

William Bradshaw: Furniture Maker and Tapestry Weaver

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AMONG THE LEADING MAKERS of English furniture and tapestries in the early eighteenth century was William Bradshaw (1700–1775). He was probably the “Mr Bradshaw, tapestry weaver of Soho Square” mentioned by John Adam (elder brother of the architect and designer Robert Adam) when he visited London in 1748.¹ By that time Bradshaw had become one of the most important of the rare breed of English tapestry weavers, working after designs by Watteau and others.² He combined his talent for weaving with a rare skill in joinery and furniture making, achieving a success that enabled him, by 1743, to take his ease in semiretirement at Halton, near Lancaster in north-west England. Recent research³ has established new facts about this provincial side of Bradshaw’s life.

Bradshaw was the son of James Bradshaw and his wife Elizabeth (Clark) of Cockerham, five miles south of Lancaster. He was baptized in the Church of Saint Michael there on January 18, 1700.⁴ He was not apprenticed locally to any trade (unlike his friend Robert Gillow [1703–1772], the joiner and furniture maker), and may have served his time with a London tapestry weaver such as Joshua Morris, though there is no evidence for this. He must have inherited some money or enjoyed an influential patronage that enabled him to set up workshops and warerooms in Frith Street, Greek Street, and Hanover Square from 1728 to 1762.⁵

In 1727, Bradshaw’s adversary the painter and engraver William Hogarth sued the weaver Joshua Morris in the Westminster Court of Common Pleas for failing to pay for use of a tapestry design.⁶ Bradshaw gave evidence on behalf of Morris, which may indicate some arrangement over employment, and argued that “the painting [by Hogarth] was not performed in a workman-like manner and that it was impossible to make tapestry from it.” The judge disagreed and found in favor of Hogarth, who was awarded £30. The suit

paved the way for important legislation in 1735 that gave to designers a legal copyright over their designs.⁷

Broken by the suit, Morris moved in 1728 from Frith Street, and Bradshaw took over his workshops. Two years later, Bradshaw joined in partnership with Tobias Stranover (1684–1756), an artist who specialized in painting exotic birds. Their surnames have been linked formally since such birds were noted on the right corner of a tapestry-covered settee (with six chairs *en suite*), which was at Belton House, Lincolnshire, until sold from there by Lord Brownlow in 1929. The set was described in the sale catalogue as “A suite of Queen Anne walnut Furniture, on cabriole legs and club feet, the seats and backs stuffed, and covered with Soho tapestry, woven with vases of flowers, groups of flowers and fruit, and on the settee a medallion of poultry with parrots at the sides, and a medallion of Venus and cupids in strapwork borders.”⁸ The suite disappeared from sight until it was traced in 1996 by the writer to an English private collection.⁹ Apart from the makers’ surnames woven into them (Stranover over Bradshaw), the patterns on the settee back and seat are based on engravings by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer. It is the exemplar by which other pieces are attributed to the partnership.

In The Metropolitan Museum of Art (66.71.1–4; Figure 1) is a set of four armchairs whose backs, seats, and armrests are upholstered in Soho tapestry, probably designed by Stranover and woven by Bradshaw.¹⁰ The chairs, originally at Chesterfield House (the fourth earl of Chesterfield’s important Rococo-style home in London), have prominent vases of flowers, as in the Monnoyer engravings. The settee design compares well with another design, found also on a settee, at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.¹¹ These further attributions were listed in 1985 by the late Edith A. Standen; in addition, there is a panel for a firescreen, about 1750, in the Royal Collection at Holyrood House, Edinburgh. This has the usual vase of flowers after Monnoyer, flanked by scrollwork incorporating bust heads in profile.¹²

In 1732 Stranover and Bradshaw separated, and

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Figure 1. One of a set of four armchairs, English, 18th century. Mahogany and tapestry, 39 x 29½ x 30 in. (99.1 x 74.9 x 76.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Dannie Heineman, 1966 (66.71.1)

Bradshaw moved to 27 Soho Square, where he resumed his business as a furniture maker. (He presumably had his workshops there, though in 1748 he gave up the house in Soho Square and retained only the back premises. He was assessed for rates at 60 Soho Square from 1748 to 1751 and at number 59 from 1752 to 1754.) In 1736 Bradshaw supplied furniture to the second earl of Stanhope at Chevening, Kent. The extensive bill¹³ of some £1,200 was receipted by Bradshaw on February 2, 1737. It included two suites—a mahogany one, originally of twelve armchairs and two sofas (of which eleven chairs and one sofa survive at Chevening), covered with Soho tapestry (£65 and £29 13s. 10d.), and a gilt set of chairs, costing £3 15s. each. In addition he provided “12 Ells and 25/8 of tapestry [some 18 yards] in 3 Borders and two Additions, £37 16s.” Bradshaw also erected the great geometric staircase at Chevening, working to a design by the French Huguenot architect Nicholas Dubois.¹⁴ It is an outstanding example of the all-embracing skills of an eighteenth-century craftsman.

By 1743 Bradshaw was able to enjoy semiretirement at Halton, and he was appointed a freeman of nearby Lancaster in that year. He had acquired Halton Hall, its mill, and an iron furnace, and had purchased several estates in London and the south. By the time of a sale of Bradshaw properties in 1834, there were

“divers compact farms, water, corn, cotton and flax mills, woods, a stream, fisheries (including four miles of salmon fishing rights on the river Lune), stone quarries and beds of coal.”¹⁵

Bradshaw was a choleric, litigious man, but he had instincts of survival, and right as he saw it, when, as a Protestant, he captained a company of the First Royal Lancaster Militia in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. In his will of May 9, 1774, with codicils added the following February, he made provision for his heirs “to defend or obtain any title to his estates.”¹⁶ Bradshaw died on February 21, 1775, a bachelor aged 75 years. The family firm of Gillow, which Bradshaw had helped establish in London as one of the most successful furniture-making firms, supplied the lace-lined strong oak coffin. His family erected about 1795 an imposing mausoleum in the Halton churchyard, which still survives. On it was placed a tablet that reads, “Sacred to the memory of William Bradshaw, late of Halton Hall, Esquire, who Departed this life, 21 February, 1775, aged 75 years, sincerely lamented by all his friends and acquaintances. In grateful remembrance of whose many virtues William Bradshaw Esq., his nephew and successor erected this mausoleum as a proof of his great respect and dutiful attention.”¹⁷ Few furniture makers of any period have left as much evidence of their lives.

NOTES

1. Geoffrey Beard and Christopher Gilbert, eds., *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers, 1660–1840* (Leeds, 1986), p. 100.
2. “The Soho Tapestry Weavers,” app. 1 in *The Parish of St. Anne Soho*, vol. 34 of *Survey of London* (1966), p. 517.
3. Susan Stuart and Keith Horsfield, “Portrait of Squire Bradshaw,” *Contrebis* 8 (Lancaster Archaeological and Historical Society, 1997), pp. 12–19.
4. Parish register, St. Michael’s Church, Cockerham.
5. Beard and Gilbert, *Dictionary*, p. 100.
6. W. A. Thorpe, “Bradshaws and Their Connection,” *Country Life* (September 20 and 27, 1946), pp. 20, 27.
7. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times* (New Haven and London, 1971), pp. 164–65.
8. Christie’s, London, March 14, 1929, lot 78.
9. Geoffrey Beard, *Upholsterers and Interior Furnishing in England, 1530–1840* (New Haven and London, 1997), pls. 176–77.
10. Edith A. Standen, *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1985), vol. 2, no. 130.
11. Geoffrey Beard, “Some Eighteenth-Century Seats and Covers Re-Examined,” *Antiques* 145 (June 1994), p. 849, pl. 9.
12. Margaret Swain, *Tapestries and Textiles at the Palace of Holyrood House in the Royal Collection* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 64.
13. Kent Archives Office, MS U1590, A20A.
14. H. M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, 3rd rev. ed. (New Haven and London, 1985), p. 323.
15. *Lancaster Gazette*, August 9, 1834, cited by Stuart and Horsfield, “Portrait of Squire Bradshaw,” n. 41.
16. Lancashire Record Office, Preston. Will proved April 22, 1775.
17. The text of the tablet was given by W. O. Roper, *Churches, Castles and Ancient Halls of North Lancashire* (Lancaster, 1880), vol. 1, p. 34. The mausoleum was sealed in 1962 and, due to vandalism, the tablet removed.