaps two dozen individuals.<sup>84</sup> These dwelt at Belize and St George's Cay, enabling them to pack the Magistracy and Committees, whereas the majority of settlers were scattered among the creeks and lagoons of the interior. It was easy, in such circumstances, for a few men to dictate to the many: 'the whole Inhabitants are so distantly Situated One from Another, that their Minds and their Opinions Resemble their Situation.'<sup>85</sup> As the Mosquito refugees threatened to swamp the cartel's hold on the mahogany works by weight of numbers, so Despard, blunt, honest and scrupulously fair, threatened their political and hence commercial dominance. At the root of the dispute was mahogany itself, a commodity worth in 1789 almost L200,000 per annum, and potentially a great deal more.

### **The battle for monopoly, 1784-1798**

Whilst the Baymen successfully defended the *status quo* in Belize, another crucial battle was being fought on their behalf in London. Within a year of the cutters' return in 1784 exports of mahogany from Belize had met and exceeded pre-war levels. In 1788 a record L189,000 (equivalent to over 23,000 tons) of mahogany was imported into England, nearly 80 per cent of the total for that year (Figure 5.9). Trade was evidently booming, but the impressive figures masked a serious underlying threat from foreign commercial competition. From 1784 to 1790 the Baymen and the Honduras merchants conducted a sustained

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<sup>83</sup> CO 123/6 Superintendent Despard to Lord Sydney, 4 March 1787.

<sup>84</sup> In February 1785 the Governor of Jamaica had reported that only about 25 settlers possessed enough property in slaves to qualify them for membership of a proposed legislature. CO 137/85 Governor Clarke to Lord Sydney, 7 February 1785.

<sup>85</sup> CO 123/3 Robert White to Evan Napean, 26 November 1785.

campaign of lobbying and petitioning in London, with the object of excluding all other sources of mahogany from the British market. Two principals were involved on the side of the Baymen; Robert White, Agent to the Settlers in the Bay of Honduras, and George Dyer, Agent to the Society of London Merchants Trading to the Bay of Honduras. Opposed to them were successive Secretaries of State and the commissioners of H.M. Customs.<sup>86</sup>

At the conclusion of the American war there were two principal sources of competition to Honduras mahogany; the Spanish and French islands on the one hand, and the United States on the other. Since the passing of the Free Ports Act in 1766 a potentially serious division of interest between the Honduras and Jamaica merchants had gradually emerged. Initially this difference was subsumed by a more immediate problem; both groups of merchants, as we have seen, had reasons for wanting duties on foreign timber removed, and their joint endeavours resulted in the passing of the 1771 Act. After 1771 amity and mutual interest vanished. The Honduras cutters now shipped most of their timber direct to Britain, where it considerably undersold the Jamaican and Spanish varieties.<sup>87</sup> The Jamaican merchants fought quantity with quality; the distinction between Jamaica and Honduras wood was universally recognised, and the higher quality Jamaican timber always commanded a premium (Figure 5.6). Nevertheless, such timber was becoming scarce on Jamaica itself, and the Jamaica merchants naturally looked to Cuba and Hispaniola to supply the deficiency. After a slow start, the traffic of foreign mahogany into Jamaica gathered pace in the 1780s, and from 1784 onwards the memorials and letters of the Honduras cutters and merchants to the Secretaries of State all carried the same burden:

So great and important are the importations now made of mahogany from Cuba, Hispaniola, Porto Rico and the Spanish Main, into Jamaica and the Free Ports... that if this law [of 1771] is not repealed, as to make the importations from our Settlement at Yucatan free, and all those alien importations abovementioned subject to the former duty... our settlement at Yucatan must be inevitably ruined...<sup>88</sup>

An additional threat arose from the newly independent United States, whose merchants were now able to exploit new sources of good quality timber. Although prohibited (except in unusual circumstances) from trading with either

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<sup>86</sup> The majority of source material for this section is contained in BT6/50.

<sup>87</sup> The scale of direct importations is given in Customs 3. Additionally, the Superintendent of the British Settlements in the Bay of Honduras supplied quarterly figures to the Lords of the Committee in Council, detailing the size of vessels trading to Honduras, their cargoes inward and outward, and their destinations. In the three months of October, November and December 1788, 144,000 feet of mahogany went via Kingston, and 314,000 feet direct to England. BT6/50 *An Account of the Imports and Exports of the District Allotted to the British Settlers in Yucatan*, Superintendent Despard to the Lords of the Committee in Council, 1789.

<sup>88</sup> BT6/50. Robert White to Secretary of State Grenville, Letter on behalf of the Yucatan Settlers 13 July 1789.

the British West Indies or the British settlements in Central America, the United States quickly displaced Britain as chief supplier of lumber, food, etc., to the Spanish and French colonies. In return they carried home mahogany, much of which was re-exported to Britain duty-free.<sup>89</sup>

Successive Secretaries of State between 1784 and 1790 were plagued with memorials and counter-memorials.<sup>90</sup> The Baymen claimed that notwithstanding the legislation of 1771, mahogany imported either directly from foreign colonies or via Jamaica was in breach of the Navigation Acts and therefore illegal. They desired that mahogany from foreign colonies should either be prohibited entirely or, at the very least, be subject to the old duty of 44/- per ton. Granted that the legislation of 1771 had been intended to relieve the 'wants and distresses' of the nation's cabinet makers, it was surely not the government's intention to ruin his Majesty's loyal subjects presently settled in Yucatan? Choosing to ignore their own role in framing the law of 1771, the memorialists accused the legislators of ignorance and incompetence. How, they asked, could foreigners take advantage of the 1771 legislation when 'the fundamental Constitutions of both Spanish and French Settlements in America and the West Indian Islands Prohibit all admission or intercourse whatsoever in their respective Ports to foreign [i.e. British] Shipping of every kind'? Since it is highly unlikely that the Baymen were ignorant of the Free Ports legislation, which was framed with exactly this difficulty in mind, their statement suggests that the memorialists deliberately ignored its bearing on the situation. As further proof of the obtuseness of both legislators and customs officials, the memorialists recalled the customs controversy of 1768, when these same loyal subjects in Yucatan had been treated virtually as foreigners by the Commissioners of H.M. Customs. They urged the Secretary of State to concentrate his efforts on the real lawbreakers, namely, 'the free States of North America' and 'some of the Members of the British colony of Jamaica'.<sup>91</sup>

The Merchants complained too about adverse trading conditions, which they claimed placed them at a commercial disadvantage against their competitors. George Dyer asserted that in the years subsequent to the 1783, freight and charges from Honduras had risen by 20 shillings the ton, whereas the selling price of mahogany had halved. An increase in selling price of at least 60 shillings per ton was required to make cutting profitable, and this was not possible because Honduras timber was being undersold by foreign mahogany, some of which, he claimed, was selling for as little as L10-13 per ton. According to Dyer, the reason for the high costs was that the Honduras ships generally came out in ballast, and therefore had to make the return freights pay for both outward and homeward voyages. The Americans and Jamaicans, by contrast, having sold their outward cargoes to the French and Spanish, generally went home in ballast. Any

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<sup>89</sup> BT 6/50, Various docs. BT6/20 Part 2, 365. Evidence of Mr Knox to the Board of Trade.

<sup>90</sup> BT6/50. Memorials and letters of 25 December 1784, 18 August 1785, 17 November 1788, 13 July 1789, and one undated (George Dyer,) but after 13 July.

<sup>91</sup> BT 6/50 *Memorials on behalf of His Majesty's Subjects settled on the Coast of Yucatan*, Robert White to the Rt Hon Lord Sydney, Secretary of State for the Home Department, 6 & 24 December 1784.

mahogany they took with them was freighted at 'little more than a moiety of what the Honduras merchants pay'.<sup>92</sup>

Much of the argument and counter argument centred on the relative merits of Honduras and Spanish wood. It was generally admitted that, on the whole, Honduras mahogany was of lesser quality than Spanish, but some Honduras, 'no doubt a very small proportion', was of prime quality. 'It is with such part of the Mahogany from Honduras that the Spanish Wood at present chiefly interferes...'.<sup>93</sup> Hence, according to Dyer, the most profitable Honduras timber was undersold by foreign wood, and it was therefore the government's duty to prohibit this foreign competition. To support his demand Dyer produced some rather back-handed reasoning. Were high quality timber in great demand, he wrote, he could understand the need for foreign competition in order to keep prices low. But this was not the case 'for 5/6ths of all the Mahogany imported is applied to common purposes and as to the remaining 1/6th it is of very little Consequence to the Community whether the Manufacturer pays 15d or 2/6 p Foot for fine Mahogany because Experience has shewn that the price of fine Furniture will be the same it consisting not so much in the Wood as in the finishing'.<sup>94</sup> Robert White reasoned in a similar vein:

The only objection your memorialists can conceive .... is, that Yucatan does not produce much of that finest and hardest grained Mahogany that is used in the first rate Cabinet Manufacture: And the answer to that Objection, they would humbly submit to be this: that this first rate and supreme kind of Cabinet Manufacture will bear paying the alien Duty.... Nor will it make any Variations of more than Twenty Shillings per Hundred Pound, in the price of the best Furniture, whether it pays the Duty or not.<sup>95</sup>

The Secretary of State passed Dyer's letter to Robert Milligan, one of the Commissioners of Customs, for appraisal and comment. Milligan was not sympathetic. In his opinion, so little Honduras timber was of fine quality that Spanish mahogany 'cannot interfere much with the value of Bay Wood, it merely serves, in some degree, to assort and regulate the Market'.<sup>96</sup> In effect, Spanish and Honduras timber were two different articles, serving two distinct markets, and inhibiting one would not significantly encourage the other. Milligan believed he knew Dyer's ultimate object: 'The whole drift of D's letter is now self evident. It is simply this, Cut off all foreign supply and then I have the Markett entirely

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<sup>92</sup> BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> BT 6/50. Robert White to William Grenville, 13th July 1789.

<sup>96</sup> BT 6/50. Robert Milligan to Lord Hawkesbury, autumn 1789.



in my own power.<sup>97</sup>

Milligan concluded that the Honduras merchants' arguments were 'in almost every respect Erroneous', and 'calculated to procure a compleat Monopoly of both Mahogany and Logwood'.<sup>98</sup> Their complaints regarding conditions of trade were similarly ill founded. Freights had not risen, and indeed were still cheaper from Honduras than Jamaica. The vessels used in the Honduras trade were generally old worn out ships with relatively cheap running costs, whereas the best (and more expensive) ships in other West Indian trades were still content with the old freights.<sup>99</sup> At bottom, what the cutters complained of was nothing more than commercial competition:

Every person in the least acquainted with the business knows; that when goods of any kind are brought to Markett for Sale, that the price is not regulated by the original Cost of the thing, but must be governed by the *State* of the Markett... Therefore, the most prudent policy was 'to lett Trade find its own level, for whenever the quantity of any article at Markett exceeds demand the price must drop, and, vice versa,- it will rise in proportion.<sup>100</sup>

The dispute came to a head in 1790. In their final memorial the Honduras Merchants ended with a warning:

... unless the Act of 11th of George third is repealed or some other method is adopted to put the Settlers on the same favourable footing which they enjoyed from 1763 to 1779, they must quit the Settlement. In such an Event the Monopoly which the Honble Commissioners of His Majesty's Customs seem to apprehend... will be felt in its full force, for not a doubt can exist that when the Governors of Cuba Hispaniola & Porto Rico know that the Cabinet Manufacturers of this Country depend on those Islands for a supply of Mahogany but a proper advantage will be made thereof and the price of that Article become what it was during the last War, L45 to L80 p Ton instead of L10 to L18 which it now bears, and with a Trade thus cramped the Supply of Logwood will be lost which I need not tell your Lordship has been the Source of one war between Great Britain and Spain.<sup>101</sup>

This was a clumsy threat which moved neither the Commissioners of Customs nor the Lords in Council. In a further opinion given by H.M. Customs it was

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*

pointed out that one of the objects of the 1771 Act had been to introduced competition into the trade, and thereby to keep mahogany prices down. The Act of 1787, extending the Free Ports legislation, specifically listed mahogany as an enumerated article, so that timber from foreign colonies could in no way be regarded as illegal.<sup>102</sup> Their conclusion was as follows:

...it would be improper to impose a Duty of 44sh. per Ton on mahogany the Growth of the Spanish or French Colonies, imported in British ships.... as such Duty would certainly operate very strongly to discourage the Navigation of this Country, and likewise to discourage many sorts of Manufactures which are made of such Mahogany, as well as the sale of a great Variety of Manufactures in the West Indies which are exchanged for such Mahogany.<sup>103</sup>

On the issue of the North American trade the Honduras merchants had a better case. A good proportion of mahogany imported into England had always come via North America, and so long as North America remained British, this trade was entirely legal. With the conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles in 1783, the former colonies became an independent foreign power, and as such was subject to the restrictions of the Navigation Laws. However, such was the scale of trade between North America and Britain, and such was the need for commodities such as tobacco and naval stores, that an exception was immediately made. By an Order in Council of 1783, unmanufactured goods (including timber) were permitted to be imported into Great Britain from North America in British ships on the same preferential basis as goods from British possessions.<sup>104</sup> The shippers took advantage of this legislation to import Spanish and French mahogany via the United States duty free.

In order to assess the scale of the problem, the Privy Council asked H.M. Customs to supply figures for the importation of mahogany between the years 1780 and 1788. These revealed that importations via the United States, whilst forming a significant proportion in the early 1780s, had dropped off after 1783, and now amounted to only 2.5 per cent of the total.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, like the

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<sup>102</sup> BT 6/50 Opinion of the Commissioners of HM Customs, 10 December 1789.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Orders in Council May 14 and June 6 1783. An Act of Parliament had already been passed which gave the Crown powers for regulating trade with North America under Orders in Council. See *Acts of the Privy Council, Colonial Series*, London 1908-12, Vol V, p.527. For further details see G.S. Graham, *Sea Power and British North America*, Harvard 1941, p.27.

<sup>105</sup> BT6/50, *Information pursuant to the Order of the Privy Council*, 27 October 1789. The Commissioners of Customs provided the following comparative values of mahogany imports from the West Indies and via the United States.

Year	United States	West Indies
1780	4063 . 0. 0	6676.16. 0

timber imported via Jamaica, mahogany imported via the United States was a very different article from that imported from Honduras. It was 'chiefly Cuba wood of very fine quality, indeed it is only that kind of wood that could afford to pay the double freight and charges from Cuba... and thence to England'.<sup>106</sup> It was concluded, therefore, that the American importations did not significantly affect either the scale of the Honduras trade or the price of its timber. However, both the Commissioners of Customs and the Committee for Trade agreed that mahogany imported from the United States could not be considered 'of the Growth of the Countries belonging to the said United States'. Hence, its importation, even in British ships, was 'not warranted by Law'. As a consequence of this judgement the importation of mahogany from the United States was prohibited from 1790.<sup>107</sup>

In retrospect it seems clear that this long drawn and convoluted exchange was a calculated attempt by the Baymen and the Honduras merchants to engross the entire mahogany trade. They failed, but not for the reasons identified in their various memorials. The scale of prices given in figure 5.3 lends some weight to their argument against competition, since it is clear that although Spanish or Jamaica wood was a much more expensive article, the prices of the respective timbers were linked. This is particularly evident between 1784 and 1789, when a rapid fall in Jamaica/Spanish mahogany is mirrored by a similar fall in the Honduras variety. It may reasonably be argued that one forced the other down, and had large quantities of Spanish mahogany not been available, it may have been possible to maintain the price of Honduras timber. However, in the longer term the quantity of mahogany imported from the United States or from foreign islands was not sufficient seriously to threaten the market for Honduras timber. Although there were initially grounds for concern, the recovery of trade after 1784 was dramatic, and imports from Honduras soon dwarfed all other sources (Figure 5.10). Herein lies the real source of the problem, which was oversupply of the commodity, and the consequent collapse of prices. In 1784, as soon as the cutters returned to Belize, it was resolved at a Public Meeting that: 'the established price of Mahogany shall be Fifteen Pounds [Jamaica currency] pr thousand feet... and that such prices shall continue in force until the first of June

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1781	1010. 5. 8	17167.10. 0
1782	1679. 0. 0	6435.10. 0
1786	4254. 4. 2	139193.12. 2
1787	9506. 5.10	135958.13. 3
1788	4239. 8. 1	245551.12. 4

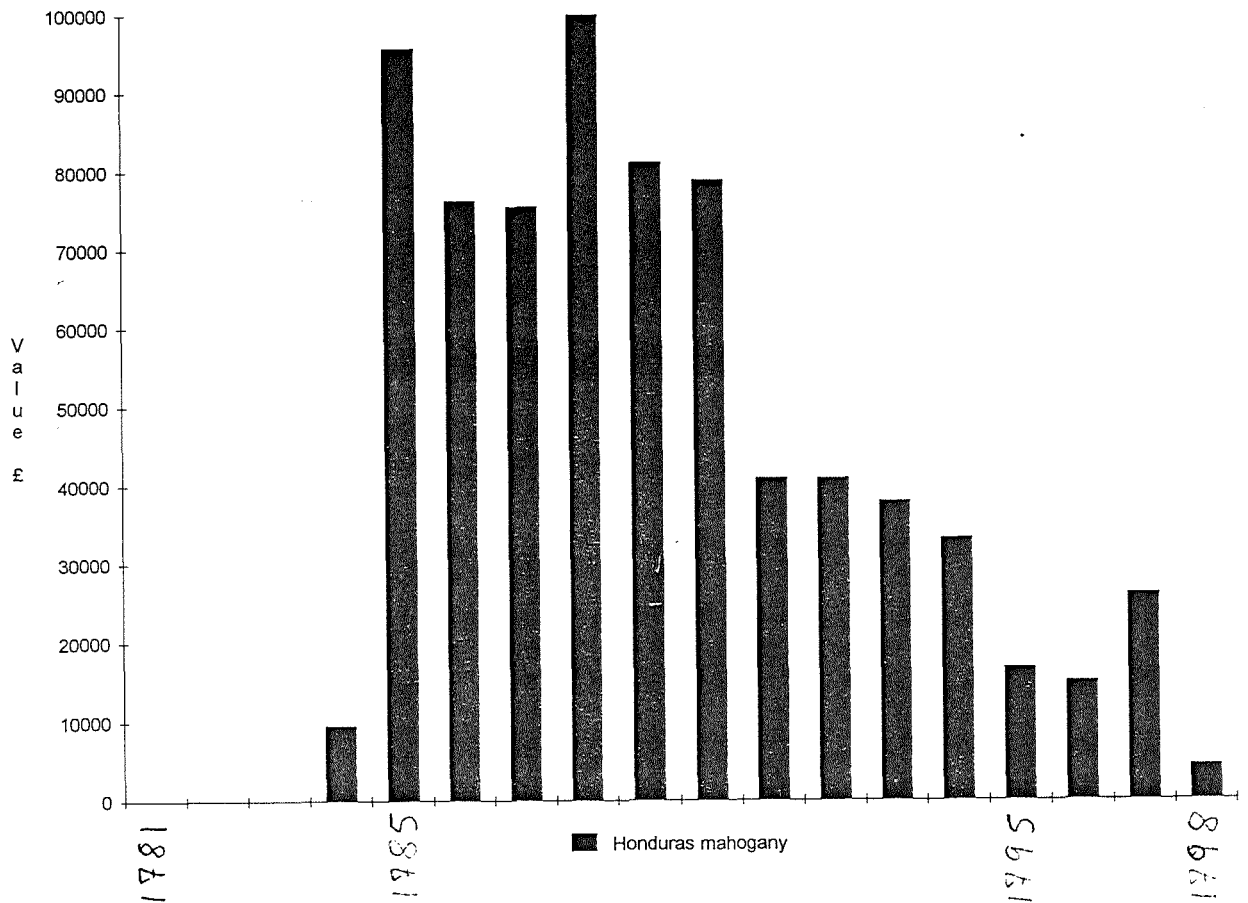
The high proportion of imports via America before 1783 is less a reflection of the scale of the American trade than of the drastic effect of the war on the West Indies trade.

<sup>106</sup> BT 6/50 Robert Milligan *ref. cit.*

<sup>107</sup> 30 *George III cap.11*. The introduction of this legislation caught some importers of North American mahogany off guard. Those with vessels already loaded or at sea were suddenly faced with import duties on arrival at British ports. BT6/20 No.455, petition of Richard Price, merchant of Bristol, and others, *passim*.

1785.<sup>108</sup> This was equivalent to something under L7 pounds sterling per ton.<sup>109</sup> Before the war the price at Belize was something over L2.0.0 per ton, so that the resolution attempted to fix prices well above their pre-war levels.

**Figure 5.9:** Value of mahogany importations from Honduras 1781-1798.



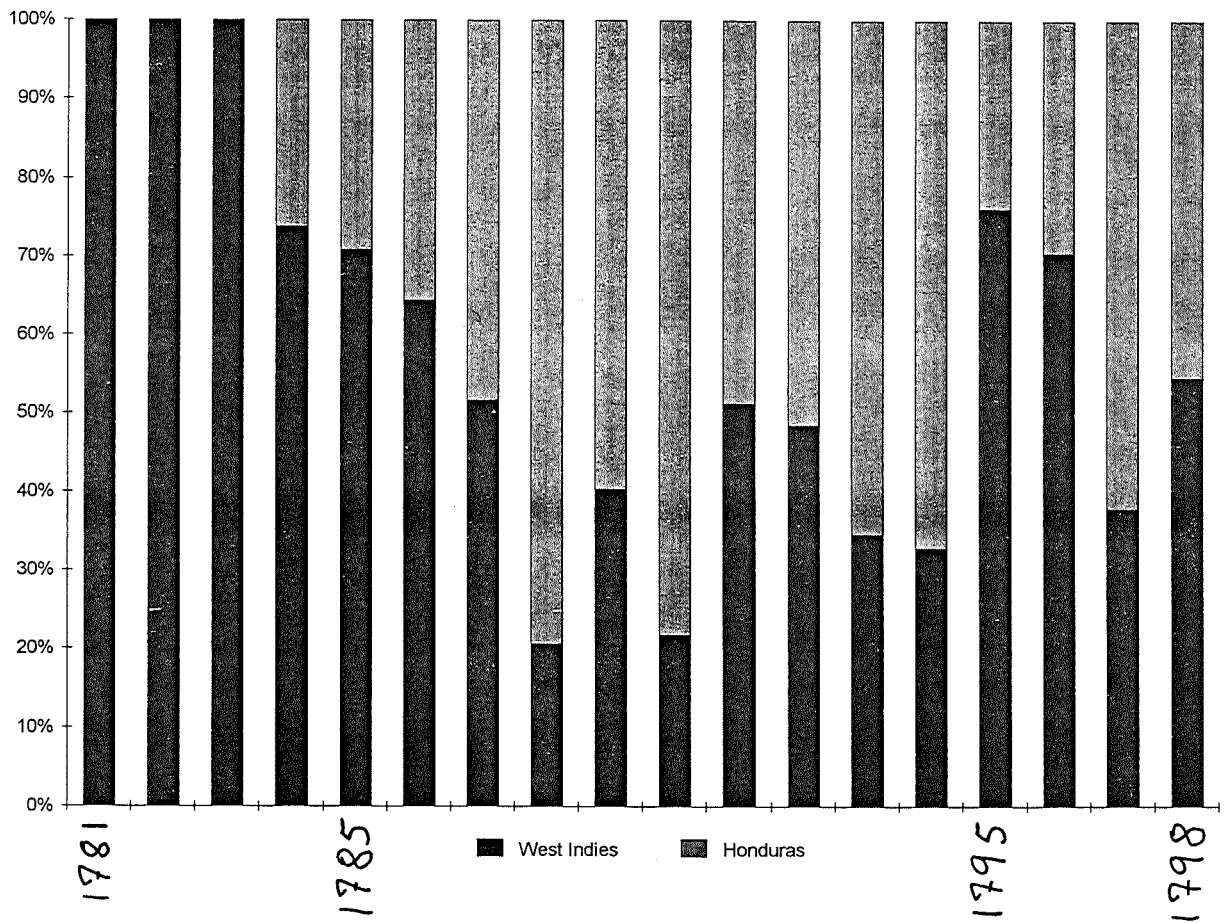
Note: The graph has been shortened to avoid distortion. The true value of importations in 1788 was L186,340.

The Baymen's attempt to fix prices was torpedoed by the 1786 Convention. Large areas of uncut mahogany became available for exploitation, and, at the same time, the influx of settlers from the Mosquito Shore rendered price control impossible. Although the Baymen retained their political dominance of the settlement, they were unable to control the market at large. The price of Honduras timber fell in direct proportion to the amount of timber imported. In 1784 Honduras mahogany was fetching 28 guineas per ton in London. In 1785 it fell to 20 guineas and in 1789 the price collapsed. London and Liverpool were

<sup>108</sup> Laws 1765-1810, 12th June 1784, in Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.145. See also CO 123/5&9.

<sup>109</sup> Jamaica currency was about 40 per cent below par with sterling, whereas Bay currency was much debased. Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.498.

**Figure 5.10:** Comparative values of importations from Honduras and West Indies 1781-1798, expressed as a percentage of the total.



Source: Customs 3, Customs 17.

glutted with Honduras mahogany, selling for as little as 3d per foot.<sup>110</sup> As with logwood twenty years previously, contraction inevitably followed. From L189,340 in 1788, the value of importations from Honduras fell to just under L79,000 in 1790 and L41,681 in 1791. The downward trend was to some extent hastened by the general slump in West Indian trade after the beginning of the Revolutionary War against France in 1793, but the decline in the Honduras trade was much greater than that of mahogany from other sources. In 1788 Honduras timber comprised nearly 80 per cent of the total of mahogany imported from the West Indies. In 1791 this fell to just under 50 per cent, and to 28 per cent in 1796. The average, between 1790 and 1798, was around 52 per cent (Figure 5.10). By this time Spain and Great Britain were again at war, and the Baymen's financial difficulties were overtaken by more pressing concerns.

<sup>110</sup> Lancaster was similarly full, causing Gillow to decline mahogany: 'Our Markets are very much glutted up therefore we don't think it will answer as a remittance for some while.' 344/172, Gillow to Messrs Worswick and Allman, 4 March 1789.

## Logging in Honduras

The best extant accounts of mahogany cutting in Belize date from the mid-19th century, and although some aspects of the business remained unchanged, much had also altered since the beginning of the trade in the previous century. The chief difference was one of scale; in the 1780s the minimum requirement for possession of a mahogany work was four negro slaves. This was essentially a property qualification, excluding the poorest settlers, but it also implies that it was feasible to cut and haul mahogany with one white man and four negroes.<sup>111</sup> The earliest works were as close as possible to rivers and creeks, so that the effort of haulage was reduced to a minimum. By the time of Chaloner and Fleming's report of 1851 the cutting gangs consisted of up to forty men, plus a team of oxen.<sup>112</sup> As the 19th century progressed, the mahogany works were increasingly dominated by the need for economies of scale, and became concentrated in the hands of a few very large concerns. Mahogany had to be sought further and further inland, away from the navigable rivers, this meant that an increasing proportion of costs were accounted for by the labour of cutting roads and hauling logs.<sup>113</sup>

Regulations governing the ownership and exploitation of a mahogany work grew out of customs established by the logwood cutters many decades before. Their rules were few, simple and extremely idiosyncratic. Each logwood work was based on a river, creek or lagoon frontage of two thousand yards. The depth of the work was unspecified, because it was not viable (or necessary) to cut wood more than a few miles from a river or creek. In the earliest days a formal claim to ownership was established by erecting a grindstone, felling a tree and boiling a pot.<sup>114</sup> In 1765 it was resolved that the erection of a hut henceforth constituted a title to the ground:

When a person finds a spot of Logwood unoccupied and builds his Hut, that spot shall be deemed his Property, and no person shall presume to cut or fall a Tree or grub a Stump within less than One Thousand paces or Yards of his hut...<sup>115</sup>

In theory, the claim had then to be registered at Belize within three months, but this requirement was rarely enforced. Even if the claim were registered, records were frequently mislaid, stolen or destroyed by 'repeated conflagrations'. Works

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<sup>111</sup> Meeting of the Committee, 25 July 1787. Laws 1765-1810, in Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.164.

<sup>112</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, p.42.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* In the 19th century the clearing of roads to the cutting site was said to account for two-thirds of the labour involved in mahogany extraction, and this naturally had implications for the cost of mahogany timber. In addition, the introduction of bow loading ports in the early 19th century permitted very large logs to be shipped, and these again required considerable team of labour.

<sup>114</sup> Burdon, *op.cit.*, III, p.216.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

often changed hands without re-registration. They were considered as 'personal chattels', and the entire, or a portion, often passed from hand to hand by sale, without, in many cases, even the precaution being taken of obtaining a written acknowledgement of transfer'.<sup>116</sup> The whole system relied on a general acceptance of customary practice, and on the fact that with a population of only a few hundred whites, every cutter's business was known to his colleagues and competitors.

Such usufructory arrangements were inadequate to cope with the rapid expansion of the settlement after 1786. In 1787 regulations were adopted prescribing the method of measuring mahogany works in the new territory between the Sheboon and Belize Rivers.<sup>117</sup> Each work had a front of three miles, the boundary between adjacent works being fixed by taking a perpendicular line inland from their river frontage. Alternatively, adjacent parties could fix boundaries by mutual consent.<sup>118</sup> The depth of each work was measured from the Belize riverbank 'as far as midway to the Sheboon'.<sup>119</sup> Presumably the works on the Sheboon were allocated in the same way, extending half way back to the Belize River. The distance between the two rivers varied between ten and twenty miles.<sup>120</sup> According to a map of 1787, the first twenty to thirty miles of the new territory had 'little or nothing to cut' and it was mostly swampy ground. Cutters therefore moved rapidly up the Sheboon; its source, discovered in August 1787, formed the western edge of the British limits.

The network of creeks and rivers, and the seasonal pattern of the rains, was vital to the cutters' work. Logwood cutting was generally done in the dry season, from September to May. Having found and cut a stand of trees, the cutters retired to their cabins to await the rains. The wood was left to lie where it was cut, the bark having been chipped away and gathered into a heap. The rains were followed by floods, swelling the rivers and creeks and inundating the low ground. The cutters then came forth, locating their wood by following the flow of bark chips upstream. The logs, too heavy to float, still lay where they were cut. Rafts were used to float the logs out and take them to the Barcadiers or

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, III, p.16; Superintendent to Governor of Jamaica, 22 June 1859. See also *ibid.*, p.226, stating that Burnaby's Laws in this respect had been ignored until the Laws in Force Act of 1855. *Report of the Attorney General on an Act for regulating the transfer of realty*, 1859. A document of July 1798 records the sale of a mahogany work for L11. *Ibid.*, I, p.246.

<sup>117</sup> Public Meeting, 24 July 1787, in Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.164.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p.151. Public Meeting 2 March 1812.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p.164; Meeting of the Committee, 25 July 1787.

<sup>120</sup> Another authority gives a depth of eight miles for a mahogany work, 'unless some other navigable water should be found within less than sixteen miles, in which event the two streams divided the interjacent lands between them'. Burdon, *op.cit.*, III, p.216.

loading points at the highest navigable point of the river.<sup>121</sup> In the case of the Belize river this was some 40 miles inland from the sea. Here the logs were loaded onto small craft and shipped to the river's mouth.

Much mahogany was probably cut in a similar way, but as stands of timber near the waterways became exhausted, the cutters had to change their methods. Once they had to move timber any distance overland the rains became a serious impediment to movement. Whereas the gathering of logwood did not commence until after the rains had set in, mahogany could only be moved in the dry season, when the ground was sufficiently firm for wheeled vehicles. A report of 1834 stated that the maximum distance which mahogany could feasibly be hauled overland was 15 miles, and that this distance from a creek or river effectively constituted the limit of cutting.<sup>122</sup>

Gangs of cutters were assembled at the beginning of August. The cutters were usually slaves, either negro or of mixed negro/indian blood. Their labour was free, except for the expense of food, clothing and shelter, and they were better able than Europeans to withstand the climate during the rainy season.<sup>123</sup> The gangs set up a base or 'Bank' on the river front of the works. Each Bank was overseen by a Captain or Conductor, and here stores were kept and mahogany logs deposited until they were sent downstream. The total number of cutters in Belize varied enormously; in the 1770s and 1780s around 750 to 1000 cutters were employed, together with 'a great number of Boats and Craft'.<sup>124</sup>

As the most accessible timber was cut out, so finding the mahogany became less easy as time went on. On the higher ground mahogany trees were usually mixed with other broadleaves and with pines. The more experienced cutters were appointed searchers or 'huntsmen', and were sent out to locate stands of mahogany. In this they were aided by the distinctive yellow hue of the leaves of the mahogany tree in autumn, which could be discerned at a distance against the green forest canopy. Once a good tree was found felling could begin.

This tree falling is the very hardest work I have seen performed in the West Indies. It would be difficult for a person who merely sees the mahogany log as exported to conceive the size and beauty of the tree. The 'spurs' or supporting buttresses spring from the trunk some fifteen to twenty feet from the ground it would be endless work cutting through

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<sup>121</sup> Adm 7/837 Captain Robert Hodgson, *Remarks on that part of the Bay of Honduras where the English cut Logwood*, 1765. 'Vessels [of about 6' draught]... go about 30 miles up [the River], where they come to the Runs [rapids]. About 12 miles higher the Flats (or large Bottomed boats) can take in their full Load in dry times. This place is called the Barcaderos.'

<sup>122</sup> *Notes added to the Memorandum on the Honduras Boundary Question*, 16 March 1855. Burdon, *op.cit.*, II, p.367.

<sup>123</sup> '...from the month of June until late in December the westerly winds set in accompany'd with heavy and almost incessant rains, the season then becomes sickly along the Shore and often fatal...' *Some observations on the probability of Success in case an Attack should be made on the Island of Trinidad, Sta Fe, Cumana, Carracas, Nicaragua, Honduras & Guatemala*. c.1783, Liston Papers, f.66.

<sup>124</sup> Liston Papers, *Remarks on certain Queries...* f.113.



these, so the woodsman commences operations above. A very light platform, called a 'barbecue' is formed of three long flexible sticks, lashed into a triangle enclosing the tree, and supported at the angles by posts of the requisite length driven into the ground. The man who chops to windward, from whom the tree will fall will have the hardest work. Standing in the centre of the base of the triangle, fifteen feet or more from the ground he swings his 'tuba axe' with the five feet handle, and the extreme elasticity of the barbecus which springs under him like a tight rope, seems to throw the whole weight of the man into the axe head as it enters the tree. I have never seen elsewhere such scientific and skilful tree falling. The largest tree is generally brought down before sunset. The next thing to be done is to saw off all above the lowest branch, then to square the log roughly; then a road must be made from the main trucking path to the spot in the forest where the log lies. When the trucks are brought the mass of wood which sometimes weighs as much as four tons is, with no machinery but tackles and levers - lifted up dextrously and placed on them. The 'trucking' is one of the sights which the inhabitants like to show a stranger. No cattle would perform it in the heat of the day so the work is carried on at night. A 'set' of oxen - six pairs, sometimes more - is attached to each truck. Men bearing pine torches, precede and accompany each log, and it forms rather a striking scene as the several noisy and brilliant processions converging from the denser parts of the forest, meet on the common high road to the Bank along which the teams then united sometime stretch for half a mile.<sup>125</sup>

Once they had been hauled to the creek, the mahogany logs were marked with the cutters' mark and rolled into the water to await the floods. The June floods were short lived, and the rivers quickly subsided, 'leaving a general freshness and fertility over the country'.<sup>126</sup> Winter floods were more severe, acquiring the descriptive appellation of 'top-gallant floods'.<sup>127</sup> As the logs were flushed downstream, the cutters followed in *pitpans* (flat bottomed canoes).<sup>128</sup> At the nearest navigable point the logs were halted by a boom, and either lashed into rafts or loaded onto small craft for shipment downstream to the Barcadier. From the Barcadier the logs were shipped downstream to the river's mouth and the

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<sup>125</sup> *Blue Book* 1858. Burdon, *op.cit.*, III, pp.222-3. The only differences between these accounts and modern day mahogany cutting in Brazil are that chainsaws have replaced the axe, and motor transport has succeeded river-borne. In all other respects, the seeking out of individual trees, the hacking a path through the jungle, the seasonal rhythm dictated by the rains, the Brazilian cutters are working exactly as their British and negro counterparts did in Honduras.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> A Pitpan 'is like a Wort Cooler: They are made long and narrow, will carry two Men, and draw not more than Four Inches Water, which they make use of to go over the Shoal Places in the Rivers', Nathaniel Uring, *op.cit.*, p.157.

port of Belize.

Before sale and loading at Belize the mahogany was inspected and measured by Measurers of Wood appointed by the Magistrates. Their job was to ensure that the timber was sound, 'properly manufactured and the bad ends cut off'.<sup>129</sup> The timber was measured in an approved manner, having first been minutely inspected:

... no Measurer shall under any pretence whatever lay his Rule or marking Iron on any Mahogany or other Woods until its is first turned so that such Measurer shall see the four sides, and the ends clearly and distinctly.

The measurer was required to take an oath by which he promised to measure fairly, to 'do justice between Buyer, Seller or Proprietor', and not to take bribes. Failure to observe the regulations resulted in a heavy fine which, in 1793, was one hundred pounds Jamaica currency.<sup>130</sup>

### **Honduras mahogany: quality and utilisation**

Honduras mahogany is usually viewed as an inferior alternative to West Indian varieties. It is widely believed that it was introduced to supplement failing stocks of commercially viable Spanish or Jamaica wood, and hence was contributory factor in a supposed qualitative decline of English mahogany furniture after c.1760. This is a hypothesis first promoted, perhaps unwittingly, by Percy Macquoid, when he relegated mahogany to the second rank of furniture woods by introducing the Age of Satinwood. The apparent supercession of mahogany by so-called exotics - satinwood, rosewood, kingwood etc. - is a feature of most books on English furniture history. The notion of qualitative decline was further promoted by Cescinsky, for whom mahogany furniture of the 'Chippendale' period was the acme of English furniture making.

There is no contemporary evidence for the idea that the introduction of Honduras mahogany is indicative either of a shortage of better varieties or of qualitative decline in mahogany furniture. The circumstances which brought about the trade in Honduras mahogany had little connection with the West Indian mahogany trade and everything to do with the parlous state of the Central American logwood trade. At the time that Honduras mahogany was introduced into the British market, quantities of Cuban and St Domingan timber were also beginning to be imported, and we have seen how the Honduras merchants viewed these high quality imports as a serious threat to their own business. Despite a constantly increasing volume of Honduran imports, the trade statistics confirm that high quality West Indian timber was more widely available after the Seven Years War than before. The thirty years after the Peace of Paris

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<sup>129</sup> 5 December 1793. Burdon, *op.cit.*, I, p.206.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

were (with the exception of the American War) boom years for all the mahogany trades.

With regard to quality, there was a universally recognised distinction between Honduras and West Indian mahogany. 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.<sup>131</sup>

Quality was judged both by aesthetic appearance - colour, lustre and figure; and working properties - hardness, strength, and accuracy of working. Honduras timber was regarded as being 'of a middle quality between both', superior to Rattan but generally inferior to Jamaica or Spanish wood. The Honduras merchants themselves acknowledged this; 'the Honduras Mahogany is 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'.<sup>132</sup> The best Honduras timber tended to be that grown on high ground - 'the timber produced on low moist grounds is generally soft, spongy and inferior'.<sup>133</sup> In buying baywood Gillow had the following advice for his agent: 'The heavier this Wood is in General & the better; also for being Close and not soft and furzey at the Ends of each; Shakes, in all wood, running Oblique in the Ends, in genery much worse than when they Run Parralel to the sides, that is,

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<sup>131</sup> Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, II, p.254. Sheraton's remarks are endorsed by other 19th-century authorities. Thomas Tredgold describes the pores of Jamaica wood as often 'filled with a white substance, as if chalk had been rubbed into them,... but generally empty in the Honduras kind'. Tredgold, *Elementary Principles of Carpentry*, London 1840, p.241.

<sup>132</sup> BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*

<sup>133</sup> Laslett, *op.cit.*, p.263.

there is more waste...'<sup>134</sup>

The mediocre quality of Honduras wood accounted for its generally lower price. Apart from the exceptional circumstances of 1779-83, Honduras timber sold for about half the price of Jamaican or Spanish wood. This relative cheapness was of enormous benefit to the furniture trade, since it permitted mahogany once more to be used as a carcass wood. The character of much mahogany furniture made in the last quarter of the 18th century bears out George Dyer's remark that 5/6ths of Honduras timber was applied to 'common purposes'. Case furniture of this period frequently features solid mahogany carcasses much in the manner of mahogany furniture of the 1720s. There is often a marked difference in quality between, for instance, the solid mahogany sides of chest of drawers and the veneered top and drawer fronts, which suggests that a clear choice was made between high quality show-wood and cheaper carcass timber. Veneers of mahogany or satinwood are often glued on a bed of mahogany rather than oak or deal. Drawer linings were also made of mahogany, and not only on the best quality pieces.

The evidence of the Gillow Letter Books is testimony to the indispensable virtues of Honduras timber. As well as best quality Jamaica or Spanish wood, Robert Gillow demanded a fairly constant supply of good 'soft Mahogany'. 'Softness' was a synonym for ease of working and suitability for secondary purposes.<sup>135</sup> In structural terms, furniture can only have improved in quality with the introduction of Honduras mahogany as a carcass wood and a ground for veneering. This was still the case in the 19th century, when the best Honduras timber had been cut out, and Honduras mahogany was competing with increasingly cheap Spanish varieties. Blackie's *Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* stated that 'for panels, door-framing, and table-tops, which are to be veneered upon; and also for all pieces of work that are required to be specially free from warping or change, we have no material equal to bay mahogany'.<sup>136</sup>

Lower quality cabinet work and joinery also benefitted. The widespread availability of Honduras mahogany at half the price of Jamaica or Spanish wood resulted in a much more widespread use of the timber. Items previously made in deal or oak could now be made in Honduras mahogany, and customers were given a choice which they had not had before. In a letter of 1771 Robert Gillow 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<sup>s</sup> or 45s'.<sup>137</sup> As a result of the extraordinary rise in importations from Honduras up to the peak year of 1788, the production of mahogany furniture must have increased

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<sup>134</sup> 344/162, Gillow to Swarbreck, Jamaica, 19 December 1775.

<sup>135</sup> . It is not possible to confirm this hypothesis in any particular instance, since even by microscopic examination it is impossible to distinguish between Jamaica or Spanish mahogany (*Swietenia mahogani* Jacq.) and Honduras (*Swietenia macrophylla* King).

<sup>136</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.29.

<sup>137</sup> . Letter Book 344/166. Gillow to William Law, Swinithwaite, N. Yorks, 11 October 1771.

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.

A small proportion of Honduras mahogany was 'very fine wood'<sup>138</sup>. George Dyer wrote of a single tree increasing the value of a whole cargo by L500, and suggested a range of prices from L6 to L180 per ton.<sup>139</sup> An early 19th-century authority mentions the piano maker Broadwood paying three thousand pounds for three logs of Honduras mahogany, 'each about fifteen feet long and thirty eight inches wide'<sup>140</sup>. 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'.<sup>141</sup> 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 19th century.<sup>142</sup> In this respect the quality of early Honduras importations 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.'<sup>143</sup> Remarks like these illustrate the danger of forming dogmatic preconceptions about Honduras and other varieties based on subjective aesthetic assessments of figure, colour or quality.

In terms of size, Honduras mahogany had the advantage of every other variety; as Sheraton remarked, very little Spanish or Jamaica wood was obtainable over two feet in width. When such timber was available, it sold at a premium: 'a manufacturer would rather give 2/- p Foot for that [Cuban] wood of large dimensions than purchase Common Bay Wood at 6d'.<sup>144</sup> 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. Hooker records two massive Honduras logs in his *Botanical Miscellany*. The first was imported into Glasgow in November 1827:

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<sup>138</sup> BT6/50 Robert Milligan, *ref.cit.*

<sup>139</sup> BT6/50 George Dyer to Lord Hawkesbury, *ref.cit.*. This statement was marked and annotated, presumably by Hawkesbury himself, with a resounding NO in the margin.

<sup>140</sup> *The Library of Entertaining Knowledge*, London, 1829, 2nd Ed. 1830, p175.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Blackie, *op.cit.*, p.29.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> BT6/50 Robert Milligan, *ref.cit.*

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 62L.14s. The value of the whole, estimated at 1s.2d. per foot, was 292L.12s., and its weight was 7 3/4 tons, or at the rate of a cubic foot of 41 1/2 lbs.<sup>145</sup>

The second of Hooker's prodigies was a log measuring 17 feet by 57 inches by 64 inches, containing 5168 feet, and weighing 15 tons.<sup>146</sup> A famous illustration from the *Illustrated London News* of 1850 shows a squared Honduras mahogany log over six feet in diameter being sold on the quay at Birkenhead.<sup>147</sup> The size advantage of Honduras timber was maintained even to the end of the 19th century. Despite supplies being then described as 'gradually failing', Honduras timber was still regularly imported in logs of 25 to 40 feet in length and 12 to 24 inches in breadth.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Hooker, *op.cit.*, p.28, footnote. The description was culled by Hooker from the *Glasgow Chronicle*.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>147</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 6 April 1850.

<sup>148</sup> Laslett, *op.cit.*, pp.262-3.

## CHAPTER SIX - THE ORGANISATION OF THE TRADE

Published studies of West Indian trade have been primarily concerned with either sugar, or slaves, or both. The economic, social and political histories of these commodities have been exhaustively explored, and readers wishing to know more of the background to West Indian trade are referred to these studies.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will seek to identify the main structural components of the mahogany trade, and to follow the different steps by which mahogany travelled from its source in the West Indies to the timber brokers and furniture makers of England.

### Factors and merchants

Evidence for the nature and structure of the mahogany trade on Jamaica itself is not plentiful, particularly for the period prior to 1763.<sup>2</sup> Compared with the economic importance of sugar, mahogany was very small beer, and in the voluminous Colonial Office files concerning the commercial affairs of Jamaica there is scant reference to mahogany or the mahogany trade. There is no reason to believe, however, that the trade in mahogany was substantially different from that in any other Jamaican commodity, and the evidence so far uncovered tends to confirm this view.

It is clear that Kingston was the hub of Jamaica mahogany trade, and it is also clear that the conduct of the trade was largely in the hands of the Kingston merchant/factors.<sup>3</sup> Unlike most other West Indian islands, where planters usually sent home their produce on their own accounts, Jamaica had a large community of resident merchants.<sup>4</sup> These mainly resided in Kingston, trading both on their own accounts and as agents or factors for others. The

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most useful are; Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*; Pares, *War and Trade and A West India Fortune*; Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies*; Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class*; Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery*.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible, and indeed probable, that surviving plantation and other commercial records in Jamaican record offices could throw more light on this subject, but these have yet to be researched.

<sup>3</sup> In the entire Gillows correspondence I have found only one recorded occasion when the firm attempted to buy mahogany direct from a planter. This was during the American war in 1782, when mahogany was almost impossible to obtain through the usual channels. 344/179. Gillows to Matthew Smith, Mount Lebanon, St Elizabeth, 21 May 1782. The first recorded instance of a factor being employed to buy mahogany can be found in the Navy Board correspondence for 1725, when a Mr Aleyn of Jamaica supplied the mahogany ordered by Captain Harris for Ripley's new Admiralty Office.

<sup>4</sup> The prominence of resident merchants in Jamaica is explained by two things. Firstly, the population and produce of Jamaica was a great deal larger than any other British islands, and hence the scope for merchants was greater. Secondly, Jamaica was the commercial centre of the Caribbean, and a great deal of its trade was with other British and foreign islands, and with the Spanish Main, in which the merchants had a key role. For detailed accounts of the activities of the resident merchants see Pares, 'Merchants and Planters'; *A West India Fortune*, pp.207-238; Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.267-299.

merchant/factor therefore had a dual character, sometimes acting as a factor or commission agent for the planters, finding shipping and sales for their sugar, and at other times buying sugar and other commodities outright, to sell on at a profit. At the same time the planters often depended on the merchant/factor to supply them with plantation stores and other commodities from England and North America. The factors were equally necessary to English merchants and manufacturers exporting to Jamaica, and it was usual for goods to be consigned to a reliable factor for sale on a commission basis.

One of these merchant/factors was Benjamin Satterthwaite, the Kingston agent for the Lancaster trading firm of Satterthwaite & Co. Some of his mid-18th century letter books survive, providing some detailed insights into Satterthwaite's manifold activities.<sup>5</sup> Satterthwaite acted as agent for a number of different planters, mostly situated in the Black River area of western Jamaica. They consigned their sugar and other produce, including mahogany, to him at Kingston. There he was responsible for the storage, sale, and shipping home of the produce, for which service he charged a commission of five per cent, in addition to costs. The proceeds of sales were either remitted to the planter or held on account against goods imported on the planter's behalf. In addition to his commission services Satterthwaite acted as a trader on his own account, buying sugar, logwood, cotton or mahogany when the opportunity arose, and shipping them back to England for sale. His correspondence is full of commercial information - current prices of produce, the condition of the sugar crop, the movement of shipping, the activities of other traders, and probable future developments in the market.<sup>6</sup>

In order to work successfully, the factor system depended on mutual confidence between all parties. The planter relied on the factor to get him fair prices for his timber. The importer or buyer expected the factor to get him fair timber for his money. It was often the case that buyer and factor had more than business in common. Melinda Elder has shown how, in almost every case, ties of religion, kinship and locality bound West Indian factors to their Lancaster clients.<sup>7</sup> The Lancaster furniture firm of Gillows had factors in Jamaica, Barbados and St Kitts, and these were all Lancaster men. Between c.1775 and c.1786 their principal agents in Kingston were Messrs Swarbreck and Daltary. John Swarbreck was a member of a prominent Lancaster trading family and a personal friend of the Gillows.<sup>8</sup> When in the 1780s Gillows began to buy

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<sup>5</sup> Satterthwaite was initially based in Barbados in the 1740s. By 1764 he had moved to Jamaica, and he left for England in 1765. These letter books are now housed in Lancaster University Library.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite, Letter Books, various dates. See also the Letter Books of James Moore & Co, of Liverpool. Lancashire Record Office, DP 409/1. These give a very full picture of the manifold activities of a factor/merchant in the early 18th century.

<sup>7</sup> Melinda Elder, *The Slave Trade*, pp.64-84.

<sup>8</sup> The Gillows Letter Books contain much evidence for the relationship between the firm and its West Indian agents. Some of this has been published by K.E. Ingram in 'Furniture and the Plantation: Further Light on the West Indian Trade of an English Furniture Firm in the Eighteenth Century,' *Furniture History*, 1992, XXVII, pp.52-54. I am grateful to Susan Stuart for further background information on John Swarbreck.



mahogany and satinwood at St Kitts, their business was handled by Robert Gillow's nephew, Thomas Worswick.<sup>9</sup> The firm did not buy a great of timber from Barbados, but had other commercial interests on the island. When the need arose, Gillows usually called on the services either of the Satterthwaites, who had longstanding interests in Barbados, or of Charles Inman, a Lancaster man who died on the island in 1767.

Factor and buyer kept in touch by a continual correspondence, the buyer on the one hand soliciting information and sending instructions, the factor responding as required. Sadly, Gillows' incoming correspondence from their factors does not survive, but the detail of their outgoing instructions allows a great deal to be inferred. In the early days of the trade Robert Gillow's instructions to his factor were very straightforward. He concluded a letter written in December 1747: 'with respect to remittance in the Hannah nothing better than mahogany.'<sup>10</sup> Often a price was specified - 'Mohog: from 6<sup>d</sup> to 7 1/2 if good, but you must send 20 or 30 pounds worth but it be good if possible.'<sup>11</sup> From the 1760s onwards Gillows' requests 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.<sup>12</sup>

On the whole, the factor system worked well enough, but it was not without drawbacks. Since factors were general merchants and not specialists in timber, mistakes were bound to happen. There were several occasions when Gillow remonstrated with John Swarbrick 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, and perhaps endured more than his fair share of criticism. On at least one occasion he bought manchineel mixed with mahogany. Although itself a handsome timber, manchineel was worth less than mahogany by half its value. In order to prevent a repeat of this and other unfortunate episodes, Gillow recommended Swarbrick to obtain expert advice before buying. Gillow 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. Similar difficulties arose through the inexperience of Thomas Worswick at St Kitts, and there is clear evidence that on at least one occasion Worswick's mistakes cost Gillows a considerable sum of money.<sup>13</sup>

According to Edward Long, there were professional mahogany cutters working

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Thomas was the son of the Lancaster merchant, banker and clockmaker Thomas Worswick. Worswick senior was married to Robert Gillow's sister, Alice.

<sup>10</sup> 344/166. Gillows to an unknown correspondent, December 1747.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 January 1748.

<sup>12</sup> Gillow Letter Books, various dates.

<sup>13</sup> Letter Book 344/170. Gillow to Swarbrick 23 September, 10 November, 27 December 1782, 8 January, 26 February 1784; Gillow to John Burrow, 3 May 1784. Gillow to William Yate, 19 January, 14 March 1784; 344/171. Gillow to Thomas Worswick 22 April 1787.

in Jamaica in the 1760s, and the wording of the Jamaica Mahogany Act tends to support this claim.<sup>14</sup> No details have so far come to light on their activities, but it is probable that as the trade in mahogany grew, so planters began to call on the services of professional cutters rather than employ their own slaves in cutting. After all, any diversion from the profitable business of growing sugar would lose the planter time and money.<sup>15</sup> It is probable too, that where a professional cutter was employed, he was also a timber merchant, and acted in exactly the same way as his counterparts in England. The mahogany trees would be sold standing, at a price agreed between the planter and the cutter, and at that point the timber became the property and the responsibility of the cutter. The life of a mahogany cutter must have been an uncertain one, since the fluctuations in price on the English market impinged directly on the viability of his trade. Edward Long described how the availability of cheaper mahogany from foreign possessions in 1760s drove the smaller Jamaican cutters out of business, so that the trade was engrossed by a few of the bigger operators, 'and they are persons who have large capitals, and make a saving gain by the greatness of their exports'.<sup>16</sup>

## Shipping

In chapter one it was shown that one of the aims of the 1721 Naval Stores Act was to promote West India shipping, by allowing shippers to complete their return loadings with mahogany and other woods. It was therefore the shippers, and not furniture makers, who inaugurated the mahogany trade. Shipping, more than any other single element, determined the introduction of mahogany, its distribution, and its rate of growth as a traded commodity. In the Honduras trade mahogany was virtually the sole bulk employer of shipping, and this goes far to explain the importance attached to this trade by the home government.

It is often assumed that mahogany was an integral part of the 'triangular trade'. The notion that mahogany was carried as ballast by returning slavers is an idea so generally held as to elude any attempt to establish its original source. In reality, the slave trade was important but not essential to the trade in mahogany. Alexander Houston, one of Glasgow's biggest West India merchants in the second half of the 18th century, was a considerable mahogany importer, and also a prominent slaver.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, William Rathbone, one of Liverpool's

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<sup>14</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica*, I, p.497. The Mahogany Act was entitled, 'An Act to encourage the cutters of and Dealers in Mahogany...'

<sup>15</sup> 'At Worthy Park, as on most Jamaican plantations, the time of the slaves was almost as valuable as the land of the estate.' Craton and Walvin, *op.cit.*, p.105.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> R.B. Sheridan, 'The Commercial and Financial Organisation of the British Slave Trade, 1750-1807, *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, 1958-9, pp.249-263. Houston & Co.'s papers are housed in the National Library of Scotland.

largest mahogany importers, was a prominent abolitionist. Melinda Elder's work on the slave trade of 18th century Lancaster has shown how a number of Lancaster vessels took part in the triangular trade, carrying West Indian produce, including mahogany, for their return loadings.<sup>18</sup> But she has also shown that the majority of Lancaster's West Indian merchants were not slave traders, and that the number of slavers declined both relatively and absolutely in the second half of the 18th century. The same holds true for all other West India ports except Liverpool. Only here did the tonnage of vessels engaged in the slave trade exceed 50 per cent of the total involved in West Indian trade.<sup>19</sup> The inference must be, therefore, that the bulk of mahogany reaching these shores did so on vessels concerned only in the two-way trade between Great Britain and the West Indies, or between Great Britain and North America.

West Indian shipping divided broadly into two types. There was a large number of vessels which operated only within the Caribbean. Most of these were small sloops and schooners of between 15 and 100 tons burden, either half- or open-decked.<sup>20</sup> These were ideally suited to their work, able to trade into the coves and creeks of the Caribbean shores and to negotiate their many hazards. Many were armed, but their best defence was manoeuvrability and a shallow draught, which allowed them to go where the *Garda Costas* could not follow. Their running costs were relatively low, and since they were small it took very little time to fill them with cargo. Flexibility was often the key to making a living in the islands.

Trade between the West Indies and Europe required bigger and sturdier vessels.<sup>21</sup> In the seventeenth century the two masted brigantine of between 80 and 180 tons was commonly employed in the Atlantic. These were dangerous times, with shipping under constant threat from privateers and pirates, so brigs were usually built for speed rather than burden. From c.1720 the 'snow' began to take over from the brig. This was a broad beamed two-master, made on the lines of a Whitby collier.<sup>22</sup> It was built for burthen rather than speed and became the workhorse of the West India trade. In the early 18th century, snows averaged 100-180 tons, but toward the middle of the century their burden began to increase, and with it the number of masts. Most ships over 200 tons had three masts, and in the second half of the century three masters of between 200 and

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<sup>18</sup> Elder, *op.cit.*, p.96.

<sup>19</sup> Elder, *op.cit.*, pp.170-182. Many of these ships were not necessarily slavers, but traded routinely between England and the West African coast.

<sup>20</sup> C0 142/14-18.

<sup>21</sup> I have drawn extensively on Ralph Davis, *op.cit.*, chapter four, for information on ship design and development. Useful information can also be found in general histories of West Indian trade.

<sup>22</sup> The Whitby collier was itself derived from the 17th century Dutch *fluitschip*, or fly-boat, the most successful cargo carrier of its day. Finch, *Coals to Newcastle*, Lavenham, 1973, p.44. Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.77-79.

350 tons were the mainstay of the trade.<sup>23</sup> The biggest vessels were almost invariably London-bound.

The increase in the size of vessels resulted from a number of simultaneous developments. Advances in hull and rigging design meant that ships could be sailed by fewer crew, and this in turn meant that larger ships could be built with lower manning costs per ton of burden. Larger ships also stowed more cargo per nominal ton burden. These factors increased operational efficiency and contributed to the decline in relative freight costs over the course of the century. On the other hand, larger ships took longer to load and needed more freight to make them pay. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries this had been an inhibiting factor, since shippers preferred a quick turnaround and a full freight to a long wait and half-freighted voyage home. By enabling West India shippers to complete their freights with mahogany, the Naval Stores Act went a long way towards removing this inhibition.

West India shippers generally employed one of three operational strategies. 'Regular' ships sailed habitually from a particular British port, usually its home port, and made a yearly voyage to a particular island. These ships were often the means of establishing good and longstanding commercial relationships between their owners and the factors. Such relationships benefitted both parties, since the shipowners could be sure of a freight, and the factors of getting their produce to market. However, because of the vagaries of the sugar crop and the West Indian weather, no regular ship was so fixed that it could not trade speculatively when the need arose.<sup>24</sup>

A second type of voyage was made by charter ships, hired and often, indeed, built for a specific venture. At the end of the venture the cargo and even the ship itself was sold off and the proceeds realised.<sup>25</sup> Finally there were the 'seekers', typified before 1775 by the North American traders, and thereafter by an increasing number of British owned vessels. These ships traded speculatively and opportunistically, selling their outward freight of manufactures and plantation stores from island to island and seeking a return cargo wherever it was to be had.

The annual rhythm of the Jamaica trade was dictated by two factors - the weather and the sugar crop. Sugar cane thrived all year round in the West Indies, but the favoured time for planting was between August and October. The plants took about sixteen months to reach maturity, so that the cane harvest began in January and continued until May or early June.<sup>26</sup> It was important to get the cane in and the sugar processed quickly because late spring and early summer was the driest time of the year. Harvesting was less liable to

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<sup>23</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.77-79. The Jamaica shipping returns (CO 142) give the tonnages of all vessels entering and clearing Kingston, and these confirm the general rise in ships' burdens over the century.

<sup>24</sup> Pares, *A West India Fortune*, p.207.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> An extensive account of sugar cultivation in Jamaica can be found in Bryan Edwards' *History*, Book V.

interruption, and the roads, such as they were, were passable for the sugar wagons.<sup>27</sup> Although precise details are hard to come by, it seems probable that mahogany cutting was done at slack times of the year, when slave labour could be diverted from main business of producing sugar. If so, the months of November to January would seem best suited to cutting, when the weather was dry and the cane harvest had yet to begin. Because there was only one navigable river in Jamaica (Black River), most mahogany was hauled overland to the coast by ox and cart, and thence taken coastwise by ship to Kingston.<sup>28</sup> Many planters made arrangements with shippers through Kingston or direct with England; others depended on the many small vessels that cruised the Jamaican coast in search of freight. The better established loading points such as Black River mouth boasted a quay and rudimentary harbour facilities. Others were no more than a sandy cove, from which hogsheads of sugar and planks or logs of mahogany were loaded in the surf one at a time into rowing boats or 'sugar-droghers' and ferried to the ship anchored offshore.<sup>29</sup>

In cases where the planter sold his mahogany through an agent, the costs of haulage and coastwise shipping were borne by the planter, for reasons which are given in the following blunt letter from Benjamin Satterthwaite to Henry Cross, a planter in St Elizabeth parish:

...it would not by any means suit me to receive your Mahogany at Black River for was I to do so, I should in the first place have my friends commission to pay there, and after that the money it produces is no higher to me than Black River.... you'll therefore be so kind as to order the mahogany up here by the first Vessel, & I shall sell it here for your Account free of Commission for the most I can get.<sup>30</sup>

Most regular West India ships timed their departures from England between December and March so as to arrive in the West Indies in the spring. The first sugar was usually ready for shipping by the end of April, and the peak time for loading was between May and the end of July. The outward cargo was quickly discharged into the hands of waiting factors, but the return lading usually took many weeks to assemble. According to Ralph Davis, the average time spent in port in the West Indies was 70-100 working days.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Good accounts of the cycle of the sugar crop can be found in Craton and Walvin, *op.cit.*, pp.95-124; Pares, *A West-India Fortune*, pp.103-140.

<sup>28</sup> *The Importance of Jamaica to Great Britain Consider'd*, p.49; Long, *op.cit.*, III, p.843. According to Edwards, the Black River 'admits flat-bottomed boats and canoes for about thirty miles'. Edwards, *op.cit.*, Book II, 187-8.

<sup>29</sup> Craton and Walvin, *op.cit.*; Pares, *A West-India Fortune*, pp.224-5.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Satterthwaite to Henry Cross, 8 December 1764. The easy terms, 'free of Commission', mentioned by Satterthwaite were due to the fact that Henry Cross owed him money, and it was therefore in the latter's long-term interest to help him towards solvency.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, p.280.

The bills of lading of vessels clearing Jamaica show that as a rule mahogany was not carried as a primary cargo. Some of these bills, taken at random from the Jamaica shipping returns for 1754, are reproduced in figure 6.1 below. Sugar, rum, molasses and cotton constituted the bulk of the lading, and very few vessels indeed carried only mahogany.<sup>32</sup> Even a firm like Gillows, which had a primary interest in mahogany, rarely brought home mahogany exclusively. Indeed, much of their West Indian trade concerned other commodities, because these were generally more profitable. In February 1775, for instance, Gillows instructed their Kingston agents to buy specified West Indian products, such as rum, sugar or cotton, and if this did not fill his share of the vessel, 'the remainder of our Shares to be filled up w<sup>th</sup> Mahog, as aforesaid: & Some Dying Wood, if you find it will pay a Freit'.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 6.1:** Sample cargoes of vessels clearing Kingston for England, 1754.

Ship	Burthen	Destination	Cargo
Sally	150 tons	Bristol	150 hogsheads sugar, 40 puncheons rum, 20 bags cotton, 10 tons fustic, 3,000 feet mahogany.
Swinton	190 tons	Hull	250 hogsheads sugar, 50 puncheons rum, 40 tons logwood and fustic, 200 pieces mahogany.
Argo	100 tons	London	150 hogsheads sugar, 50 puncheons rum, 6 tons logwood, 10,000 feet mahogany.
Boyne	180 tons	Liverpool	94 hogsheads sugar, 30 bags cotton, 3 tons fustic, 18 tons <i>lignum vitae</i> , 132 pieces mahogany
Ruby	60 tons	Lancaster	68 hogsheads sugar, 3 tons nicaragua wood, 3 tons fustic, 7 puncheons rum, 25 bags cotton, 52 mahogany plank.

Source: CO 142/16

<sup>32</sup> CO 142/15-20. This statement holds good only for the Jamaica trade. Where the Honduras trade was concerned, mahogany became the primary, and often the only traded commodity.

<sup>33</sup> 344/168, Gillow to Messrs Swarbreck and Daltary, 24 February 1775. Mahogany aside, the composition of Gillow's return cargoes changed over the years. In the 1740s, 50s and 60s it was sugar, rum and molasses. From the 1770s cotton became increasingly important, to feed the Lancashire mills.

Mahogany was usually among the first cargo to be stowed. It was often used 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.<sup>34</sup> 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. Planks were generally three inches and upwards in thickness. These were easier to handle than logs and economical of stowage. Boards (i.e. sawn timber under 2" 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.<sup>35</sup> Planks were also more versatile, giving the furniture maker more discretion in using the timber. Slabs were irregularly shaped cuts of figured wood usually destined for veneers.

**Figure 6.2:** Contract of shipping for logs of mahogany and satinwood, per the *Rawlins*, August 1784.<sup>36</sup>

*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<sup>d</sup> & Rob<sup>t</sup> Gillow or to their assigns, they paying freight for the said Goods as Customary from the Leeward Islands -*

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<sup>34</sup> This is consistent with the evidence of Benjamin Satterthwaite given in chapter four, where each of the cargos he assembled between May and July in 1764 began with a loading of mahogany. 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. Pares, *A West India Fortune*, p.233. Loading mahogany first was a cost-effective way of overcoming this difficulty. A letter of 1773, from Samuel Foster to the Duke of Portland, provides further confirmation of the use of mahogany to line the hold. Discussing the purchase of mahogany at Hull for use at Welbeck, Foster writes: '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 liquers upon.' DWF 3.956, Portland Papers, Nottingham University. I am grateful to Dr Ivan Hall for drawing this reference to my attention.

<sup>35</sup> There are several contemporary refernces to this problem, including Adm 2/1880, Captain Harris to the Navy Board, 30 December 1723; 344/170 Gillow to Worswick & Allman, St Kitts, 25 January 1785.

<sup>36</sup> 344/181, f.22. The *Rawlins* was a Lancaster vessel, owned by the Lancaster merchants of the same name. The head of the firm, Steadman 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.

*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 30<sup>th</sup> 1784.

*Tho<sup>s</sup> Tryer*

Once the mahogany was loaded, a contract was drawn up between the master of the vessel and the factor. This followed a standard form of words. Above is a typical example (figure 6.2), concerning the shipment of mahogany and satinwood from St Kitts in 1784.

Three copies of the contract were made to insure against loss or forgery. Three invoices were also made out, specifying the number of logs, the quantity of feet contained, the cost per foot, charges and factor's commission. Each log in this shipment 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.<sup>37</sup> 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<sup>n</sup> and Capt<sup>n</sup> Tower who Brot 'em declares there weare only 5 shipp'd the one that is wanting is No 264...'<sup>38</sup>

It was desirable to complete loading and be away from the island before the end of the July, since the beginning of August marked the onset of hurricanes, and on 1 August insurance rates rose accordingly.<sup>39</sup> For the cost conscious importer this was a significant consideration. 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

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<sup>37</sup> Many 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. Henry Baines to William Rathbone, 28 July 1762.

<sup>38</sup> 344/166 Gillow to Messrs Gillow in London, October 1770.

<sup>39</sup> 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 2 1/2 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. 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. Pares, *A West-India Fortune*, pp.228-9.



Produce Shipp'd during the Winter Prem<sup>m</sup> of Insurance.<sup>40</sup>

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 could, & ought to wish produce to arrive early in England; in the first place it Generally 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.<sup>41</sup>

There were two regular routes used by homeward-bound ships. The first was the most direct, by the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola. However, this passed perilously close to the Garda Costa base at Santiago de Cuba, and was moreover impossible if the winds were adverse. The alternative was to head west around the extreme 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 Indiamen arrived home in greatest numbers, and this was the time when the mahogany market was at its fullest.<sup>42</sup>

### **The voyage of the *Dolphin*, January - September 1775**

The surviving log of one of Lancaster's regular ships, the brig *Dolphin*, provides a marvellously detailed account of four voyages from Lancaster to Jamaica and back between 1774 and 1778.<sup>43</sup> A typical voyage was that which began at Lancaster on 20 January 1775. The *Dolphin* carried a mixed outward cargo of Lancashire manufactures, chiefly cloth, together with butter, beef, candles, plantation stores and ballast. She sailed first for Cork in south-west Ireland, to pick up provisions for the voyage. Running into adverse weather in the Irish Sea, the *Dolphin* was forced to put in for shelter at Waterford, and consequently did not reach Cork until the 6th of March. A week was spent provisioning and preparing the ship for the Atlantic, and on the 13th the *Dolphin* set sail for the West Indies. Just over a month later the *Dolphin* arrived at Roseau in Dominica,

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<sup>40</sup> 344/171 Gillow to Yate and Hinde, Kingston, 5 May 1787.

<sup>41</sup> 344/168 Gillow to Swarbreck, 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.

<sup>42</sup> The Gillows letters books are full of autumn and winter references to buying timber. Letters to debtors often contained the explanation 'as this is the time of year when we buy our timber...', followed by a demand for payment. Cash flow was a probably a difficulty at this time of year.

<sup>43</sup> Lancashire Record Office, DDX/22/68. A lively account of West India shipping at the end of the 18th century can be found in J.F. Gibson, *Brocklebanks 1770-1950*, Liverpool 1953. This is based on the business records of the shipping firm of Brocklebanks of Whitehaven and Liverpool. It contains particularly good detail on the vicissitudes of shipping during the American and Napoleonic Wars.

after a fair crossing. There she discharged a portion of her cargo before sailing on to Jamaica, where she dropped anchor in Kingston harbour on the 5th of May.

On arrival at Kingston the ship's master, Anthony Baldwin, reported to the Customs House to clear his outward cargo. Discharging the cargo took only a few days, but the business of assembling a return freight was much more protracted. To begin with there was a great deal of work needed to make the ship fit for the return voyage. New yards, ropes, and sails were prepared; decayed or shattered timbers were replaced by the ship's carpenter; decks and masts were treated with turpentine, the planking caulked with oakum. 18th-century sailing ships required continuous maintenance, so that within two or three decades of their launch scarcely a mast, yard, plank or timber remained of the original vessel.

After three weeks of constant work, the *Dolphin* was ready to load. Mahogany was the first freight to be stowed. Baldwin describes in his log how he 'Denige'd the Hold with Mah<sup>y</sup>'; that is, he used the first 25 planks as dunnage to fill the dead space in the bottom of the hold and provide a sound foundation for the rest of the cargo.<sup>44</sup> In the ensuing weeks sugar, rum, cotton, coffee, ginger and logwood were loaded. The logwood was split by hand into small billets so that it could be stowed amongst other goods. This not only saved space but also helped to wedge and stabilize the various casks, bales and packets which comprised the main cargo. More mahogany was also taken on, amounting to 96 planks and four logs in all. Altogether there were sixteen different consignees for the cargo at Lancaster. The bulk of the mahogany was destined for two of these, but some was taken on by Baldwin himself for speculative sale.

On 25 July, seven weeks after arriving at Kingston, the *Dolphin* was ready to depart. She went out by the Windward Passage, keeping Santiago de Cuba away on her port beam. (The following year the wartime convoy system was in force, and the *Dolphin* wasted several weeks hovering along the north coast of Jamaica waiting for the convoy to be assembled, and finally going home via the Florida Strait on 10 August.) After an uneventful voyage of eight weeks and two days she dropped anchor at the mouth of the Lune on 22 September. She had been away almost exactly eight months.

The *Dolphin* now came within the jurisdiction of the Lancaster port authorities. From the moment she dropped anchor at the Buoy of Lune she was placed under the strict supervision of H.M. Customs. As she waited for the tide to carry her up to Lancaster she was searched and her cargo checked against the captain's manifest. In order to prevent clandestine landing of goods, a searcher or 'tide-waiter' remained on board as the ship made its way up the Lune to its berth by the Customs House. Although there was little danger of mahogany being smuggled ashore, it was a real possibility where sugar or tobacco was concerned. Once the vessel was safely tied up at St George's Quay, Baldwin entered the Customs House to report the arrival of his vessel. There he swore to the particulars of his vessel - its name, its burden, the nationality and number of its crew, the port whence it came, and the details of the cargo. This was the

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<sup>44</sup> See note 33, above.

notorious 'Custom House oath', which in the 18th century was a byword for insincere or worthless testimony.

News of the *Dolphin's* arrival will have almost certainly preceded her. She will have been passed by faster ships in the Atlantic, and these brought their news to Liverpool, Bristol or London. In the western approaches packet boats, sloops and fishing vessels will have seen her and reported her course and position. Even had none of these events occurred, as soon as the *Dolphin* dropped anchor at the Buoy of Lune the news would have reached Lancaster within the hour. The merchants whose cargo she carried were therefore forewarned, and could be ready with their paperwork when *Dolphin* finally tied up at the Quay.

In order to land his goods, the importer or his representative had first to clear them at the Customs House. Even if, as in the case of mahogany, there was no import duty to be paid, there were the entry charges levied by the port.<sup>45</sup> After paying these the importer received a warrant which authorized the landing of the cargo. He handed the warrant to the 'land-waiters' at the dockside who then permitted the goods to be landed. As it was unloaded onto the quay, each plank or log of mahogany was checked against the warrant to ensure that the cargo corresponded in all its details with the warrant and, ultimately, with the ship's manifest. Only then did the importer come into possession of his timber.

### **Honduras shipping**

The trading season in Honduras was different from that in the West Indies. Most reckoned that July, a month or two into the rains, was 'the most proper season for Loading Wood.'<sup>46</sup> Until this month the prevailing wind was northerly, making it difficult for ships to clear the Honduras coast. Thereafter until December a favourable westerly prevailed, albeit accompanied by 'heavy and almost incessant rain'.<sup>47</sup> By leaving Belize in July, ships could arrive in British ports by early September, allowing time for a trip to the Baltic or Europe before the next West Indian voyage the following spring. An important consideration, however, was the condition of the market in England. Mahogany prices tended to be higher in the first half of the year, when the stocks shipped the previous autumn had been diminished, which meant that to achieve best prices ships should leave Honduras in the late autumn. This suited the cutters, since it allowed time for mahogany to come downriver on the summer floods.<sup>48</sup>

In the late 1770s the Honduras trade provided employment for between twenty

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<sup>45</sup> For a more detailed account of 18th century customs procedure see E. Hoon, *English Customs System*, pp.243-256.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Houston & Co to Messrs Turner & Paul, Tobago. Letter Books MS8793ff 433-4. NLS

<sup>47</sup> Liston Papers 5528, *Some Observations on the Probability of Success...*, f66. The voyage from Belize to Kingston could take up to two months in the early part of the year, compared with a few days in the opposite direction. CO 137/6, Governor Knowles to Secretary Robinson, 13 April 1755.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

and thirty vessels, 'without reckoning the American Interlopers'.<sup>49</sup> As at Kingston, the vessels used fell into two broad categories. Small sloops and brigs, generally of between 30 and 80 tons, plied between Kingston and Belize, bringing provisions and manufactured goods for the cutters and departing with mahogany, logwood, fustick and sarsparilla. Most of these vessels were colonial built and owned, and traded mainly within the Caribbean<sup>50</sup>. Larger ships of up to 300 tons sailed from London, Bristol and other English ports, frequently in ballast. Their greater size was necessary not so much to accomplish the long ocean voyage as to compensate for the lack of outward freight. In other words, the mahogany cargo had to be large enough to pay both ways. Whilst the Kingston-bound ships might take 9, 10, or even 20,00 feet of mahogany, those making the transatlantic crossing carried up to 150,000 feet, together with 30 or 40 tons of logwood to take up the broken stowage.

**Figure 6.3:** Cargos of ships clearing Belize, September-December 1788

Ship	Cargo	Destination
Neptune, 36 tons	9,000 ft mahogany	Kingston
Sally, 182 tons	60,000 ft mahogany, 16 tons logwood, 7 lbs sarsparilla	Kingston
Friendship, 62 tons	8,000 ft mahogany, 7 3/4 tons fustic, 14 tons logwood	Kingston
Charlotte, 121 tons	57,000 ft mahogany, 20 tons logwood	Bristol
Hope, 73 tons	20,00 ft mahogany, 10 tons logwood, 100lbs sarsparilla	Charleston
Non Pareil, 240 tons	92,000 ft mahogany, 35 tons logwood	Bristol
Fortitude, 44 tons	12,000 ft mahogany, 4 tons logwood	Kingston
London, 287 tons	138,000 ft mahogany, 53 tons logwood	London

**Source:** BT6/50 'An Account of the Imports and Exports of the District Allotted to the British Settlers in Honduras'.

The Honduras trade differed from the Jamaica trade in another important respect. Whereas mahogany was only one of many commodities shipped from Jamaica and other islands, it was the only bulk export from Belize. Figure 6.3 shows the composition of some cargos clearing Belize in the last quarter of 1788. It is evident that those concerned in the Honduras trade were almost wholly dependent on mahogany for their livelihoods. At the same time, however,

<sup>49</sup> Liston Papers 5528, *Some thoughts relative to the Trade lately carried on.... f.93.*

<sup>50</sup> CO 142

Honduras mahogany was the usually the least profitable variety to ship. It paid the same freight as the Jamaican and Spanish varieties, but sold for about half the price. As a consequence the Honduras traders and cutters were acutely sensitive to fluctuations in the market price of their timber. When prices were low Jamaican traders could switch to other commodities until profits recovered, but in the Honduras trade this was not possible. If prices fell in England both cutters and shippers faced ruin. This was the uncomfortable economic reality behind the vociferous complaints of the Honduras merchants and cutters against foreign competition in the late 1780s.

The Honduras trade had both its seekers and regular ships. An example of the former is provided by a voyage of the *Jupiter*, owned by Alexander Houston & Company, the largest of Glasgow's West India merchants. In April 1778 the *Jupiter* was awaiting sailing orders at Greenock. She was a 'remarkably Stout Ship' mounting 18 guns (for this was wartime)<sup>51</sup> and able to carry 6-700 hogsheads of sugar - equivalent to about 240 tons burthen. Her orders were to call first at Cork, on the south west of Ireland, for provisions, and then to sail for the Caribbean. Having disposed of the outward cargo at various West Indian islands, the captain was told to call successively at Tobago, St Vincent, Grenada and finally Jamaica in search of a return freight:

...if you should Likewise be dissappointed at this Island, you may then proceed, as *the Dernier resort* [my italics], with the ship to St George's Key in the Bay of Honduras, where you and Mr Auld (who we have sent out with you as Super-cargo) will dispose of the goods and provisions we have ship'd on our own account and Consign'd to him, & with the proceeds whereof you and him will purchase a cargo of Mahogany and Logwood on our acco't, with which cargo you will proceed to Cork in Ireland, where you are to receive our orders where to go next which will probably be either to Bristol or this port [Glasgow].<sup>52</sup>

Instructions were sent by the same post to John Auld, the *Jupiter's* Super-cargo. These were even more detailed, saying that if no freight were to be had in the West Indies, he must buy rum, sugar and tobacco to add to the provisions already carried, with which to make a 'neat apartment for the Honduras market'.<sup>53</sup> Having sold these he was to use the proceeds to purchase a cargo of 'good Sound Mahogany, & as much Logwood as will be necessary for making good Stowage.' He was further enjoined that if the proceeds of the sale in Honduras fell short of the amount necessary to fully load the ship with timber, he was to draw bills to cover the deficiency, 'for it will not do unless you get the

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<sup>51</sup> Only ships mounting 18 guns or more were allowed to sail without convoy.

<sup>52</sup> *Alexander Houston & Co to Captain Alexander Byres, Glasgow, 18 April 1778. Letter Books of Alexander Houston & Company, MS 8793, ff439-442, NLS.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid. Alexander Houston & Co to Mr John Auld, Glasgow 18 April 1778, ff442-444.*

*Ship fully Loaded*.<sup>54</sup> In order to be sure of a good cargo, they were to apply to a factor, either Mr James Bartlett or Mr Archibald Campbell, to advise them of the purchase of mahogany cargo.<sup>55</sup>

Because she was to call at several West Indian islands first, the *Jupiter* may not have reached Belize until the end of July, three months after leaving Greenock. On arrival in the Bay, she would have dropped anchor at St George's Cay. The depth of water at Belize itself was as little as three feet in places, so the larger ships were served by small craft, ferrying the mahogany from the 'haulover' to the ships.<sup>56</sup> As at Kingston, each mahogany plank or log was marked for its new owner.

By early August the *Jupiter* would have been ready to sail, going out by the north coast of Cuba and the Bahamas Channel, to arrive (if all went well) back at Cork at the beginning of October. There, depending on the state of the market and the prospects for a good sale, she was directed either to Bristol or Glasgow to discharge her cargo.

### Importers, brokers and buyers<sup>57</sup>

Mahogany importers were a diverse breed. In many cases the importer was what modern jargon terms an 'end user', i.e., a furniture maker, such as Gillow, or even a private individual, such as Sir Robert Walpole. The importer might write directly to his Kingston factor, stating his requirements, or he might instruct the master of a Jamaica-bound vessel to buy on his behalf. All the costs of importation were met by the importer, without the intercession of a timber merchant or broker, and hence this was the cheapest method of importation. Up to the 1760s Gillows seem to have imported most of their mahogany timber directly into Lancaster in this way. However, as their business grew, so did their requirement for mahogany. Trade between Lancaster and the West Indies was limited, and Gillows' demand for mahogany exceeded the capacity of the

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> James Bartlett was among those Magistrates who successfully opposed the government of Superintendant Despard in the 1780s.

<sup>56</sup> Adm 7/837. Captain Robert Hodgson, 'Remarks on that part of the Bay of Honduras where the English cut Logwood,' 1765. 'The River Bellise is large and deep but at the Mouth there is a Bar, which only Boats can go over, Off here is the nearest place Ships can come to take their Loading. They anchor in a fine safe Harbour, made by the Keys that lye all around it... About Nine Miles up, the River runs so near the Sea Shore that formerly Crafts were easily hauled over; and the place is still called the Haulover, tho' it has since been cut through... Vessels of [about 6' draught] can come this way into the River, and go about 30 miles up it...".

<sup>57</sup> The following account is based on surviving records at Liverpool, Preston, and in the Gillow archive. It is therefore weighted towards the trade in the north western ports. However, such information as has come to light concerning the trade in Bristol and London suggests that the manner of doing business there was not substantially different. At the time of writing a study of the London timber trade is being undertaken by John Cross, of London Guildhall University.

Lancaster ships to supply it. After the Seven Years' War Gillows began increasingly to buy at Liverpool, where the market was bigger and the choice wider.

The Liverpool trade was largely in the hands of timber merchants and general brokers. In common with all the primary West India ports, evidence for the trade is scant for the first half of the 18th century, and becomes fuller thereafter. In the 1760s and 1770s a broker named George Drinkwater had a large, possibly dominant, share of the brokerage business. His name appears on the majority of newspaper sale notices, even where the timber itself was the property of an established timber merchant such as William Rathbone.<sup>58</sup> The brokers made their money by conducting auction sales and charging a commission of 3 per cent on the proceeds. The first known record of such an auction in London can be found in the London *Daily Journal* for 10 August 1724. This sale comprised 'some fifty or Sixty Mohogany Timber Trees'.<sup>59</sup> Similar sales took place at all ports of importation. They were advertised in the local newspapers a week or so in advance, and often on the day of the sale itself. Below is a typical advertisement from Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser of 7 September 1757.

**Figure 6.4:** Advertisement of an auction sale of mahogany logs, Liverpool 1757.

*To be Sold by Auction*

On Friday the 16th Instant, at a Yard  
behind Mr. David Kenyon's House in  
Redcross-Street; the sale to begin at  
3 o'clock in the Afternoon

10 Lots of JAMAICA MAHOGANY  
Twenty-three planks in each Lot

Apply to Mr David Kenyon, Merchant.

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<sup>58</sup> See for instance, the following advertisement in *Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser* of 29 June, 1764.

*To be Sold by Auction*

On Friday the 6th of July, 1764, at Mr Rathbone's Yard the top of Duke Street the  
Sale to begin as Ten o'clock in the Forenoon,

A Choice Parcel of MAHOGANY PLANKS  
From 10 to 15 Feet long, and very  
good Breadths.

George Drinkwater, Broker.

<sup>59</sup> Quote in full in chapter two, note 4.

Figure 6.5: Handbill for the sale of mahogany logs, Liverpool, 1789.<sup>60</sup>

LIVERPOOL, MARCH, 1789.

**TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,**  
 AT THE WEST SIDE OF GEORGE'S DOCK,  
 On **TUESDAY** the 31st Instant **MARCH,**  
 AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE FORENOON,  
**TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY LOGS OF**  
**HONDURAS MAHOGANY.**

LOT.	LOGS.	FEET.		LOT.	LOGS.	FEET.	
1	3	584	3 3/4 In	42	3	634	3 1/4 In
2	3	535	3 3/4	43	3	609	2 <sup>d</sup> do
3	3	789	3 3/4 Dawson	44	3	590	
4	3	587	3 3/4 Foster	45	3	731	
5	3	604	4 In	46	3	770	7 3/4
6	3	745	5 1/2 Lowe	47	3	745	4 5/8 Charnock
7	3	614	4 In	48	3	700	4 In
8	3	547	3 1/2 In	49	3	560	4 3/4 Wilkins
9	3	617	4 Brown	50	3	815	
10	3	636	3 1/2 Eden	51	3	680	4 <sup>d</sup> Dawson
11	3	632	3 1/4 In	52	3	761	5 <sup>d</sup> Rathbone
12	3	584	5 1/2 Anderton	53	3	770	4 3/4 Charnock
13	3	858	5 In	54	3	716	3 1/2 Saul
14	3	841	3 7/8 Brand	55	3	612	14 Croft
15	3	749	4 <sup>d</sup> Edmondson	56	3	718	4 1/2 Wilkins
16	3	779	4 <sup>d</sup> Dawson	57	3	601	5 Lowe
17	3	596	3 1/2 Sharples	58	3	505	5 1/2 Hudstone
18	3	755	4 Lee	59	3	501	3 3/4 Brand
19	3	751	3 3/4 Wood	60	3	459	4 1/4 Kingle
20	3	793	7 1/4 Kingle	61	3	408	4 1/2 In
21	3	783	4 Wood	62	3	455	6 1/2 Brownfield
22	3	683	4 1/4 In	63	3	433	4 Dawson
23	3	722	3 1/4 Sharp	64	4	590	4 do
24	3	606	3 3/4 Walker	65	4	616	4 1/2 Wilkins
25	3	588	3 1/2 In	66	4	464	3 5/8 Brand
26	3	568	3 7/8 In	67	4	511	3 1/2 Eugene
27	3	537	3 3/4 Eden	68	3	358	4 <sup>d</sup> Brand
28	3	556	3 1/2 In	69	3	370	5 1/2 Saul
29	3	542	5 <sup>d</sup>	70	3	534	
30	3	547	4 1/4 Foster	71	3	717	5 <sup>d</sup> Lills
31	3	479	3 3/8 Brand	72	3	604	3 3/4 Dawson
32	3	487		73	3	700	8 3/4 do
33	3	681		74	3	623	6 1/2 Brownfield
34	3	669		75	3	608	4 Charnock
35	3	503	4 5/8 Brand	76	3	678	4 1/2 Brand
36	3	489	4 1/4 do	77	3	575	4 1/2 Croft
37	3	523	5 1/2 do	78	3	578	4 Edmondson
38	3	624	5 1/2 do	79	3	674	4 1/2 Wilkins
39	3	686	5 In	80	3	702	8 5/8 Lowe
40	3	663	3 1/2 do	81	3	774	5 Wilkins
41	3	571	3 1/2 Brownfield	82	3	653	4 5/8 Eden



Where the size of the sale justified it, catalogue handbills were printed by the vendor. Figure 6.5 shows the handbill of a sale of Honduras logs at Liverpool docks in 1789. It is annotated with the price per foot and the names of the buyers alongside each lot. There were at least 26 buyers. Some of these may have been furniture makers, but some were undoubtedly timber merchants, William Rathbone and John Sharples among them. 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 physical effort of hauling and stacking the timber (the consequently the vendor's expenses) was kept to a minimum.<sup>61</sup>

When buying on the Liverpool market, 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 in the trade. 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 of mahogany and an active buyer at auction in Liverpool. As well as buying on his own account he acted on commission for customers such as Gillows. Their business relationship demanded a good deal of mutual confidence and trust, and examples of this abound in the Gillows letter books. In August 1771, for instance, Gillows asked Rathbone 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 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[redi]t with it, without any Material Advance in the price, twou'd be more agreeable...'<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>t</sup> Jamaica Mahog in Plank D<sup>o</sup> in Loggs Rattan Mahog Fir Balk White Deals and Oak Billets & how you think Mahogany will run this year.'<sup>63</sup> Depending on Rathbone's response, Gillows might buy immediately against a future rise in price or defer until the market turned down. Gillows dealt in similar terms, though perhaps not quite so cordially, with John Sharples and

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<sup>61</sup> 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.

<sup>62</sup> 344/166, Gillow to Rathbone 20 August, 6 September 1771.

<sup>63</sup> 344/165 Gillow to Rathbone, 26 September 1765.

Joshua Beetham, and less frequently with others at Bristol and London.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to timber specialists like Rathbone, many general merchants were involved in the trade, and in this sense mahogany was no different from any other West Indian commodity. The Liverpool firm of Case and Shuttleworth handled the business of a number of Jamaican planters and merchants, and sold sugar, rum, dyewoods and mahogany on their behalves. Figure 6.6 shows a transcript of a bill of sale for mahogany logs sold on behalf of a Jamaica merchant at Liverpool in 1766. Case and Shuttleworth have deducted all the expenses of importation plus their commission of 3 per cent. The net proceeds might have been remitted to Jamaica by bills of exchange, but were more probably used by the agent to set against the next outward bound cargo.

**Figure 6.6:** Bill of sale for 25 mahogany logs, sold by Messrs Case and Shuttleworth on 7 January 1766.

*Sales of 25 Pieces of Round mahogany Received from Jamaica p[er] the Williams and Reid on Account of Mr John Ducy Merchant there.*

*Prices between 7 3/4 & 8 1/2 p ft.  
Total Sales L112.16.01/2*

<i>To Cash Paid Entry Town &amp; Trade duty</i>	<i>- 4. 9</i>
<i>To " " Freight and Primage on 4641 feet</i>	<i>29.11. 9 1/2</i>
<i>" " " Cartage, Porterage, Yard Rent &amp; Measuring</i>	<i>1.11. 6 1/2</i>

*Brokerage & Commission on L112.16.-1/2 at 3%*      *3. 7. 8*

*Total Charges*      *L34.15. 9*

*Net Proceeds*      *L78. -.3 1/2.*

Source: Liverpool Public Library.<sup>65</sup>

Many mahogany importations were essentially speculative. The importer might be a West India captain bringing in a few logs or planks on his own behalf, or a merchant such as Alexander Houston of Glasgow, importing an entire cargo

<sup>64</sup> For instance, a letter to John Pedder, at Bristol, ran: '...if it won't be too much Trouble sh<sup>d</sup> 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, Gillows to John Pedder, Bristol, 12 October 1768.

<sup>65</sup> 380 MD 36, ff51 *et seq.*

of Honduras logs. In either case the importer hoped that the selling price of his mahogany would cover all costs and a bit more besides. Such 'adventures' in mahogany were not without risk. A number of instances are recorded in the Gillows letter books of mahogany being offered to the firm 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 superficial 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 w<sup>ch</sup> will be attended w<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup>

Gillows were themselves mahogany dealers. 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. They 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...'<sup>67</sup>

Small quantities of mahogany were sold retail, often to private buyers or other furniture makers, but this was a dear way of buying. In the early 1730s Robert Gillow paid around 3d per foot but sold at 5d.<sup>68</sup> 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 - 1/2d per foot for boards under 30 inches broad and 3/4d per foot from 30 to 36 inches<sup>69</sup> - 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 2/- per foot unsawn: 'If it be sawn to your thickness & we run the risk of its opening Suitable for your purposes it would be 2s3<sup>d</sup> pr foot.'<sup>70</sup>

In the country at large, many small cabinet makers and joiners must have

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<sup>66</sup> 344/167 Gillow to William Chambre, Whitehaven, 31 October 1772, 15 June, 26 July 1773.

<sup>67</sup> 344/169. Gillow to Mr Precious Clarke, Dublin, 24 November 1778.

<sup>68</sup> 344/1 Waste Book.

<sup>69</sup> 344/167 Gillows to Rowland Watson, coachmaker, 22 November 1773.

<sup>70</sup> 344/174 Gillows to Robert Salvin, 20 March 1800.

bought small quantities of timber in this way. Such men were distant from any port, and could not afford to keep large amounts of mahogany as stock. It was bought as and when needed, and the buyer was pretty much in the hands of the retailer. The poor quality of much mahogany used in provincial furniture making reflects not so much a lack of competence in the maker, but the lack of choice in materials. The consistently high quality of mahogany in surviving Gillows furniture demonstrates the very considerable advantage bestowed by the firm's direct involvement in the trade.

### Weights and measures

The question of measurement was of overriding 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.<sup>71</sup> 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"x12"x1"), and each ton of squared timber therefore contained 480 superficial feet.<sup>72</sup> 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...'<sup>73</sup> Wholesale 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:

$$(1/4 \text{ girth})^2 \times \text{length divided by } 144 = \text{volume in cubic feet.}$$

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

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<sup>71</sup> 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.

<sup>72</sup> The 'ton' 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.

<sup>73</sup> Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, II, p.264.

in the log.<sup>74</sup>

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 in figure 6.7 for mahogany plank 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 x breadth x thickness] and dividing by 12.

**Figure 6.7:**

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

L	B	Thickeness	Cont.
8	16 1/2	9	99
7 1/2	21	9 1/2	124 8/12
10	14	4	46 1/2
10	19	7 1/2	118 1/2
10 1/2	14	8	98
10 1/2	17 1/2	4 1/2	68 10/12
8	15 1/2	8	82 8/12
12 1/2	20	5 1/2	114 1/2
10 1/2	14	4 1/2	55
10 1/2	13	7	79 1/2
9	13	8 1/2	82 1/2
7 1/2	14 1/2	2 1/2	22 8/12
7 1/2	15	3	28 1/2
8	17	8 1/2	96 4/12
10	19	2 1/2	40

*The above is invoice of 15 Mahogany Planks Right Jamaica Wood Containing 1157 foot 6 inch in Measure.*

Source: Gillows 344/161 Accounts 1744-1772.

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

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<sup>74</sup> 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.

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.<sup>75</sup> The 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 5715 ft 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'.<sup>76</sup>

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?<sup>77</sup> The Hoppus measure allowed for 27% 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 19th 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% each way, 'exclusive of other allowances for round-edged, decayed, shaken ended, or taper logs'.<sup>78</sup> In terms of volume, this amounted to at least 25%, so that for every 1000 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

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<sup>75</sup> Chaloner, *St Domingo Trade*, pp.11-12.

<sup>76</sup> 344/162 Invoices 1775-1789, 30 June 1777. These remarks demonstrate that although each timber port had its official measurers, the measurement of one port did not necessarily accord with that of another.

<sup>77</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree*, p.62.

<sup>78</sup> Chaloner, *op.cit.*, p.13.

measurement."<sup>79</sup>

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 paid on thin air, but even with the best regulated cargos 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'<sup>80</sup>. 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 Robert Gillow was sent 2783 feet of timber from his nephew Thomas Worswick, the firm's factor in St Kitts. When measured on arrival at Lancaster the timber amounted only to 1900 feet. 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.'<sup>81</sup> 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 9 1/2d Pft or 10d - I hint this for your own government & also that our own measure may be 25 pC<sup>t</sup> less than yours and sometimes 30pC<sup>t</sup>. Therefore it must be laid in so as to pay a freight on the above terms, or you had better decline it.<sup>82</sup>

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 percent. In a bad parcel the waste might exceed 30 per cent. The buyer would not know which until he saw

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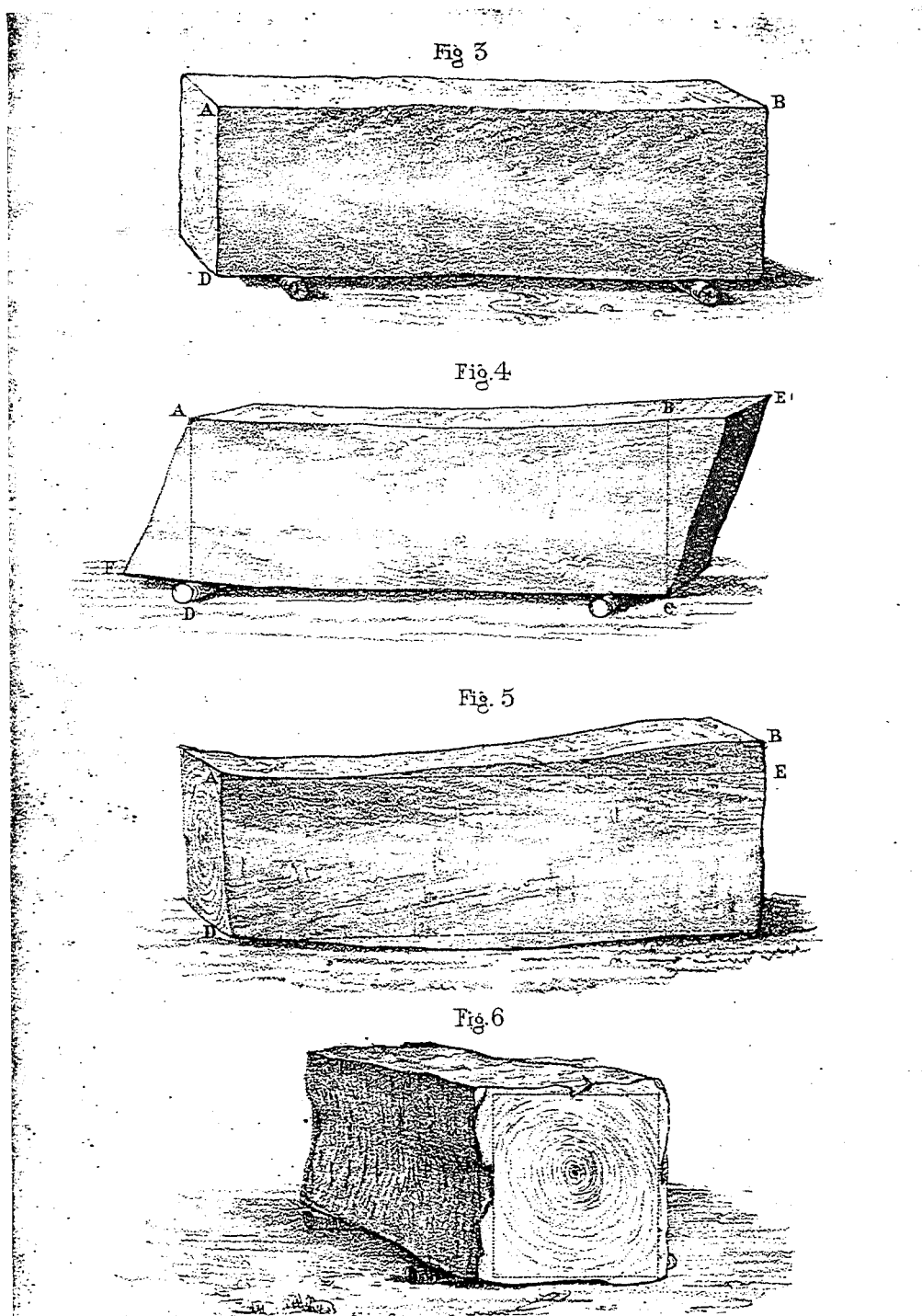
<sup>79</sup> Sheraton, *op.cit.*, p268.

<sup>80</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, p.64.

<sup>81</sup> 344/172 Gillow to Worswick and Allman, St Kitts, 4 March 1789.

<sup>82</sup> 344/171 Gillow to Thos. Worswick, St Kitts, 22 April 1787.

Figure 6.8: Preparing mahogany logs for shipment.



Source: Edward Chaloner, *Remarks on the St Domingo Mahogany Import Trade*, Liverpool 1837.

the timber for himself, and since the margins in the trade were 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.'<sup>83</sup> Any deviation from this shape incurred cost penalties, since the importer paid freight for unsaleable timber. Some 18th-century newspaper advertisements mention that the mahogany logs for sale were squared. Although it is difficult to 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. Figure 6.8 shows Chaloner's diagrams indicating, first, the ideal log squared for shipment (*Fig.3*), and then examples of irregularly cross-cut (*Fig.4*), tapered (*Fig.5*) and hollow sided logs (*Fig.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<sup>84</sup>.

Unusually large logs presented problems. Although large timber fetched a premium price on the home market, it was awkward and expensive to carry. In January 1777 Gillows raised the problem with Swarbreck: 'If you should 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'.<sup>85</sup>

There was no particular advantage in shipping logs longer than about fifteen feet for furniture manufacture.<sup>86</sup> Above this length they became difficult to handle and stow, without any advantage in price. As Benjamin Satterthwaite told a disappointed Henry Cross, who had cut logs up to sixty feet in length, 'the price is not directed by the qty of Feet but the breadth of the Plank'.<sup>87</sup>

When in the 19th century mahogany began to be used extensively for 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.<sup>88</sup> To overcome the difficulties in stowing such massive timber, bow loading ports were introduced on Honduras ships in the early 19th century.

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<sup>83</sup> Chaloner, *op.cit.*, p.11.

<sup>84</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, 61-2.

<sup>85</sup> 344/162 Gillow to Swarbreck, 27 January 1777.

<sup>86</sup> Chaloner, *op.cit.*, pp.6-9.

<sup>87</sup> Letter Books, Satterthwaite to Henry Cross, 25 August 1764.

<sup>88</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, pp.45-46.

## Import Duties

In 1795 import duties on mahogany were reintroduced, and were progressively increased from that date until 1819. Although strictly outside the time frame of this study, the subject is worth mentioning briefly, because it bears directly on the subject of weights and measures.

The Act of 35 George III cap.20 (1795) imposed a duty of 1 1/2d per foot on mahogany imported from all sources. The Commissioners of Customs quickly discovered what mahogany importers had long known, that the true measure of a piece of mahogany was not an easy thing to establish. Therefore the legislation was changed the following year, to charge duty by weight rather than linear measure.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, lobbying by the Honduras trade caused preference to be given to timber from British sources. Honduras mahogany, and that of the Bahamas, paid a duty of L1.10.0 per ton, whereas mahogany from elsewhere paid L.3.0.0. Subsequent legislation increased this difference, so that in 1803 the duties rose to L2.6.8 and L4.0.0 respectively, and in 1809 to L3.4.0 and L7.6.8.<sup>90</sup> By 1819 the duty on foreign mahogany stood at L11.17.6, against L3.16.0 on wood from Honduras and Bahamas.<sup>91</sup>

The discrimination against foreign mahogany was compounded by the fact that most of it was of high quality. "The Wood being hard or Soft has a material influence on the quantity of feet to the ton weight; the richer Wood, both in Logs and Curls, being the heavier; and plain, soft pieces, in all case the lighter. Thus the finer Wood gives fewer feet to the ton weight..."<sup>92</sup> Because duty was charged by weight, the denser, better quality wood effectively paid more duty per foot. Chaloner gives the following typical densities for different mahoganies: "The ton weight, if from the City of St Domingo, in Logs, usually yields *for sale* from 290 to 310 feet, and from 270 to 290 feet in Curls; and from other parts of Hayti, from 300 feet to 320 feet in Logs, and from 290 to 300 feet in Curls... From Cuba, the average is 290 to 300 feet to the ton; and from Honduras 330 to 350 feet to the ton."<sup>93</sup> In terms of superficial feet of saleable timber, in 1819 Honduras mahogany paid duty at an average of 2 1/2d per foot, St Domingo mahogany at 9 1/2d or almost four times the rate. These figures go a long way to explain to the commercial dominance of Honduras timber in the early 19th century.

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<sup>89</sup> 36 George III cap.78.

<sup>90</sup> 43 George III cap.68; 49 George III cap.98.

<sup>91</sup> 59 George III cap.52.

<sup>92</sup> Chaloner and Fleming, *op.cit.*, p.65.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.64-65.

## Shipping costs

In chapter one it was suggested that the viability of mahogany cargos was, initially at least, very marginal, and that 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 'Dernier resort' pervades the correspondence of Gillows and other involved in the 18th-century trade. Shipping costs continued to be of paramount concern to mahogany importers throughout the 18th century.

The multifarious costs involved in shipping mahogany from Jamaica to Liverpool are demonstrated by the following calculation from a Gillow memorandum book, dated 1777, which gives a breakdown of all expenses (figure 6.9).

**Figure 6.9:** Calculation of a Parcel of Mahogany P[er] the Sloop Nancy to Liverpool

Cost at Jam <sup>a</sup>	3376 [ft] at 70s per Ct <sup>1</sup>	L118. 3. 2
Commission 5 PCt		5.18. 2
Warfage at 15s per M <sup>2</sup>		<u>2.11. 2</u>
	Currency	L126.12. 6
		L S d
L126.12. 6 Curr <sup>y</sup> is English a 40 pCt <sup>3</sup>		90. 8 11 1/4
Insurance on L100 about <sup>4</sup>		13.15. 8
Freight on Ditto 3574 feet at 2d <sup>5</sup>		29.15. 8
Porterage and other Charges at Lple compute }		
measuring etc }		2.10. 0
Commission & Brokerage 3 pCt		<u>4.10. 0</u>
		L140. 9. 7 1/4

'twill Cost ?? 11 3/4 pFt at Lple}  
abt 12 1/2 pFt at Lancaster}<sup>6</sup>

**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.
  6. The final cost per foot on the freight measure is actually closer to 9 1/2d per foot at Liverpool. The figure given here allows a 20 per cent difference between freight and sale measure.

The calculation above shows that the largest single component of shipping costs was freight. In theory freight rates were negotiable. Numerous letters survive from Gillow to various of their West Indian factors enjoining them to agree 'as low a Freight as possible'.<sup>94</sup> In practice the rates for mahogany remained fairly constant.<sup>95</sup> In 1724 Sir Robert Walpole paid freight of 1 1/2d per foot to ship mahogany from Jamaica to London.<sup>96</sup> This same rate of freight obtained, except in wartime, for the rest of the century. It is not clear how this rate was arrived at, and how consensus was maintained among the shippers in the early days, but in 1771 the rate was fixed by agreement among the London Society of West India Merchants and Planters. 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.<sup>97</sup>

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; in other words, only for the amount of workable timber specified on his buyer's invoice, and not freight measure. He also enjoined them to 'see that proper allowance in Measure is made for defficiencies'.<sup>98</sup> This was his usual practise on the short Liverpool-Lancaster route. When importing direct from Jamaica, Gillow usually had to pay freight measure like everyone else.

After freight, insurance was the next greatest cost. The rate from Jamaica was routinely between between 2 1/2 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 February 1782 the ship *Debby* was lost at sea with a cargo of mahogany destined for Gillows at Lancaster. This was particularly galling since mahogany was very scarce at this time.<sup>99</sup> In wartime insurance rates rose sharply, sometimes to more than 20 per cent.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup> Rises in

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<sup>94</sup> For instance, 344/162, Gillow to Swarbrick & Daltary, 11 June 1775; 18 February 1776.

<sup>95</sup> This is in contrast to the rates of freight for sugar, which varied greatly according to demand. Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.227, 282-4; Pares, *A West India Fortune*, pp.231-233.

<sup>96</sup> Cholmondeley MSS, *Vouchers*. For a more detailed analysis see chapter two, pp.44-46.

<sup>97</sup> Pares, *War and Trade*, 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.

<sup>98</sup> Gillow Letter Book, 24 February 1760. 344/164.

<sup>99</sup> 344/170. Gillows to Swarbrick, Yate & Co, 15 February 1782.

<sup>100</sup> Pares, *War and Trade*, pp.495 *et seq.*; Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.318-20.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* See also Gillow 344/169, letter of 15 September 1778, giving exactly these figures.

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 standardized at 5 per cent in Jamaica and 3 per cent in England. The difference between the two is explained by the lower value of 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, portorage, measuring and other incidental charges amounted to about 6 per cent of costs, and these remained roughly the same regardless of war or peace. In total, shipping costs (including commission etc., at both ends) accounted for 40 per cent of the total cost of the shipment recorded above, or 3.6d for each foot of mahogany.

Speculative cargos 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 below.<sup>102</sup>

**Figure 6.10:** *An Acco<sup>t</sup> of Sales of 30 Plank of Mahog<sup>y</sup> P[er] the Sally on Acct of Thos Hind esq, Viz:*

<i>For 30 Planks of Mahogany Sold Mr Jr<sup>o</sup> Bond.</i>	
<i>Containing 1668Ft at 9d P[er]</i>	62.11.11
<i>To Cash Paid London &amp; Warfage of the above}</i>	
<i>30 planks of Mahogany } Turning over &amp; Piling</i>	0. 8. 0
<i>To Cash P<sup>d</sup> rent of Ditto for 62 Weeks</i>	0. 8. 0
<i>To Ditto paid for Measuring Ditto.</i>	0.17. 4
<i>To Ditto Ditto Literage of Ditto</i>	0. 7. 0
<i>To Brokerage and Commission on Do</i>	0.14. 0
	<u>1. 8. 6</u>
	3.12.10
<i>Cash Pd you at Lancaster</i>	50. 0. 0
<i>Balance due</i>	<u>8.18. 2</u>
	62.11. 0

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

<sup>102</sup> This Thomas Hinde 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 L200 in 1782. Melinda Elder, *op.cit.*, pp.139-43, 190-191, and *passim*.

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 logic behind the Naval Stores Act. Oversupply of shipping was a perennial problem in Atlantic trade, and mahogany went some way towards solving it.<sup>103</sup>

### The profits of the trade

The analysis of shipping costs suggests there was very little margin for profit in the mahogany trade. It is true that good profits could be made at source, because when demand was high the Jamaica planters and Honduras cutters were able raise prices in proportion. But it also true that when the market was glutted demand fell and with it the profits of the suppliers. The contraction of the Jamaica trade after 1771, and to a greater extent the contraction of the Honduras trade after 1788, were both the result of oversupply of the market. In both cases mahogany cutters went out of business.<sup>104</sup> The prices for Honduras mahogany noted on the handbill shown in figure 6.5 range between 3d and 8 3/4d per foot. The average was just over 4.3d. Given that shipping costs usually amounted to at least 3d per foot, the cheaper mahogany was almost certainly sold at a loss, and the shipment was only made viable by the few better quality logs which raised the average price sufficiently to clear costs. Even when prices were high, there is little evidence to suggest that good profits were made by importers. Most of the increase in price occurred at source, and benefitted the planters and cutters rather than the importers.<sup>105</sup> The market in England was extremely competitive, as the evidence of the Gillows letter books demonstrates, and prices were pared down to the minimum the market would stand. Incidental charges of lighterage, warfage, measuring and broker's commission all ate into the importer's margins. There were also hidden costs, impossible to analyse with any accuracy. We cannot know, for instance, how much of any importer's working capital was raised in loans whose interest charges must have reduced real profits still further.

Brokers, rather than importers, certainly made the easiest money. They laid out no capital, yet took a percentage of all the mahogany that passed through their hands. But compared to commodities such as sugar and cotton, mahogany was neither a particularly valuable nor a particularly large scale commodity. Mahogany formed only a small part of the brokers' business, and was not essential to their livelihoods.

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<sup>103</sup> Bowett, *Naval Stores Act*, pp.47 *et seq.*; Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.273, 278-280, *et passim.*

<sup>104</sup> Long, *op.cit.*, I, p.497. BT 6/50, Robert White and George Dyer, various documents. See also chapter five, above, p.175 *et seq.*

<sup>105</sup> For more on this, see chapter three, above, pp.107-8.

For shipowners the mahogany trade was both profitable and at times essential. Whatever its market price, the shipper earned L3 per ton in freight charges. Mahogany required very little care in stowage and paid no duty on importation. Compared with sugar, which might spoil if not carefully stowed, it was a trouble-free cargo. As the market for mahogany expanded, so it employed more and more shipping, and this is exactly what the government had intended when it framed the Naval Stores Act in 1721. In 1788, the peak year of the 18th century trade, 30,000 tons of mahogany were imported, employing the equivalent of two hundred vessels of 150 tons burden. Even when the market in England was glutted, as in the late 1780s, and prices fell below the margin of profitability, the trade was still viable because it kept shipping employed. This was especially true in the case of the Honduras trade, where no alternative to mahogany was available. In fact, the lower the value of the mahogany, the more true this became. Falling profits favoured more and bigger, not smaller and fewer ships, because of the economies of scale. Big ships cost less to run per ton. Tiny profits grew bigger when magnified by sheer quantity. This is why Alexander Houston advised his supercargo in 1778: 'it will not do unless you get the Ship fully loaded'.<sup>106</sup>

Ralph Davis remarked that mahogany and other American woods were 'the salvation of the shipowners' in the West India trade.<sup>107</sup> It is no coincidence that mahogany importers were often also owners or part owners of ships.<sup>108</sup> As early as the 1740s Robert Gillow owned a twelfth share of the Lancaster West India ship *Bridget*.<sup>109</sup> Gillow used his share of the vessel to export goods, including his own manufactures, to the West Indies. On the return voyage, having fulfilled any specific orders for sugar, rum, etc., his factor completed the remainder of the share with mahogany. If the mahogany was imported for sale, the firm profited at the rate of L3 per ton on the freight charges, plus whatever profit was made on the mahogany. If for his own use, the money paid for freight went into his own pocket and not that of another merchant. Gillow was probably not exceptional in being both an importer and a manufacturer of mahogany. In London, the furniture maker George Seddon was certainly involved in the trade.<sup>110</sup> This multi-faceted involvement of some large furniture makers in West Indian trade raises interesting questions about the degree to which

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<sup>106</sup> Liston Papers, MS 8793 f.444, Alexander Houston to James Auld, 18 April 1778.

<sup>107</sup> Davis, *op.cit.*, p.278.

<sup>108</sup> Few 18th 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.

<sup>109</sup> 344/161 Accounts. Gillow to Messrs Inman & Cork, 7 November 1747.

<sup>110</sup> 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'. BT6/50, Waugh to Lord Hawkebury, 4 March 1790.

furniture making was supported by other commercial ventures. These are matters beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is a fair bet that Gillows' success was not built on mahogany alone.



## CONCLUSION

The research for this thesis was guided by a simple premise: that the history of the 18th century mahogany trade was not to be found in published works of furniture history. Rather, it lay hidden in the government's statistical record, preserved in the customs returns at the Public Record Office, and in the records of the various government departments concerned with colonial policy and colonial trade. The sheer quantity and quality of information available has exceeded the most sanguine expectations, fully justifying the validity of that initial premise.

The primary aim of the thesis was to provide a coherent historical account of the origins, growth and development of the English mahogany trade in the 18th century. The thesis has shown when mahogany was introduced into England, and why. It has shown what the sources of mahogany were, and at what dates they were exploited. It has shown how fast the trade grew, and how much mahogany was imported in any given year. It is even possible to say, within a reasonable margin, how much of a particular type of mahogany was imported in each year. The thesis has also analysed and described the various factors underlying the growth of the trade, identified its key events and explained their significance. The framework of information provided by the statistical record has been confirmed and expanded with evidence from a wide variety of sources, of which the Gillow archive is undoubtedly the most important. Through this remarkable historical resource one may see reflected all the major developments in the trade as they occurred, proving the very close link between the condition of West Indian trade and the fortunes of England's furniture makers.

A second objective was to discuss the mahogany trade in the wider context of West Indian trade and colonial policy. The mahogany trade was not carried on in a vacuum. In all the major arms of the trade - Jamaica, Honduras, St Domingo - mahogany followed where more commercially important commodities - sugar, dyewood or cotton - led. But this apparently subordinate role belies the key importance of mahogany in supporting the profitability of West Indian trade as a whole. Without mahogany many, perhaps most, West Indiamen would have sailed home with part-empty holds, and in this sense mahogany underpinned the profitability of the rest. This is one reason why the government took an increasingly keen interest in the trade. Indeed, the most significant single theme to emerge from the thesis is the paramount role of government in determining the scale and direction of the trade. All the key developments of the trade were initiated by changes in imperial mercantile policy. The 1721 Naval Stores Act, the 1766 Free Ports Act, the 1771 Mahogany Act, the dislocation of North American trade after 1783, the 1787 Free Ports Act - these were all government measures whose effect can be measured both in the statistical record and in surviving 18th-century furniture.

The government's interest in mahogany as a furniture wood was at first peripheral. The 1721 Act was introduced solely for the benefit of the shipping interest, and its impact on furniture making was incidental. But the rapid rise in mahogany importations implies an equally rapid growth of mahogany furniture manufacturing. By 1771 this had become important enough for the Act of that

year to be framed specifically with furniture makers in mind. Treasury and Board of Trade records from the last quarter of the 18th century show that the trade in mahogany and other cabinet woods was being closely monitored, confirming the government's interest in what was by then a major domestic and export industry. The success of the Free Ports legislation in promoting mahogany importations from foreign islands led directly to the 1787 Free Ports Act in which the promotion of mahogany importations was expressly mentioned. This close interest in the trade continued with the reintroduction of import duties in 1795, and in the 19th century became a major theme of British West Indian policy.

The third objective of the thesis was to offer a re-evaluation of the role of mahogany in English furniture making. It has certainly been possible to refute many of the more ill founded assumptions about mahogany and the mahogany trade. Price analysis has shown beyond doubt that at the time of its introduction mahogany was not the 'prohibitive luxury' proposed by Cescinsky. The customs returns, Port Books and other sources show that its use was not confined to the high class London furniture trade, but was available country-wide within a few years of the 1721 Act. The myth of 'Cuban' mahogany has been clearly exposed, and the sources of 18th-century mahogany accurately mapped. It has also been possible to demonstrate the effect of significant political events on the mahogany trade, and to suggest what their probable consequences for furniture making. The among most significant of these events were the Treaty of Paris (1763) and the Convention of London (1786), both having a dramatic and quantifiable impact on the Honduras trade. Equally important for the better quality end of the market was the major policy change signalled by the 1766 Free Ports Act.

War was the single most important catalyst for change. Its effect was both beneficial, in opening new sources of supply, and malign, in being the cause of severe price inflation. Both can be measured in terms of the price and availability of mahogany on the English market. It was war, above all, that made mahogany a surprisingly volatile commodity, transforming Jamaica mahogany, the cheap joiner's wood of 1722, into an expensive extravagance by 1760. On the other hand Honduras mahogany, almost unobtainable at any price in 1780, was so cheap as to hardly bear shipping in 1789. It is difficult, therefore, to make general statements about the influence of mahogany on English furniture making, but any such statement must take cost into account. This thesis has shown that in many, perhaps most cases, price was a primary determinant of how mahogany was employed. Some furniture scholars have attributed the change from solid to veneered furniture around 1755-60 to the change from one type of mahogany to another. This argument asserts the primacy of aesthetic considerations - that it was the visual attributes of the wood which determined how it was used. There is, however, no contemporary evidence for this. On the other hand the evidence for price inflation is incontrovertible, and the inference that the change from solid to veneered construction was due to rising material costs has therefore a firm basis in fact. The reverse process is also discernible, when the impact of cheap Honduras mahogany in the 1770s is considered. A return to solid mahogany carcasses and mahogany drawer linings must reflect a cheapening of the raw material and hence a change in use.

The degree to which one allows price to be a primary determinant of form and

style will depend to some extent on how far one believes that furniture making is a business rather than an art form. This is a matter of interpretation rather than fact, and is dependent, moreover, on what quality of furniture is studied. It is reasonable to suppose the further one moves away from the purely functional towards the luxury end of the market, the weaker the influence of material costs becomes. But by the same token, the less representative such furniture is of the whole. This suggests that any attempt to define the importance of mahogany only in terms of the style or aesthetic content of selected items of furniture is bound to fail. The fact is that mahogany was not a wood confined to a small luxury market, if only because such a market could not absorb the sheer quantity imported. Mahogany was a nationwide phenomenon, affecting provincial joiners as well as the *alumni* of St Martin's Lane. It was the product of a rapidly growing Atlantic empire, and a visible domestic manifestation of the remarkable demographic and economic expansion of 18th century England. Blackie's cabinet-making 'revolution', cited in the introduction to this thesis, was not one of style or technique, but of the entire structure and scale of furniture manufacturing. Mahogany was the medium through which the fragmented and localised furniture trades of 17th-century England became a manufacturing industry of national and international consequence.

APPENDIX I: Importations of mahogany from the West Indies, 1700-1780.

Source: Customs 3.

Year	Jamaica	Barbados	Bermuda	Montserrat	Antigua	Others	N.Providence	Sp W.Indies	Total	Combined Total
1700 London Outports		5. 0. 0							5. 0. 0	5. 0. 0
1710		2. 8. 0							2. 8. 0	2. 8. 0
1711		3. 4. 0							3. 4. 0	3. 4. 0
1712	N/A									
1713		28. 0. 0							28. 0. 0	28. 0. 0
1714										
1715										
1716							1. 0. 0		1. 0. 0	1. 0. 0
1717		48. 1. 0							48. 1. 0	48. 1. 0
1718		35. 7. 6							35. 7. 6	35. 7. 6
1719		57.10. 0							57.10. 0	57.10. 0
1720		19.17. 0							19.17. 0	42.13. 0
		22.16. 0							22.16. 0	
1721		109. 8. 0							109. 8. 0	155.13. 0
		65. 6. 0							65. 6. 0	
1722							46. 5. 0		46. 5. 0	
1723		410.14. 0	4.10. 0						415. 4. 0	695. 2. 1
		199. 4. 9		10.13. 4			70. 0. 0		279.18. 1	
1724		830. 8. 0	40. 0. 0	50. 0. 0			10. 0. 0		944. 8. 0	1220. 5. 6
		206. 7. 6					15. 0. 0	14. 0. 0	275.17. 6	
1725		2852.19. 3		12.16. 0				64.10. 0	2865.15. 3	3121.10.11
		253. 7. 8		2. 8. 0					255.15. 8	
1726		2680.18. 6		200. 0. 0	2. 4. 5				2883. 2.11	3377.18.11
		490. 4. 0	4.12. 0						494.16. 0	
1727		907. 8. 0		33. 0. 0			19. 0. 0	16. 0. 0	1381. 0. 0	1606.17. 8
		225.17. 8							225.17. 8	
1728		3048.18. 0	0.12. 0					824. 0. 0	3873.10. 0	4060. 0. 0
		178.10. 0							186.10. 0	
1729		2736. 0. 0	16. 0. 0	24. 0. 0					2786. 4. 0	3261. 2.10
		469. 5. 6							475.18. 0	
1730	N/A									
1731		2571. 7. 8	255. 0. 0		8. 0. 0		30. 4. 0	580. 0. 0	3459. 7. 0	5160. 6. 2
		1666. 0. 0					34.19. 2		1700.19. 2	
1732		1988.16.11			1. 5. 0		40. 0. 0	240. 0. 0	2319. 7.11	3388.11. 8
		1062. 8. 9					0.16. 0	2. 8. 0	1069. 3. 9	
1733		1376.10. 4		0.17. 0	1.10. 0				1487.16. 4	2412. 2. 2
		923. 5.10			1. 0. 0				924. 5.10	
1734		2407. 8. 0	283.12. 0				80. 0. 0		2771. 0. 0	3553.15. 9
		782.15. 9							782.15. 9	
1735		4118. 9. 2		16. 0. 0	0. 3. 0		48. 0. 0	48. 0. 0	4230.12.12	6196.12. 2
		1966. 0. 0							1966. 0. 0	
1736		5417. 7. 4		30. 0. 0		24. 0. 0	48. 6. 0		5519.13. 4	7070.14.11
		1551. 1. 7							1551. 1. 7	
1737		8337.17. 9					2. 0. 0		8339.17. 9	9258.19. 4
		917. 8. 7							918.19. 7	
1738		10935.9. 8.		16. 0. 0	120. 0. 0		16. 0. 0	1.18. 0	11087.9. 8	14736.14.6
		3649. 4.10							3649.4.10	
1739		7734. 0.10	3.14. 0				1. 2. 0	6.14. 4	7745.11. 2	10757.4. 9
		3011.13. 2							3011.13. 7	
1740		2316. 8. 8					80. 0. 0		2396. 8. 8	3195. 8. 8
		799. 0. 0							799. 0. 0	
1741		2090.13. 4				120.15.11	11. 0. 0		2221.15.11	3730.18. 3
		1500.12. 4					2.10. 0		1509. 2. 4	
1742		6730.19. 5					400. 0. 0		7130.19. 5	8356.16.11
		1225.17. 6							1225.17. 6	
1743		5461. 0. 0					528. 0. 0		5989. 0. 0	7244.13. 1
		1255.13. 1							1255.13. 1	
1744		10512. 0.0				10. 0. 0			10522.0. 0	12090.17.4
		1453. 0. 0							1568.17. 4	
1745		3099. 5. 0				165. 0. 0		115.17. 4	3380.11. 1	5121. 7. 3
		1710. 0. 0						16. 6. 1	1741. 1. 2	
								31. 1. 2		

Year	Jamaica	Barbados	Bermuda	Montserrat	Antigua	Others	N.Providence	Sp.W.Indies	Total	Combined Total
1746	2124.13. 6		5. 0. 0					10.15. 3	2140. 8. 9	
1747	2165. 0. 0								2165. 0. 0	4305. 8. 9
	3703. 6. 6							129. 2. 6	3837. 9. 0	
1748	1031. 6. 3					5. 0. 0			1107.11.11	4945. 0. 0
	7560.10. 6	66. 0. 0				76. 5. 8			22318.4.10	
	2821. 7. 6						18. 0. 0	14691.18.0	3965.19. 9	26284.4. 7
1749	10076.0. 0			72. 0. 0		1134. 7. 6		10. 1. 9	10905.0. 0	
	4355.11.9					757. 0. 0			4419.11. 9	15324.11.9
1750	11229. 0.0	574. 0. 0		85.16. 0	4. 0. 0	152. 0. 0	1939. 0. 0		17736.16.0	
	2772. 9. 2	422. 0. 0				101. 0. 0			3678.13. 2	21415.9. 2
1751	21522.19.5					32. 0. 0			22749.19.5	
	4190. 7. 1	1138.19. 0					250. 0. 0		6835.15.10	29585.15. 3
1752	19046.10.6	100. 0. 0		97. 0. 0			924.12. 9		19439.10.6	
	6237.16.10						112. 0. 0		6401. 8.10	25840.19. 4
1753	21264. 0.0	137. 0. 0		315. 0. 0			160. 0. 0		22805. 0. 0	
	3312. 8.0						1075. 0. 0		4201. 4. 0	27006. 4. 0
1754	16085. 4.0	2310. 0. 0		160. 0. 0			888. 0 .0		20023. 4. 0	
	2693.14.4	445.10. 0					1460. 0. 0		3415. 1. 2	23438. 5. 2
1755	15526. 5.3	62.10. 0				8. 0. 0	260. 0. 0		15786.17. 3	
	6553.10.0	176.10. 0				198. 2. 0		790.11. 7	7520.11. 7	23307. 8. 10
1756	8759. 0. 0	190. 0. 0		560. 0. 0					10435. 0. 0	
	5114.12. 6	230. 0. 0				396. 0. 0			5375. 2. 6	15810.0. 0
1757	21557.0. 0	40. 0. 0				30.10. 0			21740. 9. 3	
	1494.16. 0	323. 0. 0		40. 0. 0		35. 0. 0			1916.16. 0	23657.5. 3
1758	9985.10. 0					97. 0. 0			10871. 0. 0	
	3709. 0. 0						886.10. 0		3815. 0. 0	14486. 0. 0
1759	11919.4. 6			20. 0. 0		6. 0. 0			11939. 4. 6	
	4335.12. 0								4776.12. 0	16715.16.6
1760	15365. 8.0					4. 0. 0			15665. 8. 0	
	1797.18.0								300. 0. 0	
1761	3760. 0. 0			38. 0. 0					401. 0. 0	17864. 2.0
	2936. 0. 0								81. 0. 0	
1762	9157. 0. 0								654. 0. 0	7469. 7.6
	4537. 8. 0					1.15. 0			9158.15. 0	
1763	26349.10.0			75. 0. 0					740.12. 0	14443.15.0
	5552. 0.0	40. 0. 0							1615. 0. 0	
1764	29305. 0.0	1. 0. 0				Guadeloupe		2369. 0. 0	30349.10. 0	
	10082.12.0	24. 0. 0				Martinique		182. 8. 6	6707. 8. 6	37056. 8.6
	24472.10. 0					46. 0. 0		2919.15. 0	34428.15. 0	
1765	8646. 8. 0	26. 0. 0		31 0. 0		64. 0. 0			11435. 2. 0	45863.17.0
	19394. 2. 0	175. 0. 0				16. 0. 0			29928.10. 0	
1766	7191. 0. 2	96. 0. 0		2. 8. 7	90. 0. 0	240. 0. 0		2732. 0. 0	10819. 8. 0	40747.18.0
	12341. 0. 0	410. 0. 0				60. 0. 0		123. 0. 0	22592.19. 4	
1767	7924. 6. 4							1489. 4. 0	7889. 0. 2	30481.19.6
	14695. 0. 0							602. 0. 0	14507.10. 0	
1768	3721.17. 0	80. 0. 0		336. 0. 0				965. 0. 0	8608.16. 8	23116. 6.8
								7. 7. 8	18393. 2. 1	
								3046. 2. 1	4545.18. 2	22939. 0.3
								664. 1. 2		
1769	18801.14. 0	120. 0. 0		484. 0. 0					24384.10. 0	
	3409. 0. 0	63. 0. 0					4.16. 0	4299. 0. 0	3779.17. 1	28164. 7.1
1770	20365. 5. 0	2544. 0. 0							32853. 3. 0	
	7978. 1. 8	159. 0. 0					264. 0. 0		9760. 8. 2	42613.13.2
1771	30674. 7.10	761.12. 0		640. 0. 0					55500. 8. 4	
	8478. 4. 9	700. 0. 0					2000. 0. 0		11664. 1. 9	67160.10.1
1772	11791.13. 6			127. 0. 0					35641.13. 6	
	8075.19. 0								12471.17. 4	48113.10.10
1773	7243. 0. 0	56. 0. 0		92. 0. 0					21920. 0. 0	
	5064. 9. 0	16. 0. 0							10948. 9. 0	32868. 9. 0
1774	4529. 0. 0	7.10. 0							21353.10. 0	
	1727.16. 3	80. 0. 0							4165. 9. 0	25518.19. 0
1775	5052. 0. 0	20. 0. 0							29964. 0. 0	
	1929. 0. 0								3698.13. 1	33662.13. 1
1776	8542.10. 0	9. 0. 0		120. 0. 0					26766. 6. 0	
	4792. 2. 2	54.10. 6							7449. 0. 0	34215. 6. 0
1777	13100. 0. 0			131. 0. 0					32938.10. 0	
	6124. 5. 6								9588. 5. 6	42526.15. 6
1778	13225. 5. 0			31. 0. 0					48371. 5. 0	
	4799.14. 3								7149.14. 3	55520.19. 3
1779	9494. 0. 0			138. 0. 0					14357. 5. 7	
	2095. 0. 0	2. 0. 0		40. 0. 0					4561. 0. 0	18918. 5. 7
1780	4464. 0. 0								4656. 0. 0	
	920.16. 0								920.16. 0	6676.16. 0
								(Mos. Shore)		

Note : From 1763 importations from Honduras are given under *Spanish West Indies*.

APPENDIX II: Importations of mahogany from North America, 1725-1780.  
Source: Customs 3.

Year		Carolina	N.England	New York	Pennsylvania	Va & Mary	Georgia	Florida	Total	Combined Total
1725	London Outports	12.16. 0	162. 0. 0	96. 0. 0					270.16. 0	270.16. 0
1726		10. 0. 0				8. 0. 0			18. 0. 0	
1727	N/A	8. 0. 0			8. 0. 0				16. 0. 0	34. 0. 0
1728										
1729		82. 0. 0				20. 0. 0			102. 0. 0	102. 0. 0
1730	N/A	169.12. 0				7. 4. 0			169.12. 0	250.16. 0
1731		74. 0. 0							81. 4. 0	
1732		471.15. 8		16.16. 0	4. 5. 0	10. 0. 0			502.16. 8	
1733		78. 6. 6			3. 4. 0				81.10. 6	584. 7. 2
1734		80.10. 0				19. 8. 0			98.18. 0	
1735		329.18. 6							329.18. 6	428.16. 6
1736		35.10. 0				44. 4. 0			79.14. 0	
1737		58. 0. 0				9. 0. 0			67. 0. 0	146.14. 0
1738		94.15. 8			1. 6. 0	2.17. 6			98.19. 2	
1739		39.12. 0			100.16. 0				140. 8. 0	239. 7. 2
1740		180.19. 0							180.19. 0	
1741		52. 0. 0				3. 6. 8			55. 6. 8	236. 5. 8
1742		17. 8. 0		24. 0. 0		9. 9. 0			67.17. 0	
1743		52. 0. 0		84. 0. 0					136. 0. 0	203.17. 0
1744		182. 4. 0			13. 0. 0				195. 4. 0	
1745	N/A	3221. 5. 0			74.10. 0				3295.15. 0	3490.19. 0
1746										
1747		177. 4. 0		25. 0. 0					202. 4. 0	
1748		161.11. 0							161.11. 0	363.15. 0
1749		336. 4. 0	8. 2. 0	9. 0. 4					353. 6. 4	
1750		120.12. 0	3. 0. 0						123.12. 0	476.18. 4
1751		45.10. 0	65. 0. 0		16. 0. 0				126.10. 0	
1752		113. 3. 0							113. 3. 8	239.13. 8
1753		432. 0. 0	85.14. 0	254. 8. 6	5.12. 0	12. 0. 0			789.14. 6	
1754		45. 7. 6		8. 0. 0					53. 7. 6	843. 2. 0
1755		1620. 0. 0	84.18. 0	21. 4. 0					1705. 2. 0	
1756		75.13. 8							75.13. 8	1780.15. 8
1757		2210. 0. 0	23.16. 0	240. 0. 0					2473.16. 0	
1758		1908.15.10	8. 0. 0						1916.15.10	4390.11.10
1759		1217. 0. 0	83. 0. 0			4. 5. 0			1304. 5. 0	
1760		1160. 8. 6							1160. 8. 6	2464.13. 6
1761		1019. 0. 0	16.10. 0	5. 0. 0		40. 0. 0			1080.10. 0	
1762		244.16. 0							244.16. 0	1324.16. 0
1763		1865.16. 0	0. 2. 6	52. 0. 0					1917. 2. 6	
1764		262. 4. 0			65. 3. 6				327. 7. 6	2244.10. 0
1765		1291. 1. 6							1291. 1. 6	
1766		185.10. 0		5.15. 0					191. 5. 0	1482. 6. 6
1767		1792. 2. 6	463. 0. 0	111. 0. 0	1398. 0. 0	1. 5. 0			3765. 3.11	
1768		265. 0. 0	277.14. 6			52. 0. 0			594.14. 6	4359.18. 5
1769		1331. 0. 0	829.14. 0	1345. 0. 0	3144. 2. 6				6649.16. 6	
1770		1382.16. 0		24. 0. 0	40. 0. 0				1446.16. 0	8096.12. 6
1771		1806.19. 0	1895. 0. 0	259. 0. 0	584. 0. 0				4544.19. 0	
1772		6323.17. 0		215. 8. 0					6539. 5. 0	11084.4. 0
1773		424. 0. 0	2348. 5. 0	396. 0. 0	623. 7. 0	127.10. 0			3919. 2. 0	
1774		1897. 5. 0	548. 0. 0	48. 0. 0	2. 0. 0	48. 0. 0			2552. 5. 0	6471. 7. 0
1775		1745. 0. 0	5106. 0. 0	185. 0. 0	2007. 0. 0		2. 0. 0	Nscot9	9122. 0. 0	
1776		287.18. 6	824. 0. 0		24. 0. 0	1057. 0. 0			2192.18. 6	11314.18.6

Year	Carolina	N.England	New York	Pennsylvania	Va & Mary	Georgia	Florida	Total	Combined Total
1754	2587. 0. 0	170.10. 0	169.10. 0	2527.15. 0	5. 0. 0	129.10. 0			
1755	2099.15. 6	56. 0. 0			24.15. 0			5579. 5. 0	
	584. 1. 0	96.12. 0	578. 0. 0	460. 0. 0				2180.10. 6	7759.15.6
	670.10. 0	55.19. 1	363.10. 0	3.12. 0				1718.13. 0	
1756	916.10. 0	30. 0. 0	108. 0. 0	633. 0. 0	63. 0. 0			1093.11. 1	2812. 4. 1
	348. 1. 1			5.15. 0				1750.10. 0	
1757	168. 0. 0		504. 0. 0	2095. 0. 0				353.16. 1	2104. 6. 1
	117. 0. 0	3.13. 8						2767. 0. 0	
1758	81. 5. 0		114. 0. 0	3.10. 0	15. 0. 0			135.13. 8	2902.13. 8
	31. 0. 0							198.15. 0	
1759	297. 0. 0	1.12. 0		37. 0. 0	105.13. 0			136.13. 0	335. 8. 0
	1449.11. 3							335.12. 0	
1760	302. 0. 0		99. 0. 0	796. 0. 0	4. 0. 0			339.11. 3	675. 3. 3
	82. 6. 3							1237.11. 3	
1761	726. 0. 0	2. 0. 0	100. 0. 0	51. 0. 0	63. 0. 0	40. 0. 0		145. 6. 3	1382.17. 6
	622.10. 0		335. 0. 0					879. 0. 0	
1762	1882. 0. 0							957.10. 0	1836.10. 0
	357. 0. 0		56. 0. 0					2253. 0. 0	
1763	1532. 0. 0	48.10. 0	614. 0. 0	1341. 8. 0	67. 0. 0	1. 0. 0		413. 0. 0	2666. 0. 0
	724. 0. 0	168. 0. 0	8. 0. 9	16. 0. 0	13. 0. 0			3603.18. 0	
1764	2316. 0. 0	150. 0. 0	809. 0. 0	933. 0. 0	80. 0. 0			929. 0. 9	4532.18. 9
	1250. 8. 0		340. 0. 0	171. 0. 0	80. 0. 0			4288. 0. 0	
1765	4234.12. 6	3240.10. 0	2940. 0. 0	549. 0. 0	289. 0. 0			4879. 0. 0	9167. 8. 0
	1484.15. 6	735. 3. 7	1285.10. 6	229. 0. 0	155.12.10			11253.2. 6	
1766	1687. 0. 0	727. 0. 0	4497. 4. 0	441.10. 0	50.10. 0	88. 0. 0	5.10. 0	3735. 2. 5	14986.4.11
	857.12. 0	955. 0. 0	763. 0. 0	779. 7. 0	100. 0. 0	35.10. 0		7496.13. 0	
1767	3009. 0. 0	443. 6. 0	207. 0. 0	486.10. 0	2.11. 0			3490. 9. 0	10986. 2.0
	1169. 4. 0	1509.14. 9	96. 0. 0	507. 0. 0	136. 0. 0			4148. 7. 0	
1768	1290.16. 6	40. 0. 0	392. 0. 0	321. 0. 0				3417.18. 9	7566. 5. 9
	414.12. 0	1011.11. 0	233. 0. 0	576. 0. 0	242.10. 0	0.16. 0	79.13. 0	2123. 9. 6	
1769	3199. 0. 0	802. 0. 0	3821. 0. 0	177.10. 0				2478. 9. 0	4599.18. 6
	131.13. 0	91.10. 0	1729. 8. 0	888. 0. 0			96. 0. 0	8263.10. 0	
1770	618. 0. 0	1383. 0. 0	489. 0. 0	1196. 8. 0				2861. 1. 6	11124.11. 6
	560. 0. 0	244. 0. 0	1342. 0. 0	1421.18. 3	400. 0. 0		105. 0. 0	3891. 8. 0	
1771	6738.10. 0	877. 0. 0	2195.10. 6	2067.18. 0	32. 0. 0	79. 0. 0	578. 0. 0	3967.18. 3	7859. 6. 3
	717. 6. 9	37. 4. 0	387. 0. 0	294. 0. 0	24. 0. 0	640. 0. 0		10372.18.6	
1772	626. 0. 0	847. 0. 0	9297.15. 0.	697. 0. 0		208. 0. 0		2099.10. 9	12472. 9. 3
	508. 8. 0		1306. 5. 5	567. 4. 0	877. 0. 0	179.14. 7	8. 0. 0	11683.15.0	
1773								3438.12.0	15122. 7. 0
1774									
1775									
1776									
1777			297. 0. 0		40. 0. 0			0. 0. 0	
								40. 0. 0	40. 0. 0
1778			1041. 0. 0					297. 0. 0	
								0. 0. 0	297. 0. 0
1779			258. 0. 0					1041. 0. 0	
								0. 0. 0	1041. 0. 0
1780								258. 0. 0	
								0. 0. 0	258. 0. 0
1781									

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