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Edinburgh Cabinet Makers’ wage agreements and wage disputes, 1805 to 1826

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Printed price books, recording piece rate agreements between masters and journeymen in the cabinet making trade, have been overlooked in historical accounts of early nineteenth-century industrial relations. Art historians have used the price books to document the development of furniture styles but have not recognised the labour militancy which gave rise to their publication. This article charts the wage negotiations revealed in the Edinburgh price books within the context of a changing legislative environment. The manner in which strikes were organised is revealed in evidence submitted to the parliamentary select committee on combinations and the voice of the journeymen is heard in letters sent to the newspapers. The uncertainties of the period are revealed in the different opinions of employers, workers, and journalists.

This article draws together some contextual evidence for the origins of the class of printed document known as a price book. These were printed piece rate lists used in the cabinet making trade during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and were the products of agreements between a number of employers and a body of workmen with a view to setting indisputable piece rates. Such books survive today in very small numbers but have been used by furniture historians to elucidate the precise functionality of certain items of furniture and to uncover patterns of regionality in design. The genesis of these books, however, has not been closely investigated and nor are they mentioned in social and economic historians’ accounts of nascent trade unionism.

The period under review was one of economic fluctuation and frequent, sporadic collective action. W. Hamish Fraser has shown how, during the eighteenth century, organised trade unionism in Scotland evolved in the artisan workshop before then transferring, after 1800, to the factory context. Relationships between masters and journeymen were played out under conditions of unprecedented urban growth. The social gap between employer and workman widened as competition among masters gradually intensified. Whereas most wrights, working on general joinery, particularly in housebuilding, were paid daily wages, most cabinet makers, excepting apprentices, tended to work at piece rates.

1 W. Hamish Fraser, Conflict and Class: Scottish Workers, 1700–1838 (Edinburgh, 1988). Fraser places the emergence of furniture making as a speciality carried on in isolation from general wright work in the second half of the eighteenth century. Cabinet-making was in fact a distinct business in Edinburgh as early as 1730, even though the anglicised name for the work was uncommon before the 1770s.
The first cabinet makers’ piece rate agreement to be codified in a price book was reached in London in 1788. The London Cabinet Makers’ Book of Prices was printed by the United Society of Cabinet Makers of London and presented to the masters as a wage claim, probably building on existing agreements with individual employers, recorded in manuscript. In 1793, a refined and expanded second edition was printed to prevent disputes over interpretation. Many regional centres including Leeds, Lancaster, Manchester, Norwich and Nottingham subsequently published their own books and others, including Birmingham and Bolton, printed supplements to the London volume. Regional books were necessary not only because wage rates varied according to locality but also because, at this date, the style of popular furniture types was still regionally diverse.

In the year 2000 the furniture historian, David Jones, published in facsimile five furniture price books printed in Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Work in editions of 1805, 1811 and 1821, a Supplement to the Cabinet-Makers Book of Prices dated 1825, and The Edinburgh Chair Makers’ Book of Prices for Workmanship, also from 1825. Each book defines the appearance of a basic article and cites the rate for making it, together with extra amounts for optional variations and decorative embellishments. For example, the labour required to make a ‘square card table, three feet long, one fly leg, solid top, rails veneered, plain tapered legs’ was worth nine shillings in Edinburgh in 1805, with extras such as ‘an astragal round the bottom of the rail, and broke over legs’ attracting an additional specified amount (in this case one shilling). Using the books’ wealth of detail, Jones showed how it is possible to trace the development of form, ornament and fashion over time. The books can also be used as tools for analysing the geographical origins of a piece of furniture since the regional variations are evidenced in the detail. To take one simple example, Jones also published the Glasgow price book of 1806 and he demonstrated how a standard Glaswegian sideboard would be seven feet long, as against six feet in Edinburgh.  

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3 David Jones, The Edinburgh Cabinet & Chair Makers’ Book of Prices, 1805–1825 (Gupar, 2000).

The very first Edinburgh book of September 1805 is prefaced with these words:

Many inconveniences having arisen from the want of an approved standard, by which to regulate the Prices of Piece Work in the Cabinet Business in Edinburgh and neighbourhood; and it being found that, owing to various local circumstances, none of the books on that subject published in other places applied properly to this, made it highly expedient to bring forward the present publication.\(^5\)

The utility of the London book was compromised in other words not only by the rates in that book but also by the many differences in construction and decoration. The preface went on to note the ‘useful and satisfactory’ fact that the book was jointly authored by both masters and journeymen, the product of an apparently amicable agreement. The introduction to the edition of April 1811 likewise asserted that ‘the joint interests of both parties have been duly attended to’ and the 1805 volume was criticized for the ‘very limited and ambiguous manner in which the different pieces of work are made out, and an almost total want of the many modern fashions of cabinet-furniture which at present prevail’.\(^6\) The number of items described increased from 125 (128 pages) to 212 (294 pages). The original list was also described as ‘very deficient ... with regard to the inequality of prices’ which probably referred to discrepancies within the text whereby identical elements of work were priced slightly differently across the range of furniture articles.

Yet while fashion, and more gradual changes in lifestyles, certainly necessitated amendments, the argument of this article is that the principal reason for the frequency with which the books appeared was that prices were in contention. To journeymen, the cost of living, and the general level of wage rates, were likely to be of greatest concern. Scrutiny of the piece rates shows that they rose and fell. Comparisons taking a variety of articles, the fundamental specifications for which did not evolve functionally or stylistically during the period, show that rates increased in 1811, decreased to the 1805 level by 1821, and then increased to beyond the 1811 level in 1825. The edition of 1821 actually reprinted the preface, descriptions and prices of 1805 word for word, shilling for shilling.

The 1825 Supplement, however, differs distinctly in appearance from the previous books. The introduction, dated 8 July, again cites fashion as the reason for change:

The Journeymen having suffered many inconveniences from the incomplete arrangement of the original book of prices, as not applicable to the fashion of the day, did, by a Committee, prepare this supplement, to supply the deficiency,

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5 David Jones, Book of Prices, 1805-1825, p. 55.
6 Ibid., p. 301.
which having been laid before the Masters, was revised and sanctioned by them as a future rule of Settlement for the Cabinet prices of work.  

Unlike the previous volumes, however, the *Supplement* was presented to the masters by their journeymen. It differs physically from the previous ones, being rougher in print quality with 95 items priced out across just 44 pages. Many entries do not describe the article, simply giving a basic price under the heading ‘start’. Some specifications are modified in design, but it is the absence of extensive detail which is more noticeable. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the primary purpose of the *Supplement* was an overall revision in prices and an explanation lies in events that took place in the weeks leading up to 8 July 1825.

During May and June 1825, a parliamentary select committee gathered evidence to assist the framing of a new Combination Act. This was sponsored by the Home Secretary, Robert Peel, and the President of the Board of Trade, William Huskisson, with a view to repealing the unacceptably liberal Combination Act, introduced by the radical, Joseph Hume, in 1824. The legal status of journeymen’s societies and combinations to influence wages and working practices, altered continuously during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and have been amply described elsewhere. In essence, however, combined action by workers in an attempt to compel negotiation with employers had been declared illegal in Scotland by the Court of Session in 1813. Hume’s Combination Act permitted peaceable industrial action and the formation of unions, something that had been illegal in England under legislation of 1799 and 1800. Hume’s Act did define criminal penalties for violence during a strike but was written in a manner incompatible with Scottish legal practice. Legislators were torn between *laissez-faire* economic theory and the fear that workers’ organisations might become politicised. Scottish manufacturers sought an efficient mechanism by which a Procurator Fiscal or the Lord Advocate could prosecute, promptly, those who, by threats or molestation, induced others to quit work or prevented a master from carrying on his business. The new Combination Act, which was passed in the Commons on 30 June 1825, provided for just this, laying down a maximum penalty of three months’ imprisonment.

Manufacturers and mine owners bombarded Robert Peel with anecdotal information and offers to give evidence before the select committee. On 13 June 1825, Scotland’s Solicitor-General, John Hope, wrote to Peel with a lengthy account of a shooting at a Glaswegian cotton mill, also enclosing a

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letter from the master cabinet maker, William Trotter, 'respecting the state of his extensive works'. Trotter was well connected to the Scottish Tories and to Hope's own circle, centred around the second Viscount Melville. He had sat on the oligarchical Town Council and was to become Lord Provost of Edinburgh in October 1825. A city-wide combination of journeymen cabinet makers had recently been formed, as Hope described it, 'for the purpose of obtaining the entire control and command of their masters'. Trotter, the largest employer, had been singled out because, although his workers' wages, at 'between twenty and thirty shillings a week', were the highest in Edinburgh, the journeymen's society sought to 'intimidate other masters by communicating with him'.

Trotter maintained that his workmen's 'state of total insubordination' sought 'not only a great rise in the prices of piece work but to take the government and regulation of these prices almost entirely into their own hands'. The men had 'form'd a stock purse of several hundred Pounds' and had promises of financial assistance from journeymen's societies in other cities, including London. The plan was to take on one master at a time. Those who continued to work elsewhere contributed to the strike fund, which paid fifteen shillings per week to the men who had stopped work. Trotter described how he had refused to discuss prices with a deputation of his men on the grounds that they were combining with workmen from other shops. The result of this encounter was that 'more than a hundred men gave notice that they would strike work' and the following day:

Some of the men who had finished their work, carried their tool chests in a triumphant manner, to the gate and upon their being informed that no chest would be permitted to pass, until it was ascertained the owner was not in his master's debt ... they became very tumultuous and alarmed the Porter so much, that he judg'd it necessary to retire into his office & lock his door.

When Trotter attempted to intervene, 'a scene of almost riot took place' and during the discussion that followed, 'one of these men, who turns out to be their Preses, in order to shew the feelings and spirits by which they were actuated, deliberately put on his cap, and sat down upon a couch which happened to be there, and in a menacing attitude told me they would now be their own masters ... and that they would not be tyrannized over by anyone'.

The indignant tone reflects the way in which working class 'insubordination' was viewed from above, the very word 'combination' triggering thoughts of dark conspiracy. Peel was not greatly moved, briefly acknowledging the letter as 'superfluous proof of the evil effect of Combination upon the minds and

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10 Hope to Peel, British Library, Add. MS 40379, f. 127.
12 The word was negative in tone before it came to be used in the present sense. See John Montgomery Simpson, 'The Advocates as Scottish Trade Union Pioneers' in G. W. S. Barrow (ed.), The Scottish Tradition (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 174.
dispositions of the men'. Events did not pass unnoticed in the press, however, for on 18 June, the editor of *The Edinburgh Evening Courant* condemned the ‘spirit of combination’ among Cabinet Makers and Bookbinders in Edinburgh as ‘extensive and alarming’ and in that same issue the Cabinet Makers placed the following advertisement:

**TO CABINET AND CHAIR MAKERS, &c.**

AN advertisement having appeared in a Provincial Paper, for CABINET and CHAIRMAKERS, also for a few JOINERS, to apply to a certain place in Edinburgh for immediate employment and good encouragement, the Trade in Edinburgh beg leave to inform their Brethren in the Country, that wishing to have a regular Standard for their Prices, they submitted the same for revision to one of their Employers which he absolutely refused to look at; accordingly, the men struck work on account of non-compliance with so just a request, and, consequently, expect that none of their Brethren will come to town in quest of work till it is fully settled.

This was a week after the incident which Trotter described to Hope and a day after the following appeared in *The Perth Courier*:

**TO CABINET-MAKERS and CHAIRMAKERS**

SKILFUL WORKMEN in the above Lines, also a few good JOINERS, – will find immediate employment and good encouragement, on application to Mr. TROTTER, 9 Prince’s Street, Edinburgh.¹⁴

An identical entry was placed almost directly below the journeymen’s advertisement in *The Edinburgh Evening Courant*.¹⁵ Newspaper advertisements were standard tactics in such situations. Masters sought to draw in blackleg labour in order to break the strike, whilst journeymen appealed to their ‘Brethren in the Country’ to abstain from coming to town. There is no further mention of the strike in the Edinburgh newspapers, however, and it would appear that an agreement was reached on or around 8 July, resulting in the Supplement price book.

The years 1824 and 1825 had seen a huge building boom in Edinburgh, the banking reforms of 1819 having drawn considerable investment into housebuilding. By the autumn of 1825 the bubble had burst and bankruptcies, unemployment and wage-cuts ensued.¹⁶ The level of housebuilding had a direct relationship with the provision of new furniture and journeymen cabinet makers

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¹⁴ *The Perth Courier*, 17 June 1825. I am grateful to Ware Petznick for this reference.
¹⁵ And above a notice from John Burke of St Andrew Square to journeymen upholsterers seeking ‘two good hands’. It would seem unlikely that there was also a strike in Burke’s shop so perhaps he sought to entice men away from Trotter.
¹⁶ Fraser, *Conflict and Class*, p. 123.
now found themselves in a far less hospitable economic, as well as legislative, environment. Accounts of renewed conflict appear in the newspapers during the autumn of 1826. On 16 September the editors of The Scotsman, William Ritchie and Charles Maclaren, noted the ‘great diminution in the amount of business done by cabinet-makers’ and that ‘as wages had been raised about 20 per cent last year when the trade was flourishing, the master cabinet-makers thought that the late change in their circumstances authorised a reduction … [of] 10 per cent’. The journeymen, however, struck work and ‘business is now at a stand in the shops of all those masters who concurred in the resolution’ to reduce wages. The liberal minded Scotsman declared:

So far neither party can be blamed, as each has only done what the law allows. But the journeymen, it seems, have not stopt here. Sentries are placed on some of the most considerable warehouses, and if any journeyman is seen going in, means are immediately used, by persuasion, or, if that fails, by intimidation, to prevent him from returning to his work.

The journeymen responded to this by means of an advertisement placed in The Edinburgh Evening Courant on 18 September which questioned the figure of 20 per cent and asserted that the masters had sought to return to the ‘System of prices agreed on in 1817 … contained in Old Book, with list of reductions’. This might refer to a lost price book although in 1982 Christopher Gilbert recorded a copy of the 1821 printing at Shoreditch Library, subtitled (or perhaps annotated) ‘with List of Deductions as agreed in 1817’ 17 Whatever took place in 1817 and 1821 does not, however, appear to have attracted the attention of the newspapers. The journeymen went on to allege that leading master cabinet makers had sought to induce smaller masters to lay off their men in order to force the general reduction in piece rates and that

as for the Chair-Makers’ Book of Prices, which was entirely of the Masters’ own composition … it rather reduced the prices in general than advanced them, but to which the Chair-makers then submitted; as they never have had a standard, they thought it was better than none.

This, apparently, was the origin of the last of the five books reprinted in 2000, The Edinburgh Chair Makers’ Book of Prices for Workmanship, which has no preface or indication of authorship. Chair-making was a separate craft which involved joinery and carving, but not the cabinet-making skills of dove-tailing and veneering. It was regarded as less skilled 18 and the chair makers were

17 Christopher Gilbert, ‘London and Provincial Books of Prices: Comment and Bibliography’, Furniture History 18 (1982), p. 18. Shoreditch Library has since closed down and the collection has been dispersed.

possibly less unionised than the cabinet makers. The advertisement closed with the following appeal:

The Journeymen thus situated are compelled to act on the defensive, and most respectfully beg leave to inform the Public, that they will Open a WARE-ROOM tomorrow, in DUNDAS STREET, No. 22, to receive orders for Furniture . . . which they are determined to sell at Prime Cost, (desiring no profit) but covering their expenses and Journeymen wages.

This bold attempt to undercut the masters through a co-operative enterprise actually repeated a tactic adopted forty years previously in the summer of 1778. The whole affair was recorded in an article in *The Scots Magazine*.19 The strike, which began in April 1778, included masons, wrights and furniture makers. Newspaper advertisements were placed by both sides throughout May and June, culminating in an announcement from the General Society of Journeymen Cabinet-makers, Joiners and Carvers that ‘they had set on foot a subscription for building houses, and that they were just now to establish a manufactury of all manner of cabinet and chair work, where a variety of the neatest and newest patterns of every article might be had’.20 The Procurator Fiscal entered the fray by offering ten guineas for information regarding a theft of tools, and during July the strike collapsed with a drift back to work. Nevertheless, memories of 1778 apparently persisted as late as 1826.

On 20 September 1826 *The Scotsman* delivered a reply to the ‘disingenuous’ journeymen, explaining that ‘the increase last year varied with the nature of the work, being on some articles 20, and on others no more than 2 or 3 per cent’, the average amounting to about ten per cent. The editors had evidently spoken to the masters involved since they were able to report that the strike had targeted the ‘shops of four leading masters in the trade’ on the calculation that ‘if the four proscribed shops were forced to submit to the old prices, all the others would be obliged to follow their example’. When those masters who were apparently unaffected discovered this, ‘they made common with their brethren, and discharged all the journeymen belonging to the Association’. The paper concluded that ‘as for the warehouse opened by the journeymen . . . experience has shown that such attempts always prove futile’. Three days later, on 23 September, *The Scotsman* reported that ‘on Tuesday night a shop was broken into, and the tools of a journeyman who had taken work in opposition to the orders of the association, were carried away or destroyed’. An advertisement offering £10 for information leading to the ‘discovery of the perpetrators of the above wanton outrage and robbery’ indicated that it was Mr Ker’s workshop at 21 Greenside Place that had been burgled. One week later, *The Scotsman* could add that ‘a respectable master cabinet-maker engaged

19 *The Scots Magazine*, 40 (June 1778), pp. 329–331. See also in Fraser, *Conflict and Class*, p. 54.

two men to supply the place of some of those belonging to the association’ but that these men were ‘dogged by four journeymen personally unknown to them, who literally chased [sic] them home to their lodgings’. The men then wrote to their employer, ‘begging him to release them from their engagement’. 21 It is impossible to be certain whether these allegations were true. Court of Session records show that behaviour of this sort did occur during strikes but accounts of such cases were also widely distributed and false reports might have been invented as easily as true ones imitated. No prosecution under the Combination Act arose as a result of the Edinburgh cabinet makers strike of 1826. 22 There were other methods of eroding morale available to the masters, however. On 30 September the civic magistrates sentenced a journeyman to two months’ imprisonment for breach of contract. The man had come to Edinburgh from the country in response to an advertisement for hands but ‘was pursuaded by the association to break his engagement’. The sentence was remitted on condition that he returned to work. 23

The dispute dragged on into October. The Scotsman allowed itself one last remonstration with those who would attempt to manipulate market forces, concluding

The masters have as good a right to offer wages as any of the operatives have to reject them and those workmen who chose to take employment upon reduced wages, have the clearest right to do so. . . . Wages depend, not on rules formed by employers, or combinations formed among the employed, but upon the number of those who require employment, and the amount of business to be done . . . all strikes and combinations to prevent others from taking work, assuredly and necessarily increase and aggravate the evils which they are intended to cure. 24

The Courant, which was entirely unsympathetic to the strike, printed a letter to its editor, David Ramsay, from Robert Russell, Preses of the Journeymen Cabinet Makers 25 and The Scotsman followed with a letter from Robert Bissett, President of the Journeymen Cabinet Makers. 26 The two letters cover much the same ground and are in places identical, although differences in compositional literacy and clarity of argument imply two separate authors. 27 Bissett’s letter,

21 The Scotsman, 30 September 1826.
22 A lengthy case under the previous legal framework was fought out, however, following a strike at Robertson Reid and Brother in Glasgow in 1816. The extensive printed papers produced by this case record an assault and the remarkable legal wrangling that resulted from it. The papers also contain much interesting information on wage rates and conditions of employment.
23 The Edinburgh Evening Courant, 2 October 1826. The Scotsman, 7 October 1826.
24 The Scotsman, 7 October 1826.
25 The Edinburgh Evening Courant, 9 October 1826.
26 The Scotsman, 14 October 1826.
27 The Edinburgh Post Office Directory for 1824–5 lists a ‘Robert Russel, wright, foot of Carrubber’s close’ but this man was probably a master rather than a journeyman.
the better reasoned and more expansive, set out to deny accusations of violence, ‘either as a body, or as individuals’, and to remind the public that ‘the journeymen have not combined to obtain a rise of wages’ but rather ‘the majority of the masters have combined to force the journeymen to submit to a reduction of wages’. Asserting that ‘fully one third of the Edinburgh Master Cabinet Makers have no connection with, and utterly disclaim the masters’ combination’, Bissett set out the history of piece rate negotiations in the following terms:

In the year 1805, a book of prices for the journeymen’s work, was agreed to both by the masters and the men; and ... no alteration was made in those prices until the year 1817, when the masters, taking advantage of the then depressed state of the country, obtained the consent of the journeymen to a reduction of from 5 to 20 per cent in their prices, under a promise, however, that the masters would voluntarily restore the journeymen to their former condition, as soon as business should in some degree revive, and the fulfilment of which promise was evaded till July 1825, when the journeymen at length obtained the prices which the masters’ combination are now endeavouring to wrest from them, although they average only about 5 per cent more than those of 1805.

He further claimed that the cabinet making business had ‘more than doubled’ in extent since 1805 and that, while timber prices had declined, the cost of furniture to the consumer had increased, implying that the masters were the only party to profit from this growth in the trade. Unsurprisingly, neither Bissett nor Russell mentioned the rise of 1811, thereby concealing the fact that the prices of 1817 (or 1821) were largely identical to those of 1805. That there was a rise in 1811 is not recorded in any source that has yet come to light other than in the pages of the book itself. The state of trade at that time was generally depressed and there was an upsurge of industrial conflict. The cabinet makers had, perhaps, been able to engineer an increase by militancy alone, in opposition to the market forces so beloved of The Scotsman.

Matters do not appear to have worked out well for the journeymen in 1826. Although the dispute vanished from the press without any indication of a conclusion, two rare copies of The Edinburgh Book of Prices, in the Winterthur Library, Delaware, and in Glasgow University Library, suggest that the masters were able to maintain the 1805 level of piece rates. These two copies of the book are an exact reprinting of the 1805 version, dated 1826 on the title page. The printer, J. Glass, was not responsible for any previous printing. The very existence of these books suggests that the Supplement became a dead letter very quickly. In fact, the inevitable conclusion is that prices were generally maintained at the 1805 level for most of the period, except between 1811 and

28 Fraser, Conflict and Class, p. 89.
29 The first book of 1805 was printed by Alexander Smellie and those of 1811 and 1821 by J. Pillans & Son. The Supplement did not bear the name of its printer and the chair makers book was the work of James Auchie.
Plate 1  Flag of the Edinburgh Cabinet and Chair Makers Society carried in the Edinburgh Reform Jubilee, 10 August 1832. The word ‘REFORM’ is probably an addition (Image courtesy of Edinburgh City Council).

1817. Examination of the 1825 edition of the Glasgow price book shows that it is identical to that of 1806.

The question remains as to what extent prices were ever controlled across the entire industry between 1805 and 1826. Whatever the partial claims made by either side in a dispute, it is clear that some masters did not always follow the rule of the book, preferring competition to combination. Those with greater capital, concentrating on quality, fashion and exclusivity, reaped the largest profit margins and could perhaps afford to reward skilled craftsmanship with continuous employment at optimum rates. Further research is required to test this hypothesis. On 10 August 1832 Edinburgh’s journeymen cabinet and chair makers took part in the Reform Jubilee procession\textsuperscript{30} and in March 1833 they formed a Branch of the Scottish National Union of Cabinet and Chair Makers.\textsuperscript{31} Within four years, this branch was moribund, however, and no further price books were published in Scotland until 1870.

\textsuperscript{30} Helen Clark, \textit{Raise the Banners High} (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 65–7.