

‘John H Buchanan’s Newly Invented Polyterpic Table’

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a short description of an unusual item of furniture called a Polyterpic Table. It includes a brief survey of early 19th-century cabinet-making in Greenock where the table was both made and retailed.

INTRODUCTION

In 1968, the then National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland purchased for its collections a singular item of furniture called a ‘Polyterpic Table’. Bought from an Edinburgh antique dealer, the table is a versatile combination of a tea table, a games table and a viewing machine. A printed broadsheet acquired with it and dated 8 August 1817, provides a wealth of information and lists its various functions in full, describing the table as ‘newly invented’. A handwritten list on the reverse also details the titles of the views included on the viewing roll. The broadsheet also allows us to date the table to c 1817, and provides some information about its maker or ‘inventor’ John Buchanan. The acquisition of the table for the Museum continued an already established policy aimed at developing a corpus of material within the collections by known Scottish cabinet-makers.

Multi-purpose furniture such as tea/card tables were very popular in the early 19th century. Thomas Sheraton’s *Cabinet Dictionary*, published in 1803, includes illustrations and descriptions of several ‘combination’ pieces, including an ingenious library stool cum steps and an occasional/games table (Sheraton 1803, pl 57, 59). The introduction of a viewing apparatus, however, appears to have been a more unusual development. The combination of a well-made piece of furniture by a known Scottish maker, with its unusually varied functions and full documentation made the table an important addition to the Museum’s furniture collections. As the broadsheet aptly states, the table is ‘an entertainment of no ordinary kind’.

DESCRIPTION (illus 1–3)

The table itself is a well made, though arguably standard example of early 19th-century Scottish cabinet-making (illus 1). Its simple and slightly heavy lines are characteristic of Scottish Regency furniture which is often compared unfavourably, and unfairly, with the generally lighter English examples of the period.

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ILLUS 1 Polyterpic table closed, showing games board (NMS)

Made of mahogany, it has ebony stringing and measures 760 mm in height, 965 mm in width and 460 mm in depth. The top is made of two pieces of solid mahogany hinged together which, when open, form a square table with reeded and shaped edges. These flaps can be further folded back on each other to reveal the internal print mechanism. The four tapering legs are turned and reeded and terminate in brass casters. The two rear legs pivot outward to support the table-top when open.

Internally, the table contains a series of engraved and tinted paper viewing prints backed on to a linen roll. The print roll is secured to wooden rollers which are turned by a metal handle inserted into the front of the table. The titles of the views include 'The Bridge Rialto at Venice', 'Rome in its Original Splendour' and 'The Great Temple at Palmyra'. On either side of the rollers are two shallow removable cedarwood 'trays' with sliding lids and small leather tab handles. The number '23' is handwritten on the lids in black ink. A viewing mechanism, consisting of three stiff green-marbled paper-covered boards, is also stored inside the print compartment. When constructed, the boards form a three-sided viewing cowl. The addition of a sloping hinged mirror and lens to the top of this cowl enhances the prints, achieving a similar effect to a camera obscura (illus 2).

The front of the table has a hinged lockable panel, 830 mm in width and 100 mm in height with two ornate brass drop handles. This compartment contains a games board and a writing 'drawer'. The box-shaped hinged gaming board has, on the exterior, chequered mahogany and burr walnut squares



ILLUS 2 Polyterpic table open, showing print viewing cowl (NMS)

in a mahogany frame 325 mm in length, 370 mm in width and 80 mm in depth. There are also markings on the outer rim for cribbage. When open, the box forms a backgammon board marked with stained and inlaid woods, 655 mm in length, 370 mm in width and 40 mm in depth (illus 1). Two turned, shaped wooden 'cups' or dice throwers, each 100 mm in height, are stored in the drawer with 12 dark- and 15 light-stained round counters or men, three black-stained backgammon counters and three ivory dice. Each die has a small impressed crown above 'G.R.' and the name 'Neild'.

The cedarwood writing 'drawer' contains a small mahogany removable pen tray. On either side is a separate square compartment containing, respectively, a square glass ink bottle with a brass screw lid embossed with a crown and 'Patent London' and a square glass lidless sand shaker. The drawer also contains the hinged mirror and lens which can also be used as a looking glass.

DISCUSSION

Although references to print viewing machines can be found in the late 17th century in Leipzig, the main period of their popularity in Britain seems to have been from the early 1700s to the beginning of the 19th century. The early print-viewing machines appear to have been almost exclusively portable, often in box-like containers. The term 'Diagonal Mirror' was the most universal description of the mechanism, although they were known by a variety of names. The popularity of the machines also coincides, understandably, with a peak in the production of perspective views (Kaldenbach 1985, 87–104). Although the views produced cover a variety of subjects, there are often similarities in their execution. Usually etched, for ease of viewing, they are generally produced in the horizontal form. Consequently the subject matter relies heavily on architectural features with buildings, important streets and boulevards often depicted.

Print production was concentrated in four main centres: London, Paris, Augsburg and Bassano. London 'prospects', unlike those from the continent, were required by a copyright act of 1734 to bear both the name and place of publication, although this practice was not always strictly adhered to. London prints are also finely coloured and are often of better quality than the European examples. The Polyterpic Table contains views from London which are clearly signed, some prints being assigned to Carrington Bowles, no 69, St Pauls Churchyard, while others are inscribed 'published 12th May 1794 by Laurie and Whittle 53 Fleet Street, London'. The titles of the views are printed in both French and English. Both Carrington Bowles and Laurie and Whittle produced catalogues of their ranges of prints (Kaldenbach 1985, 96–7). Indeed it was probably from such catalogues that John Buchanan made his selection of views for inclusion in the table. For variety it is also suggested that the 'commercial' prints could be alternated with 'amateur' sketches if a person had 'a turn for drawing' (broadsheet). The main purpose of the prints was to entertain and inform, providing, to some extent, the same function as a modern slide show, with images of cities or buildings included from across the world.

The early 19th century was a time of expansion in the Scottish furniture trade. It was also the period which saw the continuing growth and development of cabinet warerooms, establishments which carried large stocks of furniture and were located throughout Scotland. Although the emphasis in the warerooms was on the production of standard lines, individual pieces were often included for a more limited market (Jones 1987, Introduction).

In Pigot's *Directory* for 1821–3, which lists occupations under town headings, the Greenock section has under cabinet-makers an entry for John H Buchanan's wareroom at 3 Hamilton Street and also a further entry under Upholsterers. This is by no means unusual, as this was also a period of growth in the upholstery trade and many of the furniture warerooms offered an upholstery service. A further six cabinet-makers are listed, as are three carvers and gilders (Pigot 1823, 182). The *Directory* can, of course, only give a limited picture of the extent of cabinet-making in Greenock as not every maker would have subscribed to the publication. It does, however, give an indication of the buoyancy of the furniture trade, particularly when compared to the population of the town which was estimated in c 1820 to be upwards of 22 000 (NSAS, 7, 427). It is reasonable to conclude that a large proportion of production was probably destined for furth of Greenock or indeed perhaps for overseas markets.

BUCHANAN'S
NEWLY INVENTED
POLYTERPIC TABLE.

THIS Table being an appropriate piece of furniture either for the Library, the Parlor, the Drawing-room, the Dressing-room, or the Ship's Cabin.

In its appearance, it is simply a Tea Table with two leaves. These leaves, however, by a peculiar mode of hinging, can be made not only to spread out, but to fold over each other, and in that part where a drawer is commonly placed, there is concealed in it an apparatus, before which a person may seat himself; and by turning a handle at either end of the Table, make to pass and repose in review before him, a succession of coloured perspective views, &c. This, to a person of a cultivated taste, must be an entertainment of no ordinary kind; especially if he has a taste for Drawings, or be can then directly the selection, at pleasure, and moreover, have his drawings put in a glass and ready to be shown at any time to greater advantage even than in frames, or they may be added like the barrel of an Organ, according to the taste of the proprietor. By slightly altering part of the apparatus, it can be turned into a Camera Obscura, which, when presented to any interesting scene in nature or land or sea, concentrates the view and exhibits it in a gay and animated picture upon a white surface below the eye. This is not only an agreeable amusement, but it is really a valuable acquisition to the Drawing student, so he may sit at his table and correctly trace the figures and the prospect on the paper upon which the picture is thrown; and obtain a knowledge of colouring from it which no representation ever done by the pencil can at all equal. What enhances the value of this part of the contrivance still more is, that it can be removed from the table and carried at pleasure to the window, to the field, or ship board, &c. The Table likewise contains a portable writing desk which can be taken out when wanted, and used with as much ease and convenience as could be wished; it being made sufficiently large, and is constructed so as to slope to any angle the writer may require. The mirror employed in the Camera Obscura may occasionally serve as a dressing glass to those who find it necessary. Backgammon Tables, Men and Dice, with a Draft board, a Chess board, &c. form part of its contents, and which may be used although the mirror should be engaged.

Upon the whole, it is presumed, the invention will be a desirable thing to those whose situation is in the country, by the sea side, in public streets, or indeed in view of any piece of picturesque scenery, and particularly on ship board where there are passengers, who often require amusement; nor is day light essential to its use; by candle light both the Diagonal mirror and the Camera Obscura will be found even then to prove a sort of pleasing and useful entertainment. Those who might wish to have the apparatus and views in boxes, without the Table, may have them made up in different forms and at proportional prices, from 15 shillings and upwards. The prices of the Tables are as low as Ten Guineas, increasing according to the quantity of Wood Work, number of Prints, &c. up to Fifteen, Twenty, Thirty Guineas, &c. And when the cost of any of the individual articles is considered, the Table, as a whole, will be found rather an economical than an extravagant piece of furniture, on account of the various uses to which it can be applied.

Orders received and executed by John H. Buchanan, at his Warehouse, behind the Academy, near the entrance, on the Cabint Milling, &c. in all its branches.

Greenock, August 26, 1817.

PRINTED IN THE GREENOCK HERALD OFFICE.

1 Inch

ILLUS 3 Printed advertising broadsheet, 1817 (NMS)

Greenock in the early 19th century was a thriving town. Imports and exports passed through the port and industries developed linked to the trade particularly in cotton, rum and sugar. Mahogany from the West Indies and timber from the Baltic and America were also important imports. Indeed, significantly, Greenock was one of only two entry ports for mahogany in Scotland, the other being Montrose. In 1820, some 430 tons of the wood arrived in port with the figure peaking in 1830 at 1583 tons (NSAS, 7, 449). The company of Walter Ritchie and Sons illustrates the nature of the timber trade in Greenock. Owners of a large mercantile fleet, the firm engaged in receiving and selling mahogany cargoes and immense quantities of logwood. Their influence on the industry was such that

it was rumoured that 'half the household furniture both in Greenock and the surrounding towns and countryside was constructed of wood imported by Ritchie and Sons' (Smith 1921, 203). On this evidence, it is clear that a flourishing timber and furniture-making industry developed in the town.

John Buchanan probably sold a wide range of furniture from his warehouse. It is obvious, however, that the viewing table was produced for a specialized market. Price alone would have proved a limiting factor, although Buchanan himself, not surprisingly, would perhaps not have agreed with this conclusion. In the broadsheet (illus 3) the variety of tables and finishes are described and the cost is stated to be 'as low as Ten guineas'. The basic price increased, however, according to the quality of the wood used in construction and the number of prints in the viewing scroll. Depending on the individual requirements, tables could be supplied at 15, 20 or 30 guineas. However, as we are reminded again in the broadsheet 'when the cost of any of the individual articles is considered, the Table, as a whole will be found rather an economical than extravagant piece of furniture, on account of the various uses to which it can be applied'. The broadsheet also provides an indication of the market to which such an individual piece of furniture was aimed. 'Upon the whole, it is presumed, the invention will be a desirable thing to those whose situation is in the country, by the seaside, in public streets or indeed in view of any piece of picturesque scenery, and particularly on shipboard where there are passengers who often require amusement'. It is significant that one of the many uses ascribed to the table is the provision of shipboard entertainment. Given the rapid development of Greenock as a port in this period it is more than probable that such a piece of furniture would have been targeted at this growth area. Indeed Buchanan's tables may well have been exported overseas in this way, on ships bound for destinations across the world.

Generally it is the exception for an item of furniture to be accompanied by such full and fascinating documentation as that provided by the broadsheet. It only affords an insight, however, into a small area of the output of Buchanan's wareroom. As yet, little evidence has come to light to provide a true indication of the range and quantity of furniture produced from 'Behind the Academy' (broadsheet). Further research will, I hope, uncover information both about the commercial aspects of the firm and also perhaps provide more personal details about John H Buchanan, Cabinetmaker, Upholsterer and maker of the 'newly invented Polyterpic Table'.

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