

JAMES REILLY

An artisan manufacturer in Victorian England

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The biography of Manchester furniture maker, James Reilly, highlights several key aspects of nineteenth-century British economic, social and urban history. The firm of Reillys emerged out of the traditional urban artisan culture of the first half of the nineteenth century when craft traditions dominated the British economy. A climate of technical innovation allied to the burgeoning urban markets of mid-Victorian England enabled ambitious and ingenious artisans like James Reilly to make the progression into independent business. Reilly proved to be an enthusiastic and ingenious innovator in a trade where the variability of raw material and the delicacy of the final product meant that mechanisation was by no means straightforward and skilled hand labour persisted. By combining traditional and modern elements his firm reveals the variable impact of capitalistic enterprise in an industry dominated by craft traditions. At the same time his transformation from an artisan manufacturer into a non-manual businessman with interests stretching beyond the furniture trade shows the important realignment of work and business which was occurring in the nineteenth century.

Manchester and the North West was already a centre of the furniture trade long before James Reilly arrived there. In 1797 there were six chairmakers in Manchester plus another in Salford as well as 29 cabinet makers. Individual cabinet makers dominated Manchester's trade at this time and specialist retailers and large-scale manufacturers were largely absent before the mid-nineteenth century. Few of Manchester's manufacturers produced furniture which bore a maker's mark – a sign of quality. Two who did were John Bancroft, a Salford based Quaker operating from the 1770s, and William Worsley whose workshop was in Hanging Ditch. These men produced chairs which involved a lot of 'turnery' including spindles and bobbins on the backs and underarm supports which required specialist workshops.¹

Outside Manchester the North West was the home base of one of the country's top furniture producers. Robert Gillows had been in business in Lancaster since 1728 and during the eighteenth century built a national reputation for providing top-quality furniture for the rich and well to do. Gillows gained increasingly important commissions including a number of major country house fittings, notably the interior woodwork and furniture at Tatton Park, 1780–1812. Gillows expanded his business beyond the North West opening a branch in London in 1764 to market furniture in the capital and keep in touch with the latest styles. This paid off handsomely in the nineteenth century when Gillows were awarded the commission for fitting out Pugin's new Houses of Parliament in 1851–59.²

Although no Manchester producer was on a par with Gillows, either in scale of operations or reputation, the town's furniture trade expanded rapidly after 1800. By 1828 there were 31 cabinet makers increasing by 1853 to 191 plus 19 chair makers. Many of the cabinet makers were located in the town's Shudehill area along with other skilled trades as the street names testify: Foundry Lane, Coop, Turner, Mason and Carpenter Streets. Furniture-

making businesses were well supplied by local sawmills and timber yards.³

Sometime between the 1820s and 1850 the Reilly family settled in this bustling area of Manchester. It is not known when James Reilly senior arrived, but both of his two sons James and Thomas were born in Liverpool in 1825 and 1827. What is certain is that the Reillys (James, his wife Jane and two sons) were living at 11 Edge Street in Shudehill in 1851, sharing their house with three lodgers and an Irish house-servant. What separated the Reillys from many other Irish immigrants in Manchester at this time was their skill as cabinet-makers. James, the eldest son followed his father into the same trade and by 1851 both were operating as independent, small scale masters employing five and four men respectively, and almost certainly carrying out their business from the premises in Edge Street.⁴

In many respects the Reillys at this stage perfectly typify the work culture of the skilled trades in mid-nineteenth-century England. They were located in an area rich in artisans and small masters, in a town whose population was rapidly expanding. The succession of James into the same trade as his father was characteristic of skilled work, since apprenticeships were often reserved by fathers for their sons, a practice encouraged by masters and workers alike as a way of guaranteeing and preserving skill. This process of self-recruitment was reinforced by the upward mobility of many artisans into the small master class; something which both James Reilly and his son had achieved by 1851. The small size of the Reilly's workforce is entirely typical of skilled enterprise at this time.⁵

During the 1850s and 1860s the character of the Reilly enterprises was transformed. After 1855 there were no fewer than five changes of address all within central Manchester. But none of these premises could cope with the growing level of business which James Reilly junior (his father died in 1859) was generating. Unlike his father who remained a handworking small master, James junior broke out of the constraints of the craft tradition to emerge as an all-round and increasingly successful businessman. By 1861 the trade directories reveal that he had at last found a suitable base for his growing enterprise. His New Globe Mahogany Chair Works in Hulme covered a two acre site and included a seasoning and drying room for component chair parts prior to assembly plus a workshop which housed a central power source – a steam engine. By 1869 there were upwards of three hundred people regularly employed at the New Globe Works, compared with the four or five men he and his father had employed in the 1850s. The works were located close to the Liverpool Road where a host of smaller furniture makers and woodworkers created a nucleus of factories and workshops serviced by local timber yards and excellent transport facilities provided by the canal network with the Liverpool-Manchester Railway less than a quarter of a mile away.⁶

The New Globe had all the characteristics of an integrated furniture business. Its mechanical steam saw could reduce a 'two foot square' mahogany log to a workable size in

three minutes, while at same time boy machinists made wooden dowels. It contained separate rooms for preliminary carving, stuffing, French polishing and padding. Moreover, Reilly not only made his own chairs but other people's as well, in addition to his own machinery and grinding his own paint. He was using interchangeable components to replace dowels and tenons and with 'off the shelf' models to save on inventory costs. The scale of his operation was radically different from that of individual cabinet makers who could only afford to make up goods in small quantities because they had to meet costs and wages out of weekly earnings. By the late 1860s Reilly had also made the transition from a purely local businessman. The market for his furniture was the new provincial middle class which was expanding rapidly not just at home but further afield as well. By 1869 his chairs were being sold to the new colonial markets in Melbourne, Sydney and Montreal.⁷

The level of mechanisation and rise in the scale of operations embodied in the New Globe Works was only part of a wider technical revolution occurring in cabinet-making and wood working in the mid-nineteenth century. Technical change centred on the increased use of circular saws for cutting veneers allied to the application of steampower. Apart from the growth of demand two other factors stimulated innovation. The Patent Law Amendment Act of 1852 liberalised innovation by simplifying and cheapening the cost of obtaining a patent. At the same time the Great Exhibition of 1851 inspired an increase in the frequency of international exhibitions at which new woodworking machines and furniture designs were shown.⁸

In the Manchester region these technical and organisational changes occurred in a number of other large-scale producers. The famous woodworking machinery makers Thomas Robinson of Rochdale started business in 1838 and their 1852 patent for machinery to shape wood into mouldings led to their capture of worldwide markets. By 1877 Robinson's works covered an area of seven acres and employed over twelve hundred men. This firm was the largest of its type in the world and in addition to woodworking machinery it produced boilers and steam engines for driving them. The firm's international reputation was confirmed by the award of first prize at the international exhibitions at London, Paris, and Vienna in the 1860s and 1870s.⁹

James Lamb's furniture business was on the same scale as Reilly's and his career followed a remarkably similar pattern. Lamb completed his apprenticeship as a cabinet maker in the 1830s, was operating on his own account in the 1840s and by 1860 had a factory in Castlefield and a purpose built five-storey warehouse in John Dalton Street. Like Reilly, Lamb used the latest woodworking machinery but since he operated at the 'Art Furnishing' end of the market design was more important for him. He achieved fame in this role being awarded medals at the London and Paris exhibitions.¹⁰

While mechanisation should not be overstated, even in large businesses like Reilly's and Lamb's it co-existed, sometimes uneasily, with skilled hand labour. As historians have observed cabinet-making was revolutionised by the application of steampower especially in the production of veneers, mouldings and parts but the woodworkers themselves, with the exception of the sawyers, were only indirectly affected by these changes.¹¹ This is confirmed by a close examination of Reilly's innovations. Reilly made a virtue out of machine usage and advertised his 'Patent Machinery' as a way of selling his furniture. He was an

enthusiastic innovator with no less than ten patents recorded against his name. These varied from 'improvements in machinery as apparatus for tenoning, mortising and saving wood, metal and other materials' to 'improved castings and sealings for steam boilers to save time, labour and fuel'. These were aimed at achieving savings on fuel and material and did not seriously threaten the position of his skilled workers. Indeed Reilly's most important patent for a 'perpendicular saw working up and down' needed 'a worker with a dextrous hand' to turn it into a chair. James Lamb was far more defensive about his use of machinery. He used machines for sawing, planing, mortising and moulding but argued that their use was 'unblamable since such time saving help is used with due regard to artistic thought and is secondary to hand labour'.¹²

During the 1860s Reilly's business interests began to expand and diversify. In 1863 he ventured into the furniture retail trade. This was not unusual among Manchester's large furniture manufacturers. By the late nineteenth century Gillows had showrooms in Lancaster, London and King Street, Manchester (though their production at Manchester was negligible). James Lamb's showroom at John Dalton Street carried a range of stock from the 'Lancashire Rocking Chair to the most costly specimens of Italian Art furniture'.¹³ Kendal, Milne and Company had a cluster of showrooms in the city in the 1870s at Deansgate, Police Street, St. Anne's Street and Campfield though these were not all furniture showrooms, since Kendal's were carpet dealers and agents for decorative goods. Kendal's were beginning the transition from cabinet-makers and upholsterers into a department store.¹⁴ Reilly's show and sales room was in London Road, but it does not appear to have survived. By 1865 there is not mention of a retail outlet under Reilly's name in the trade directory.¹⁵

Perhaps the relative narrowness of Reilly's output precluded his successful exploitation of retailing but in any case by the late-1860s he was moving into new areas. His opening of the Manchester Baths and Swimming School on Whit Monday in 1867 next door to the Globe Mahogany Chair Works, reveals Reilly's interest in the commercial opportunities inherent in the provision of organised recreation. As with the furniture business his innovative skills were quickly harnessed to the new venture. In 1867 he had a patent approved for a 'Mechanical Aid worked by hand or motive power to enable the art of swimming to be rapidly acquired'. Manchester was already served by a small number of swimming baths, but Reilly's was on a very large scale, one of the three pools was sixty-yards long with water supplied from a well by steam engine at a rate of 30,000 gallons per day. Clean and secure conditions were provided, including towels and bathing costumes at a small extra cost while personal belongings were secured. His intended customers were respectable working- and middle-class men for whom a raised open room with easy chairs was provided where visitors might enjoy 'the luxury of a cigar'.¹⁶

On a much larger scale was Pomona Gardens acquired by Reilly in 1868 and representing the peak of his interest in the leisure industries. In some ways Pomona anticipated the leisure and conference centres of the twentieth century. The site had been a public Zoological Gardens in the 1830s, covered twenty acres and extended along the River Irwell and Bridgewater Canal. At the centre of the site Reilly built Pomona Palace, lit by gas and surmounted by a clock tower, it was said to be able to hold 28,000 people. It would accommodate an orchestra and be used as a dance

hall but political meetings were also held there. Between 1868 and 1872 Benjamin Disraeli and John Bright both addressed large audiences, and demonstrations for the Conservative and Liberal parties were held there in the late-1870s. The Manchester and Salford Trades Council organised a rally in support of the nine-hour movement in 1871 at which over 3,000 people attended. In 1884 there was a meeting of the unemployed. A note of respectability was struck by the annual Police and Fire Brigade Athletic Society Meeting being held at Pomona with the Fire Brigade in attendance in 1883.¹⁷

During the 1870s Pomona was a competitor to Belle Vue and although the latter was on a larger scale (42 compared to 21 acres) it could not match the covered facilities which Reilly had created at Pomona. What both venues had in common was a dance hall, usually described in respectable terms as a ball-room. Pomona could accommodate a full-scale orchestra and dances represented Reilly's 'bread and butter' source of income. Nearly twenty years after it closed in 1888 it was still fondly remembered for this activity. A military band attended on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday 'from four o'clock in the afternoon . . . and the stolen delights of these evenings were treasured by Manchester and Salford women'.¹⁸

The dances at Pomona (and at least one illegal prize fight held there in 1874) suggest that Reilly was searching for a wider mass urban market. However the reality of market conditions meant that he had to operate on several different fronts. Fetes, horse shows, galas, orchestral concerts and ballets were aimed at a more respectable audience.

By the 1880s Reilly's business empire had spread to what was perhaps the most distinctive Victorian leisure industry – the music hall. In 1884 he opened the St. James' Theatre in Oxford Street and, true to form, ensured that the site was sufficiently diversified to include shops, a restaurant, offices and an adjoining hall. The Argyle Rooms, licensed to Thomas Reilly, James' younger brother, were connected to the St. James complex. One can only assume that Thomas was linked in some way to James's catering-entertaining business but he remains a shadowy figure and this is the only mention of his name among the Reilly business interests. It is quite possible that the two brothers were not close since Thomas was not included in James's will.¹⁹

The mid-1880s were the high water mark for Reilly's business. In the next few years a series of external shocks transformed his financial situation. In June 1887 a big explosion at the chemical works of Roberts, Dale and Co. at Cornbrook, adjoining Pomona Gardens, extensively damaged the ballroom, dining room and Agricultural Hall as well as Reilly's home which was on the site.²⁰ Fire was an ever present threat to Victorian businessmen and Reilly had already suffered from it in 1870 when there was a large fire at the New Globe Works. Fortunately Reilly was well insured.²¹ There was to be no recovery from the disaster at Pomona since in 1888 the Manchester Ship Canal Company compulsorily purchased the site after a lengthy, costly and acrimonious arbitration which saw Reilly receive £70,352, less than half the original claim he had tendered.²²

In September 1889 James Reilly died and William, his son, inherited the New Globe Works, St. James's Theatre and his father's personal estate of more than £56,000. Given his modest beginnings the size of Reilly's fortune was considerable but it did not put him in the category of the very rich. Moreover, Reilly had acquired few of the trappings of wealth. He never purchased land other than his

business sites; neither did he live luxuriously since his home was on the Pomona site. Like many artisan manufacturers of this period Reilly continued to maintain the umbilical link with his locality, works and workers.

Reilly's will was a microcosm of the concerns of a self-made Victorian businessman. Firstly, he tried to guarantee the long term future of his furniture-making business by placing it under the control of Trustees with a requirement that it was turned into a limited company. Secondly, he sought to guarantee his family's respectability by insisting that his son faced disinheritance if he married beneath him. In fact William never made the conventional and respectable marriage which his father must have hoped for but instead took a mistress by whom he had a daughter. Reilly's will however highlights the real fear of downward mobility among the newly rich.²³

By the 1890s furniture making was being transformed by new producers and mergers among established firms. In the East End of London, Lebus, the country's largest furniture manufacturer which by 1903 was employing 1,000 workers, co-existed alongside many small cabinet makers. New producers in Manchester included Kaufman and Co., bedroom furniture specialists and the Co-operative Wholesale Society which was making cheap mass produced furniture in Broughton.²⁴

Mergers also became commonplace. Gillows, who had joined in a loose business arrangement with Waring of Liverpool in the late nineteenth century, were taken over by them in 1903. In Manchester following his retirement in 1888, James Lamb's business was merged with two other prominent Manchester cabinet makers, E. Goodall and Highway and Son; a development which enabled the company to survive until the 1950s. Reilly's business was not so fortunate. After his death it was managed by Josiah Hansford, his old Works manager at the New Globe Works. Hansford was an important link between Reilly and his son, and before his retirement in 1912 he acted as William's adviser. William was one of the major share holders in the limited company which was formed in 1893 and on at least two occasions loaned it large sums of money but unlike his father he lived a more detached life in the affluent suburbs of Davyhulme and Urmston. By 1909 the company was in difficulties and was being managed by a firm of chartered accountants who had been brought in as Receivers. In 1913 a Liquidator was appointed but the final winding-up did not take place until 1921, two years after William's death.²⁵

James Reilly was a classic nineteenth-century entrepreneur whose career confirms the importance of the artisan sector as a source of entrepreneurial talent, innovation and as a spring board for upward mobility. But he was not restricted by this tradition. Above all else he was a businessman and does not appear to have been involved either in Manchester's civic affairs or its local society. Neither did he court publicity except when it could be used to promote his business interests. A local reporter describing his business in the 1860s complimented him on his energy and his role as a public benefactor but apologised for 'bringing his name more prominently forward than would otherwise have been necessary'.²⁶ Apart from business the other driving forces in his life were his search for respectability and his craft pride. It is no surprise to find he described himself as a 'chair maker and gentleman' while the terms of his will reveal dynastic ambitions and a desire to protect his social position. However, while his business was a long lasting one its economic base proved ultimately to be too narrow.

NOTES

- 1 See Scholes' *Manchester and Salford Directory* (1797) and C. Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture* (London 1991).
- 2 For the early history of Robert Gillows see C. Gilbert, *Ibid* and H. Barty King, *Maples: Fine Furniture* (London 1992).
- 3 Data on Manchester's cabinet makers is from Pigot's *Lancashire Directory* 1828-29 and *Manchester and District Directory* 1853.
- 4 Information on Reilly, family and residences is from Manchester Commercial Directories (various years), and Wesleyan Cemetery, Thomas Street, Cheetham Hill.
- 5 For further information on the world of the nineteenth-century artisan see G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London 1840-1880*, (1978). On the restriction of apprenticeships see C. More, *Skill and the Working Class in England 1870-1914* (1981).
- 6 The New Globe Works are described in *Free Lance*, 15 August 1869 and 11 September 1869.
- 7 *Ibid*
- 8 The impact of Patent Law Amendment Act is discussed in D.G. Blankentham, 'Cabinet makers in Victorian Britain', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Warwick 1978.
- 9 All information on Robinson's is from D. Povey and H. Clayton, *History of Thomas Robinson and Son Ltd* (1962).
- 10 James Lamb's business is discussed in *Journal of Decorative Art*, October 1898, p.251.
- 11 See R. Samuel, 'The Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain', *History Workshop*, 3, 1977.
- 12 Details of Reilly's patents are in The British Library, Science Reference and Information Service. His perpendicular saw, a precursor of the band saw, is Patent Number 2800 (1853).
- 13 Details of James Lamb's stock from *The Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, 1 February 1883.
- 14 For information on Kendal Milne see *Post Office Trades Directory* (1873).
- 15 *Free Lance*, August 1868.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 Pomona Palace is described in S. Massey, *A History of Stretford*, (Altrincham 1976). Details of the meetings held at Pomona are in the *Salford Weekly News*, 3 April 1875, 25 October 1879, 1 November 1879, 1 March 1884.
- 18 *Manchester City News*, 26 May 1906.
- 19 Details of St. James' Theatre are in a collection of play bills advertising the opening of the theatre in 1884 located in Central Library Manchester. Thomas Reilly's involvement in the Argyle Rooms is from the Licence Archives City Magistrates Court Manchester.
- 20 Details of the explosion at Pomona are in B. Leech, *History of The Manchester Ship Canal*, Vol 2 (1907).
- 21 Details of the 1870 fire are in Watch Committee Minutes 1869-1871, Vol. 8, (Manchester City Archives).
- 22 The purchase of Pomona by the Manchester Ship Canal Company is described in *Manchester City News*, 25 June 1887.
- 23 Details of Reilly's will are in the Sub-Registry, Duncombe Place, York.
- 24 For details of the late nineteenth-century furniture trade see P. Kirkham, R. Mace and J. Porter, *Furnishing the World: The East End Furniture Trade 1830-1980* (1987) and for the C.W.S. in Manchester's Trade see *The Wheatsheaf*, December 1899 (C.W.S. Archives, Manchester).
- 25 Details of the company's performance and management after James's death are from Company Papers (No.37698) in the P.R.O., reference number NBT 31.15275.
- 26 *Free Lance*, August 1868.

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