

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker investigates Edward Collis, a cabinet maker, upholsterer and furniture broker in Victorian Leicester

“The Oak Chest of Drawers in the Club Room... the Work Table in the Parlour...the Mahogany Chest of Drawers in the Back Bed Room... the Looking Glass in the Parlour and Half a Dozen Windsor Chairs... my needlework picture ‘the Bride of Lammermoor’... [and] my Pianoforte by Darney.” The 1882 will of my ancestor George Collis – publican at the Spinney Hill Tavern – lists furniture, clocks and other household items bequeathed to each of his eight children. It’s a will to delight any family historian, capturing a sense of his home life, room by room.

Prompted by this mention of chests and chairs, pictures and pianos, I began to wonder whether George had bought some of these pieces from his nephew, Edward Collis, who worked as a Leicester cabinet maker, upholsterer and furniture broker. I decide to take a closer look at Edward’s working life, in search of clues.

As a young man, Edward Collis trains not as a cabinet maker but as an engineer’s model maker, working in wood to create models or patterns for casting in metal. He was following in his family’s footsteps – his grandfather and uncle Thomas were patternmakers, and his father John also worked at the iron foundry, variously described as a smith, fitter or engineer.



In January 1854, Edward marries twice-widowed Ann Hewitt. Her first two marriages have each ended in tragedy, in remarkably similar circumstances. Her husbands – firstly William Wilkinson in Rugby and then Joseph Hewitt in Coventry – were both killed whilst working as railway engine drivers in 1851 and 1852 respectively. I’ll spare you the gruesome details. But one snippet is relevant to our story: “The deceased [William Wilkinson]... has left a widow and six children to lament his untimely end; but, fortunately, he had insured his life for £500 in the Railway Insurance Company’s Office.”

So, it is against this traumatic background that Ann Hewitt moves to Leicester with a gaggle of children and the residue of £500 to her name. Within a year or so she has met and married Edward Collis. Initially they have a brief foray as ‘Dealers in British Wines’ at Highcross Street and then Cart’s Lane. The insurance pay-out might well have helped them set up shop.

The wine-selling venture lasts no more than a few years, but it isn’t without incident. In April 1855 there are two thefts in quick succession. “Mrs Collis said she sold sweet wine,” reported one magistrate’s hearing, and the accused “took two bottles – one of English port and one of sherry.” An advert for another local British wine dealer, McAdam’s, hints at the refreshments that

Ann might have sold: “A splendid green ginger, dry raisin, orange, cowslip, and all kinds of genuine British wines” available by the pint, bottle or gallon.

In the meantime, Edward Collis sets up as a furniture broker at 4 Church Gate. He was to remain in the furniture trade for over 30 years, expanding into cabinet making and upholstery. Many of the finely-honed woodworking skills he'd developed as an engineer's patternmaker are re-directed into making tables, cupboards and bookcases, as well perhaps as small fancy items such as tea caddies and decorative boxes.

The furniture trade was competitive – trade directories between 1860-80 show there were around 40 cabinet makers in Leicester, as well as a handful of chair makers, French polishers and upholsterers. In addition, some 35-40 furniture brokers dealt mainly in second-hand furniture.

Henry Mayhew (1850) helps set the scene:

“The general Cabinet hands make the following articles, on which they are principally employed: Pembroke Tables, which are square-cornered, with a wide ‘bed’ (surface) and two small flaps. They are generally of solid mahogany. Loo Tables, which are generally round, though a few are oblong... rosewood, maple, and mahogany being the most frequent materials. The Dining Table has a narrow bed, with two long ‘flaps’. The ‘extensible’ dining table has telescope slides... The Card Table turns on a frame, and folds over into half the space. There are also library, sofa, occasional, and other tables. For the furniture of drawing rooms oak is now a fashionable wood... [though] Fine English oak for such a purpose is far costlier than mahogany.”

Chairs and sofas were often made by specialists:

“Drawing-room chairs are of rosewood, maple, or walnut, and are, in the present fashion... covered with rich silk tabaret, or elaborate needlework. The bedroom chairs are of polished or stained birch; sometimes they are japanned, with cane-work or osier bottoms. The chairmaker is, moreover, the artisan employed in the making of sofas. These are known as cabriole, couch, and tete-a-tete is the form of the letter S, and is adapted for two persons only, who occupy the respective bends.”

Dr Julie Banham writes of Sheffield furniture brokers in ‘Furnishing a City’ (1999): “The high number of brokers would suggest second-hand furniture which fulfilled requirements was preferred to new goods of fashionable but inferior quality... Little stigma appears to have been attached to acquiring goods from brokers as their premises appeared in the prime shopping areas of the town.”

Edward Collis operates from premises in the heart of town: 4 Church Gate serves as the main showroom, with the family accommodation above, and workshops at 7 Butt Close Lane (1870) and 9 Belgrave Gate (1874-6).

There's a tantalising glimpse of the Church Gate premises in this photo taken around 1878-84. Alas, the Central Cabinet & Upholstery Furnishing Establishment was not Edward's showroom – his was more modest, a door or two down Church Gate – but this corner appears to have been a furniture-buying hotspot, in the shadow of the Clock Tower. By 1885, the corner building had been replaced by the East Gates Coffee House, which stills stands there today.



In due course, two of Ann's sons join the business. Eldest son William works as a French polisher, and his brother John as an upholsterer – trades they were each to follow independently for the rest of their lives. And by 1871, the household includes Ann's teenage niece and nephew working as a broker's assistant and an upholsterer respectively.

A couple of newspaper snippets add some colour. In 1866, Edward and several other cabinet makers in the town agreed "to give every man in their employ 2s weekly extra and an advance of 10 per cent on all piece work" to help cover "the increase in house rent and the prices of provisions." And over six months in 1869, employee Thomas Fisher surreptitiously stole and pawned a succession of tools from the workshop – seven planes, a saw, a square and rule – and was sentenced to twelve months' hard labour.

E. COLLIS,
UPHOLSTERER, CABINET MAKER, AND GENERAL
FURNITURE DEALER,
 4, AND 5½, CHURCH GATE, LEICESTER.

BEGBS to tender his humble thanks to the Clergy,
 Gentry, and General Public, for the kind and
 liberal support bestowed upon him during the past 17
 years, and trusts by moderate charges and personal atten-
 tion, to merit a continuance of the same.

E.C. solicits attention to his extensive stock of Furni-
 ture, consisting of every variety, and of the best Work-
 manship.

SPRING MATTRESSES FROM £2 2s.
 BEDDING, IRON BEDSTEADS,
 CHIMNEY AND LOOKING GLASSES,
 NEEDLEWORK NEATLY MOUNTED,
 DEALER IN ANTIQUE OAK FURNITURE AND
 CHINA,

DRAWING-ROOM SUITES FROM £7 7s.
 Furniture removed to all parts of the country.
 All orders punctually and personally attended to.

An advert in 1870 presents Edward as running a steady, respectable business, sustained by “the kind and liberal support bestowed upon him during the past 17 years.” When the Church Gate premises are auctioned in 1874 – for the third time during his tenancy – it is time to move. Edward relocates to 9 Belgrave Gate but it proves to be only a short-term measure; two years later, he “is retiring from the Cabinet Manufacturing Department of his business, and in consequence of the premises being sold to the Leicester Tramways Company,” he not only auctions off his supplies of “superior Mahogany, Oak, and Walnut veneers” but also takes the opportunity to prune his stock of “massive oak and Spanish mahogany suites in costly Utrecht velvets, morocco and real leather... marqueterie and buhl cabinets... Arabian and French bedsteads...” and other opulent sounding pieces.

From Belgrave Gate, Edward and Ann Collis hop briefly to 3 Town Hall Lane and then settle at 14 Silver Street. By now, they seem to have become general brokers, dealing not only in furniture, but also paintings, tableware and curiosities.

Monday and Tuesday, April 9 and 10.

Mart and Sale Rooms, 10, Silver-street, Leicester.

IMPORTANT TWO DAYS' Sale of Antique and Modern FURNITURE, valuable oil paintings by celebrated artists, fine steel and proof engravings, articles of vertu, old china, silver and electro plated goods, books, cut glass, old curiosities and miscellaneous effects, collected during many years by Mr Edward Collis, Broker, Leicester, who, owing to ill health, is retiring from the business; also a quantity of valuable furnishing requisites, removed from a cabinet-maker, and to cover cash advances.

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,

By H. T. HINCKS

(Without the slightest reserve).

On Monday and Tuesday, April 9 and 10, 1883,

SILVER and ELECTRO-PLATED GOODS, cruet stands, fish carvers, card basket, fine massive electro-plated jug, egg stand, small salver, dessert cutlery, butter coolers, candelabras, &c., cut glass, antique and modern china, fine old antique tea service, vases, figures, jugs, &c., Valuable **OIL PAINTINGS**, including examples by Lea, Parker, Sir Peter Lealy, and other artists; fine old engravings, by Earlom, Cousins, Godby, and other eminent artists; water colour drawings, oleographs, old prints, quantity of books, including works of Chas. Dickens, Shakespeare, works of fiction, travels, and adventure. The **SUPERIOR FURNITURE**, including a mahogany-frame dining-room suite in morocco leather, dining tables, bookcase and cheffioneer, 6ft. Spanish mahogany sideboard, chimney pier glasses, Brussels carpets and rugs, sofas and chairs in hair and cretonne, fenders and fire sets, japanned coal vases, elegant walnut - frame drawing - room suite, walnut centre and occasional tables, fine - toned eleven-stop American organ, in carved Gothic case, five-air musical box in rosewood case, full-compass cottage piano, by Hopkinson; bedroom furniture, including enamelled bedroom suite, iron and brass mounted bedsteads, with chintz furniture and pink sateen linings, feather and wool bedding, 4ft. mahogany wardrobe, pair duchesse tables, night commodes, a large quantity of mahogany, birch, maple, and other furniture, toilet services, blankets, sheets, and quilts, cane-seated chairs, cornice poles and brackets, and a vast quantity of items and effects, kitchen and culinary utensils and miscellanies.

Sale to commence each day at 11 and 2.30 o'clock prompt.

Catalogues now ready and Goods on view. wa859

Sadly, in April 1883, Edward "owing to ill health, is retiring from the business" and his entire stock is put up for auction. A glance down the listing – even allowing for artistic licence here and there – helps us picture how Leicester middle-class homes would have been furnished at the time. However, despite the auction including "valuable oil paintings" and "superior furniture", the sale proceeds didn't provide the comfortable retirement Edward and Ann might

have anticipated. Some 18 months later Edward dies in the Leicester Workhouse and is buried in a common grave at Welford Road Cemetery. And similarly, Ann spends her final days in the Borough Asylum before her death in 1890. After over 30 years in business, it seems a rather sad end to an enterprising couple.

What became of the furniture made in Edward Collis' cabinet workshops, I wonder? We shall never know for sure, but I like to think that one or two pieces were bought by his uncle George and used to furnish rooms at the Spinney Hill Tavern. As George made his will – bequeathing furniture, room by room – maybe it was Edward's "Oak Chest of Drawers... Work Table... Looking Glass in the Parlour and Half a Dozen Windsor Chairs" that were being passed down for later generations to enjoy.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter [@auntiemabel.org](https://twitter.com/auntiemabel.org)