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THOMAS RIPLEY AND THE USE OF EARLY MAHOGANY

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Thomas Ripley's architectural career is sufficiently well recorded to need no retelling here.[1] This article is concerned with a previously unregarded aspect of his work, which is the extensive use of mahogany for interior joinery in two of his most important buildings. The first of these was the Admiralty Office in Whitehall, and the second was Houghton Hall in Norfolk, on which Ripley acted as building supervisor for Sir Robert Walpole. In both cases the surviving documentation for the purchase and shipping of the mahogany is relatively complete, and both cases suggest that modern attitudes to the value and status of this 'exotic' import were not shared by Ripley and his contemporaries in the 1720s.

The Admiralty Office was begun in 1723, with Ripley as architect in charge. The building has won few admirers, but it is unique in employing large quantities of mahogany for routine joinery in place of the more usual deal or oak.[2] 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.[3] As Master Carpenter, Ripley's endorsement of mahogany to the Lords of the Admiralty was probably born from experience rather than hearsay, but his opinion was not guided by its superior beauty, durability or structural stability. Rather, he advocated its use on the grounds that 'it will be cheaper than any other Wood.'[4] This was certainly true. After the Naval Stores Act of 1721 mahogany from the British West Indies could be imported free of duty and, if carried in Royal Navy ships, paid no freight, insurance or handling charges.[5] The original vouchers for the Admiralty's purchase have yet to come to light, but according to surviving Port Books the price of mahogany in Jamaica at this time was a little under 1*d* per superficial foot (12"× 12"× 1").[6] With no other charges to pay, the Admiralty could import mahogany cheaper than it could buy deal (1*d*–1½*d*) or wainscot (3*d*–5*d*).[7]

The mahogany was intended for use in the doors and windows of the lower and middle storeys of the new building.[8] The specification for the contract was sent out to Captain Harris in October 1723, comprising four hundred 2½ inch planks, six hundred 2 inch, and a thousand each of 1½ inch and 1 inch boards. Each plank or board was to be between eight and ten feet long. 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. To allow for damage during shipment Harris should buy rather more than specified and, finally, he was to get the wood 'on the Cheapest terms you can', and send it home in Royal Navy ships as they came off station.[9]

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.[10]

The imminent arrival of the first shipment was advertised in London and provincial newspapers:

> 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 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.[11]

The *Mermaid* arrived with its mahogany in June 1724, and was closely followed by a second shipment on the *Nonsuch*.[12] The wood was landed at Deptford and lightered upriver to Whitehall Stairs.[13] By September enough mahogany had arrived to complete the work at Whitehall, and Harris was instructed to send no more.[14] But 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.[15] Consequently, further shipments arrived in late 1724 and early 1725 with the *Leopard, Launceston, Adventure* and Harris's own ship, the *Falkland*.[16] Much of this remained unused at Deptford until the autumn of 1726, when it was sent up to Whitehall.[17] Some of this may have been used in other Admiralty buildings, or indeed to make furniture for the new Office. In late 1726 3,548 feet of surplus mahogany was sold off at a profit for just over 3*d* per foot.[18]

If Harris sent all two thousand three- and four-inch plank as requested, the total would have amounted to at least 70,000 feet of mahogany, or about 145 tons.[19] The Customs returns record a total of 152 tons of mahogany imported into England in 1724, and 423 tons the following year. The mahogany for the Admiralty Office probably accounted for most of the total imported into London in 1724, and a considerable proportion of the following year's total as well.[20] It was almost certainly the biggest single contract of the decade.

In a recent visit to the building Ripley's mahogany proved very difficult to find. The Board Room, which survives relatively unchanged and is the finest interior in the building, is panelled throughout in wainscot, not mahogany. A random examination of windows and window frames on the middle storey revealed oak and deal but no mahogany. Internal doors and door frames were also of oak and deal, disguised under many layers of paint. Many of these were of late 18th century or 19th century date, installed during one of the building's many refurbishments. In a small room in the north wing two doors of solid mahogany were found. These were unpainted, and appeared to be original to the building. If so, they are the earliest documented mahogany doors in England.

Well over a hundred tons remains to be accounted for. The Admiralty records show that not all the mahogany ordered was needed, and this was presumably used elsewhere. There is an interesting discrepancy between the original contract, which specified that the mahogany was to be used for doors and windows, and the newspaper reports, which spoke of 'Inner Doors . . . Tables and other Purposes.' It is conceivable that between ordering the wood and its delivery the Admiralty Commissioners changed their minds, thinking that the wood would be wasted on window frames and sash bars. Much of the timber may have gone to make furniture for the new offices and for the quarters of the Admiralty Commissioners. Although two mahogany inner doors survive, many have undoubtedly been changed. These doors, although cheap in 1723, would in the later 18th century have become valuable, and the mahogany may have been re-used

for other purposes. Of tables and other furniture none remain, save in the Board Room, and these are of late 18th century date. The mahogany staircase handrails are probably the only surviving parts of Ripley's mahogany in common sight.

The example of the Admiralty Office throws a new light on the use of mahogany at Houghton Hall. Here the employment of mahogany on a grand scale for 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.[21] Others have said that Walpole himself was responsible for the removal of import duty on mahogany solely in order to furnish Houghton Hall.[22] In fact, there is no real mystery about Houghton's mahogany. As we have seen, mahogany had been free of duty since the 1721 Naval Stores Act, so there was no question of Walpole somehow evading payment of duty. The timber was bought on the open market in Jamaica and shipped at Walpole's expense to King's Lynn *via* London.[23]

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.[24] Ripley certainly paid bills for the wood on Walpole's behalf, and seem to have organised freight, lighterage and storage for the various shipments.[25] 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.[26] 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 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.[27]

The sheer scale and bravura of Houghton's mahogany contrasts markedly with its use at the Admiralty Office. The doors, doorcases and stairs are heavily carved and richly detailed. Much of the detail is picked out in gold leaf, thereby heightening an already opulent effect. One can easily understand how art historians have assumed that such rich treatment must imply that the wood itself was equally precious, but Walpole's mahogany cost him no more than the equivalent quantity of wainscot. Initial purchase and shipping to London of 419 planks cost £490.8*s*.9*d*.[28] The shipping invoices for two of the shipments, by the *Rose* and the *Dolphin*, show that freight was charged at 1½d per foot, and that the planks averaged 71½ superficial feet each, freight measure.[29] The entire shipment therefore amounted to just over 30,000 feet (about 60 tons, or about 16% of the total imported into London that year). The cost was a fraction under 4*d* 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, bringing the total to 4½*d* or 4¾*d* per foot. This was still less than the Commissioners for the Fifty New Churches were paying for wainscot in London.[30]

The employment of mahogany in Whitehall and at Houghton Hall was by no means unique, except in scale. It serves rather to illustrate a general point, which was that in the early years of its introduction mahogany was considered a wood suitable for joinery rather than cabinet-making. A number of early Georgian houses employed mahogany in a similar fashion. Between 1720 and 1724 the Duke of Chandos bought mahogany for panelling the saloon at Canons in Middlesex.[31] In Northumberland, Vanbrugh's

mahogany room at Seaton Delaval (1726) still survives.[32] Marble Hill House at Twickenham has the entire *piano nobile* floored in mahogany (probably 1727–8). Although documentation for Marble Hill's mahogany has yet to come to light, there is an interesting tradition that the timber was imported in Royal Navy ships.[33] Could this perhaps be the surplus timber from the Admiralty Office? It is significant that, unlike Chiswick House a few miles away, Marble Hill was a house built to a tight budget, and almost every expense was spared.[34] The use of mahogany in this context suggests economy rather than extravagance. In contrast to Marble Hill, St George's Bloomsbury, one of Hawksmoor's churches, is exceptionally well documented. It has a complete suite of liturgical furniture in mahogany, comprising a reredos (1727), a pulpit and the remains of the altar table (1728).[35] The work is of superb quality, and the reredos is quite spectacular, so much so that it was assumed to have come from the Duke of Bedford's private chapel nearby.[36] It should be remembered, however, that the Commissioners for the Fifty New Churches invariably awarded contracts for work to the cheapest tender.[37]

The employment of solid mahogany for architectural joinery did not long outlast the 1720s. The rapidly rising demand for mahogany as a furniture wood soon pushed prices beyond the reach of house carpenters and joiners. In the early 1740s Robert Gillow, founder of Lancaster's furniture making dynasty, was paying 5–7*d* per foot for his mahogany.[38] By 1750 this had risen to 8*d*, and by 1760 to 12d and more.[39] Over the same period the price of deal had risen very little, to about 2d per foot, so that mahogany was both absolutely and relatively much more expensive. As early as 1734 paint suppliers were listing mahogany colour amongst their products, a sure sign that the real thing was becoming both fashionable and expensive, and examples of mahogany graining abound in the second half of the 18th century.[40] Not until the advent of Honduras wood in the 1760s was mahogany again cheap enough for house joinery, and then only in the grandest houses.[41] Its employment on the scale of the Admiralty Office or Houghton Hall was never again attempted in the 18th century.

NOTES

1 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, 1600–1840, New Haven and London, 1995, 818–820.

2 London, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), ADM 1, *Navy Board Out-letters*; ADM 2, *Navy Board In-letters*, ADM 3, *Minutes of the Admiralty Board*.

3 PRO, ADM 3/34, 3 October 1723. 'At the desire of Mr Ripley, [it was] Resolved that Orders be sent to the Commander in cheif [*sic*] of the Ships at Jamaica to purchase Such a Quantity of Mahogany Wood, as he proposes, to be employ'd in the Admiralty Office now rebuilding . . .' It is conceivable that Ripley had encountered mahogany when carrying out work at the London Customs House from *c.* 1718, or at the Liverpool Customs House between 1719 and 1721.

4 *Idem*.

5 Adam Bowett, 'The 1721 Naval Stores Act and the Commercial Introduction of Mahogany,' *Furniture History*, xxx, 1994, 42–56. The 1721 Naval Stores Act (*8 George I, cap.12*) removed the import duty on all American woods imported after June 1722. It was this act that made the large scale importation of mahogany into England commercially viable.

6 PRO, E190 1403/12, shipments of mahogany dated 1 February, 20 August, 29 October 1723. Importers were required by H.M. Customs to state the original cost of mahogany at source, and the figure of 1d or less is recorded in Liverpool Port Books for 1723.

7 The price of deals and wainscots can be found in the *Records of the Commission to Build Fifty New Churches*, particularly the Books of Works, Books of Contracts, and Building Accounts, in Lambeth

Palace Library. The Navy's purchases of the same materials are recorded in the records of the Treasurer of the Navy, filed in the PRO under ADM 20.

In 18th century joiners' parlance a *deal* was a sawn board of imported softwood, and *wainscot* was a quarter-sawn board of high quality imported oak. Deals were shipped from Norway and the Baltic, wainscots primarily from Holland [1660 Books of Rates, *Act of 12 Charles II, cap. 4*; Thomas Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, London, 1803].

8 PRO, ADM 2/51, *Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to Captain Harris*, 3 October 1723.

9 *Idem.*

10 PRO, ADM 2/1880, *Captain Harris to Navy Board*, 30 December 1723.

11 *St James' Evening Post*, 24 May 1724. 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.

12 PRO, ADM 2/1880, *Captain Harris to Navy Board*, 30 December 1723; ADM 3/25, *Minutes*, 14 July 1724.

13 PRO, ADM 3/35, *Minutes*, 14 July 1724.

14 PRO, ADM 3/35, *Minutes*, 18 September 1724.

15 PRO, 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 Board to Lords Commissioners*, 26 April 1725; ADM 3/35, *Minutes*, 2 March 1725.

16 PRO, ADM 3/35, *Minutes*, 2 March 1725; ADM 1/3638, *Navy Board to Lords Commissioners*, 26 April 1725; ADM 2/1880, *Captain Harris to Navy Board*, 31 May 1725.

17 ADM 3/36, *Minutes*, 18 October 1726.

18 ADM 20/147 Part 1, 14 March 1727. The accounts record a payment of £1147.5*s*.3*d* for Captain Harris's 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 Comptrollers Office'. It has not been possible to locate these particulars. However, a marginal note explains that £47.15*s*.9*d* can be set against Harris' bill, since this was the sum got for '3548 feet of Mohogany Plank sold being more than was wanted for the Admiralty Office.' 3–4*d* per foot seems to have been the usual market price of mahogany in the 1720s, and this is the figure given as the rateable value of mahogany in the Act of *11 George I, cap.7*. This Act of 1724, also known as the *Additional Book of Rates*, laid down the average values of commonly imported commodities on which import duty, if applicable, was to be levied. The 1724 Act was a supplement to the original Book of Rates contained in the Act of *12 Charles II, cap.4*.

19 Assuming an average length of 10 feet, as specified in the contract, and a conservative average width of 12ins. for each plank.

20 PRO, CUST 3, total of mahogany importations from all sources recorded in the customs returns for the periods Michaelmas 1723 to Michaelmas 1724 and Michaelmas 1724 to Michaelmas 1725.

21 Herbert Cescinsky, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1912, 27. Cescinsky accused Walpole of 'making a fortune out of a national calamity'.

22 This idea was widely disseminated by Percy Macquoid, *Age of Mahogany*, London, 1906, 69, and has been often repeated since.

23 Cambridge, University Library, Cholmondeley MSS, Vouchers; PRO, E190 451/2, 454/5, King's Lynn Port Books. One of the shipments of mahogany recorded in the Port Books has Walpole's name pencilled beside it.

24 Ripley's role at Houghton has recently been discussed by John Harris and Geoffrey Beard. The former states that Robert Hardy was appointed Clerk of Works in August 1721, which means that Ripley did not officially act in that capacity. Hardy describes him as 'supervisor' to the building works, a rather vague but undoubtedly multi-faceted role [John Harris, 'The Architecture of the House,' and Geoffrey Beard 'Craftsmen at Houghton,' in Andrew Moore, ed., *Houghton Hall. The Prime Minister, The Empress and the Heritage*, London, 1966, 20–25].

25 Cholmondeley MSS, Vouchers, 20 April, 16 June, 25 September 1725.

26 *Idem.*

27 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 Fournier Street, London. The house was built in 1726 for Marmaduke Smith, a Yorkshire-born carpenter-builder who was certainly acquainted with Ripley, having worked on the London Customs House with him. The staircase is of solid mahogany – could these be Walpole's missing planks? [Andrew Burns, *London's Georgian Houses*, London, 1986, 68].

28 Cholmondeley MSS, Vouchers, May, 5 May, 21 May, 21 June 1725.

29 *Idem.*

30 See note 7 above.

31 San Marino (Ca.), Huntington Library, Stowe MSS., ST vol.85. Several payments relating to the purchase and use of mahogany at Cannons are contained in this file, the earliest dating from January 1720. The bills show that Chandos paid 2d per foot for the wood. I am grateful to Dr Terry Friedman for directing me to this source.

32 Seaton Delaval Hall, letter displayed in the mahogany room, James Mewburn, clerk of works, to Sir John Vanbrugh, 21 January 1726. 'Thomas Harles and two of his men are sett on to wainscott the North Easte Roome with the mahoggany wood, which is so well dryed & seasoned that it works extremely fine, save some course [*sic*] pieces there is two more of Harles' men sawing the mahogany continually and the crust of the wood is very hard.'

33 Julius Bryant, *Marble Hill House*, London, 1988,10.

34 *Idem.*

35 London, Lambeth Palace Library, *Records of the Commission to Build Fifty New Churches*, Books of Works 2700, 25 March 1725–31 December 1726, 255–6; 2701, 1 January 1727 to 25 March 1728, 80–95. Thomas and John Phillips were the joinery contractors, with carving by John Boson and John How. I am grateful to Dr Terry Friedman for the loan of the relevant microfilms, which has saved me considerable expense in rail fares and shoe leather. John Boson is famous for carving the pair mahogany dressing tables supplied to Lady Burlington in 1735, but the furniture at Bloomsbury is his earliest known work. [Gervase Jackson Stops (ed)., *Treasure Houses of Britain*, New Haven and London, 1985, 221].

36 Hugh Meller, *St George's Bloomsbury*, London, 1975, 9.

37 The contracts awarded by the Church Commissioners were frequently annotated with the comment 'this proposal being the lowest.' In the case of St George's Bloomsbury, Thomas Phillips's tender for joinery undercut his nearest competitor by £30 [Lambeth Palace Library, *loc. cit.*, 2715, Miscellaneous documents, fol 44].

38 London, Westminster Archive Centre, *Gillow Archive*, Waste Book 344/2; Letter Book 344/166.

39 *Ibid.*, Letter Books 344/161; 344/166. PRO BT 6/50 contains a letter from Joseph Waugh to Lord Hawkesbury, 4 March 1790, giving a list of mahogany prices on the London market from 1750 to 1789.

40 Ian C. Bristow, *Interior House Painting Colours and Technology*, 1615–1840, New Haven and London, 1966, 168, 179–181.

41 Honduras mahogany was first imported in 1764, after the end of the Seven Years War. Although generally of mediocre quality, it was considerably cheaper than the Jamaican article, and in the mid 1770s fetched 3*d*–4*d* per foot on the London market. This was about the same price as Jamaica mahogany when first imported in the 1720s [Adam Bowett, *The English Mahogany Trade*, 1700–1793, unpublished PhD thesis, Brunel University, 1997, 152–192].