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Citation for published version (APA):

Levitt, R. (2012). The Kenseetts and furniture making in Britain and America. *The Historian*, 115, 22-25.

Citing this paper

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The Kensetts

and furniture making in Britain and America

Dr Ruth Levitt

Every household needs beds, tables, chairs and cupboards, and every office, factory, workshop and school needs desks, workbenches, seating and shelving. Demand for these items rose in the nineteenth century as a direct result of remarkable population growth and industrialisation. The population of England and Wales in 1801 more than tripled to well over 32 million by the time Queen Victoria died in 1901; in the same period London's raced ahead at double that rate, to over 6.5 million.

For most of the nineteenth century the furniture trade resisted the change to mass production that was reshaping other traditional sectors, particularly textiles and metalworking. The skilled craftsmen specialised as chair and sofa makers, cabinet makers, upholsters (upholsterers), turners, joiners and carvers who made pieces of furniture to order since the eighteenth century. Apprentice furniture makers had to serve the required years to become journeymen and, eventually, masters if they could raise the capital to set up their own shop. Some untrained carpenters or handymen also found work in smaller communities.

Industrial methods helped textile and metal trades to standardise designs and increase the quality and range of their products. Their workers, previously operating from attics, parlours, outhouses or sheds, now travelled to newly built manufactories and workshops. Skilled and unskilled tasks were rethought and reorganised into shifts to achieve greater collective efficiency and, with steam powered machinery, much higher total production. In contrast, furniture firms and individual craftsmen stayed small and more localised, remaining closer to their customers. They often clustered near to each other, which made it easier to subcontract and collaborate.

Important furniture making centres developed around St Paul's in the City of London, at Shoreditch in the East End and Marylebone and Soho in the West End, and increasingly attracted custom from outside London. There were over 6,500 cabinet makers and upholsters in London by 1831, nearly 7,000 ten years later and almost 8,000 in 1850.¹

Kensett furniture makers

Several members of the Kensett family were furniture makers. William Kensett (1788-1855) called himself at various times a chair maker, chair and sofa manufacturer, fancy chair maker and cabinet maker (and he also became a rather controversial



William Kensett, Abbot's chair c.1832
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

local politician in the 1830s and 1840s). He was born in Roehampton and probably went to school in Putney for a few years. At about 14 he was probably apprenticed to a furniture maker for several years, perhaps in London. Thereafter he may have joined an existing master's workshop as a journeyman to gain further experience, before running his own shop and taking on apprentices himself. By April 1814, aged 26, he was at 66 Mortimer Street in Marylebone near Oxford Street, employing his own foreman, where his son, also named William (1812-1843), joined him as a teenage apprentice.



A.W.N. Pugin, Glastonbury chair c.1840
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

T. Kensett, possibly William senior's brother (b 1790), was already a cabinet manufacturer at that address. George Kensett, possibly another brother (b 1797), was a chair and cabinet maker round the corner at 25 Nassau Street in 1819, where he insured his tools, equipment, stock and personal possessions against fire with the Sun Fire Office in 1819 for £300 nearly (£18,000 today). John Kensett joined him there in 1820 and E. Kensett came in 1822, as chair and sofa manufacturers, while George moved less than half a mile south in 1821, crossing Oxford Street to 102 Wardour Street. There he bought a new Sun Fire policy for double the cover; many of his neighbours were also chair and cabinet makers insured with Sun.² In 1793 the well-known furniture designer Thomas Sheraton (1751-1806) had premises at 106 Wardour Street. The Kensetts' neighbourhood, bordering Tottenham Court Road to the east, attracted more and more furniture makers' shops as well as brokers (dealers) who bought and sold furniture. [See Table 1]

William Kensett's repertoire included highly elaborate chairs with lathe-turned elements, which reproduced Elizabethan ecclesiastical designs. These were noticed

by John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), whose influential *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture* first appeared in 1833. This information-packed work with 1,000 lithographs and more than 2,000 wood-engraved illustrations was so popular that it ran to five editions in the 1830s and several more until the 1860s. Loudon wrote:

Kensett of Mortimer Street has also some curious specimens, both of Elizabethan and more ancient furniture. Among these we may mention a correct fac-simile of a chair taken from Tintern Abbey, and now in Troy House, Monmouthshire; and two other chairs from Glastonbury; one of which, called the abbot's chair, is of very elaborate workmanship, and the other no less remarkable for the simplicity of its construction. Correct copies of these celebrated chairs are manufactured by Mr Kensett for sale.³

One of Kensett's Abbot's chairs found its way to Walter Lionel Behrens (1861-1913) in Manchester, in the family of bankers, textile manufacturers and merchants originally from Hamburg. Behrens became a shipping merchant and amassed a substantial collection of

English furniture as well as art, books and prints, porcelain, ceramics and glass, arms and armour and netsuke. After his death, although most of his collection was sold, his family donated the Kensett chair to the V&A Museum where it still is today.

Furniture makers' careers

Robert Campbell's *The London Tradesman* of 1747 explained the skills and division of labour between upholster, cabinet maker and chair carver.⁴ He called the upholster the 'chief agent', who had to be a judge of materials, taste in fashions and skill in workmanship, and a master of every branch of furniture making:

...though his proper Craft is to fit up Beds, Window-Curtains, Hangings, and to cover Chairs that have stuffed Bottoms: He was originally a Species of the Taylor...

but who now needed to be a connoisseur: '...in every Article that belongs to a House'. He employed specialist journeymen including:

...Cabinet-Makers, Glass-Grinders, Looking-Glass Frame-Carvers, Carvers for Chairs, Testers, and Posts of Bed, the Woolen-Draper, the Mercer, the Linen-Draper, several Species of Smiths, and a vast many Tradesmen of the other mechanic Branches.

The wooden parts of furniture were made by joiners, cabinet makers and carvers. Male upholsterers could earn 12 to 15 shillings per week, women a shilling a day. They had to be able to:

...handle the Needle so alertly as to sew a plain Seam, and sew on the Lace without Puckers; and he must use his Sheets so dextrously as to cut a Valence or Counterpane with a genteel Sweep, according to a Pattern he has before him...The stuffing and covering a Chair or Settee-Bed is indeed the nicest Part of this Branch...

Cabinet makers obtained the woods and made a huge range of pieces:

...Chairs of all Sorts and Prices, carved, plain, and inlaid, Chests of Drawers, Book-Cases, Cabinets, Desks, Scrutores, Buroes, Dining, Dressing, and Card Tables, Tea-Boards, and an innumerable Variety of Articles of this Sort.

TABLE 1: Furniture makers in the West End of London, 1801-1872

	1801	1811	1846	1859	1872
Wardour Street	1	4	6	17	10
Oxford Street	4	3	12	34	24
Berners Street	–	–	3	13	13
Charlotte Street	1	3	7	12	14
Cleveland Street & Mews	–		4	2	10
Tottenham Court Road	–	2	8	9	25
TOTAL	6	12	40	87	96

[Source: J.L. Oliver, *The Development and Structure of the Furniture Industry*, Oxford, Pergamon, 1966, Table 8, p 35]

A journeyman cabinet maker could earn a guinea a week, or up to two guineas if he was 'diligent' and was paid by the piece. Chair carvers were paid 30 to 40 shillings per week as their work was much in demand. Although they needed to be able to draw: '...the rest of their Education may be as mean as they please.'

The account that William Lovett (1800-1877) wrote of his training as a cabinet maker is very revealing although he is remembered as a political radical, active from the late 1820s alongside Francis Place, Richard Cobden and others who pressed the case for parliamentary reform and supported the Chartist movement. Lovett was self-taught and a forthright proponent of adult education for working people. Towards the end of his life he wrote an autobiography about his political activities, with a fascinating opening chapter on his early years in Cornwall, his apprenticeship to a rope maker, his arrival in London aged 21 looking for work as a ropemaker and, not finding any, how he fell in to carpentry and furniture making.⁵ After several false starts and a succession of precarious low-paid trainee jobs he did learn the skills of the furniture trade. Membership of the West End Cabinet-Makers' Society, conditional on five years' experience, was a pre-requisite for obtaining work in a respectable shop. By moving from job to job he improved his skills and earnings and joined the Society; later he was even elected its president.

Furniture making in America

British influence on American domestic and workplace furniture styles persisted long after America had gained its independence. William Kensett's cousin Thomas, an engraver, had emigrated to America in 1802 and moved from Connecticut to New York City around

1820, where he pioneered new methods of food canning. Around that time the city he encountered had about 250 cabinet makers, in addition to carvers, gilders, turners, japanners, upholsterers, chair makers, frame makers and looking-glass makers. Nearly 30 years later the *New York Herald* estimated 3,000 cabinet makers there, 75% of America's total. By mid century the annual total value of New York's furniture production was \$15m (\$330m today), 85% of it for new settlers in the south, south east and west of America and exported for buyers in South America and China. German immigrants dominated New York's furniture workforce, concentrated in the Lower East Side, while fashionable cabinet makers opened premises in the smart shopping district further up Broadway, still conveniently close to timber dealers and sawmills at the port, and within easy reach of upholsterers, turners, and auctioneers and dealers.⁶

The English writer and newspaper publisher William Cobbett (1763-1835), who lived in America in 1792-1800 and in 1817-19, found:

Household Furniture, all cheaper than in England. Mahogany timber a third part of the English price. The distance shorter to bring it, and the tax next to nothing on importation. The woods here, the pine, the ash, the white-oak, the walnut, the tulip-tree, and many others, all excellent. The workman paid high wages.⁷

Henry Fearon (b 1770) visited America in 1817 to advise those contemplating emigration from Britain. He reported on the prospects for several artisanal trades, including furniture prices in New York cabinet makers' shops:

The retail price of a three feet six inch chest of drawers, well finished and of

good quality, is £3. 16s. 6d.; of a three feet ten, with brass rollers, £5. 8s. A table, three feet long, four and a half wide, £3. 7s. 6d.; ditto with turned legs, £4. 5s. 6d.; three and a half long, five and a half wide, (plain,) £3. 12s.; ditto better finished, £4. 10s.; ladies' work tables, (very plain,) 18s. [...] The retail price of wooden chairs is from 4s. 6d. to 9s.; of curl maple with rush seat, 11s.; of ditto with cane seat, 13s. 6d. to 11. 2s. 6d.; of ditto, most handsomely finished, £1. 9s.; sofas, of the several descriptions enumerated above, are the price of six chairs.⁸

He concluded that:

A good cabinet-maker, who should have no more than an hundred pounds after paying the expenses of his voyage, would obtain a comfortable livelihood; as would also, an active speculating carpenter or mason under the same circumstances. [...] Cabinet-makers are paid by the piece. When in full employment their earnings may amount to 50s. per week: a safe average is 86s.⁹

Charles Knight was offering rather different advice by 1840, finding cabinet making to be:

... badly paid for, when compared to others. Weekly wages are about eight dollars, and if the work be taken by the piece, which is somewhat customary, a man must labour very hard to get much more than this sum.¹⁰

Although demand for furniture was rising everywhere in America, in smaller towns and mainly rural communities people often had small budgets and simple tastes. For example, about 100 miles west of Boston in Greenfield, Massachusetts, the aptly named Edward Jenner Carpenter (1825-1900) became a young apprentice furniture maker and kept a diary in 1844-5, which contains many interesting details. There were two cabinet makers' shops in the town, as well as tailors, boot makers, blacksmiths, a baker, a foundry, woollen mill and cutlery works.¹¹ Carpenter was apprenticed for four and a half years at the age of 16 to cabinet makers Isaac Miles and Joel Lyons and lived in Miles' household. The firm employed one journeyman and two apprentices until 1845, when Miles & Lyons bought out the other local cabinet maker, moved to larger premises and took on three more journeymen. Carpenter recorded

progress on the furniture he was making. During March 1844:

I finished the Secretary today and began a pannell end Bureau [...] I put the carcass together today [...] I finished the Bureau today [...] and began another just like it & I hope it will not take quite as long to make it. [...] I finished the Bureau today & began another a board end with Ogee drawer [...] began a Butternut Board end Secretary.¹²

He had to make many more desks as: 'Cheap secretaries are in good demand...' but also:

...it is Bureaus & Secretary all the time. I have worked on them about a year & I begin to think it is about time to learn to make something else.

The local tin pedlar bought a Butternut table and two rocking chairs; someone else bought a set of chairs and a table for ten dollars. In other entries we learn that the firm's journeyman made coffins, chair painting was subcontracted, and Lyons travelled to Hartford, Connecticut, to buy mahogany and other woods.

In small communities without trained furniture makers everyday pieces were often made by joiners or handymen. Elsewhere the division of labour among skilled furniture makers included specialist carvers, joiners and turners supplying particular elements to generalist cabinet makers. Customers who could afford to ordered finer furniture from England or France. Wealthy urban elites in New England and prosperous tobacco producers and traders in Virginia and Carolina bought the best furniture from abroad or commissioned American artisans to make copies of English and French pieces.

Interior design

Clients willing to spend the money could have coordinated interiors where the fine bespoke furniture was harmonised with wallpaper, upholstery and carpet designs. Imported textiles from Asia, ceramics from China and glassware from Europe complemented American-made rugs, silverware and furniture. To show off these interiors, lighting levels were improved by using large wall-mounted mirrors with lustrous surrounds, chandeliers, wall brackets, candelabra, candlesticks and other candle-holders. The practice of labelling or marking

furniture with the maker's name was gradually established in these years. American makers could expand their clientele through brokers who dealt with other American states and abroad by advertising in local papers and arranging distribution over land and sea, including to the Caribbean islands.

Transatlantic influences

America's home-grown furniture acquired greater assurance as the century progressed although American taste owed much to British and European precedents. The sequence of styles that had prevailed since the eighteenth century in Britain, particularly among well-to-do and upwardly socially mobile households, appealed to Americans too and was reflected, after a time lag, in furniture made in America for the higher end of the market. These styles included William and Mary, Queen Anne, Georgian, Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton, Gothic, Rococo, Chinese and neo-Classical.¹³ Americans did not need to set foot abroad to learn about these styles. They could read about interior design ideas and look at fine illustrations in books imported from Britain, for example those by Thomas Chippendale, Sheraton, A.C. Pugin, J.C. Loudon and Henry Shaw.

Gothic Furniture by Pugin (1762-1832) was first published by Ackermann in London in 1828; his son A.W.N. Pugin (1812-1852) designed the furniture, fittings and metalwork for the Palace of Westminster under Sir Charles Barry in the 1840s. Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836), a large format folio volume of engraved drawings with descriptive texts, included a Glastonbury chair designed by A.W.N. Pugin, very similar to the one by William Kensett that Loudon had praised.

Loudon's writings were also the inspiration for a book of American architectural, landscape and interior designs that became enormously popular in its own right: *Cottage Residences* (1842), by Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892) and Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852). An older American-born architect, Ithiel Town (1784-1844), had taken Davis on as a partner in 1829 to design Gothic furniture in walnut and oak for the interiors of the revival-style houses they were building.¹⁴ Another important figure in American furniture design was Duncan Phyfe (1770-1854), a Scottish-born furniture maker who popularised

neoclassical designs informed by Sheraton's ideas, and he became highly sought after by some of the richest clients in New York.

Traditional artisanal furniture making was fast losing ground as the end of the century approached. In Britain many small firms were forced to merge or go out of business in the face of rising costs and greater competition. In America, new entrepreneurial businesses in the Mid-West and the south gladly seized the opportunity to make good quality new furniture at lower unit costs and lower prices. They employed large workforces in streamlined factories geared to mass production using steam power. They served rapidly growing regional populations in the expanding towns and settlements to the west, as well as exporting to the east and abroad.

Nevertheless, on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the nineteenth century, people in all classes also kept and handed on their old furniture, and demand for fine traditional furniture has never wholly disappeared.

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Dr Ruth Levitt is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of North American Studies, King's College London.

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