



The Burlington House Commodes

A Pair of George III Ormolu-mounted Satinwood and Marquetry Commodes, attributed to John Mayhew and William Ince, c.1780-85

Of demi-lune form, each constructed of deal, mahogany, and oak, veneered with figured West Indian satinwood and holly, with rosewood bandings, hare-wood and burr-yew marquetry, and ormolu mounts, the top inlaid with a semi-elliptical panel of burr-yew, the frieze inlaid with festoons, and the legs with trailing husks and foliage, in hare-wood, the doors veneered in figured West Indian satinwood, enclosing shelves; with early modifications to the frieze and base of the rear side panels, and later sprung door catch and ormolu handle; one commode retaining paper label inscribed 'Hon. C. Cavendish / Aug^t. 6 1854. No. 787'

58in. (147cm.) wide; 33¼in. (84cm.) high; 24½in. (62cm.) deep

Provenance

Almost certainly supplied to Lord George Cavendish (1754-1834), 1st Earl of Burlington (2nd cr.), for Burlington House, Piccadilly, c.1782-5

Securely recorded in the collection of his son, the Hon. Charles Compton Cavendish (1793-1863), 1st Baron Chesham, 1854

Thence by descent to John Compton Cavendish (1894-1952), 4th Baron Chesham, Latimer, Chesham, Buckinghamshire, by whom sold Sotheby's, London, 30 Nov. 1945, lot 147 (bt. A. J. Cohen)

Christopher Grey Tennant (1899-1983), 2nd Baron Glenconner, by whom sold Christie's, London, 27 June 1957, lot 84 (bt. Guy Hannen, Chairman of Christie's, as agent for undisclosed principal)

A family trust, by which sold anonymously, Christie's, London, 29 November 1984, lot 144

Acquired by the present owner by private treaty

Literature

Lucy Wood, *Catalogue of Commodes. The Lady Lever Art Gallery, National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, HMSO, 1994, p. 258, fig. 243*

History

In 1945, when the present commodes were sold by the 4th Lord Chesham at Sotheby's, it was stated in the catalogue that they had belonged to his ancestor, George Augustus Henry Cavendish, 1st Earl of Burlington (1754-1834), and had provenance from Burlington House, Piccadilly. On information supplied by Lord Chesham himself, it was claimed that the commodes '... were formerly in the collection of George Augustus, Earl of Burlington, and were once part of the furnishings of Burlington House, London'.

The evidence strongly supports this claim. In fact it is probable that the commodes were originally commissioned by Lord Burlington, specifically for Burlington House, and were subsequently adapted on his orders as part of the redecoration of the building in the early 19th century, remaining in situ until their removal by his son, the 1st Lord Chesham, in 1854, when Burlington House was acquired by the Government as the eventual home of the Royal Academy.



Burlington House in the 19th century

Stylistically, the commodes belong to the early 1780s. This was precisely when Lord Burlington, newly married and looking to establish himself in fashionable London society, took over the lease of Burlington House, one of the grandest private residences in the capital. Lord Burlington and his wife occupied the house for only three years, from 1782 to 1785, but during that time they are known to have placed significant orders for furniture with London cabinet-makers, wishing no doubt to stamp their own individual mark on their new surroundings. In scale and design the commodes would have been ideally suited to the state apartments at Burlington House, which had recently been redecorated in grand Neo-classical style by Lord Burlington's predecessor, the 3rd Duke of Portland.

Although Lord Burlington departed in 1785, he returned again in 1815, at which time the house was extensively remodelled. The works included the removal of virtually all the original dados in the state apartments, and remarkably the commodes show signs of having been modified at this period in a way that precisely reflects this change. Side panels have been added at the back to fill the gaps that would otherwise have appeared when the commodes, originally with overhanging tops designed to slide over a projecting dado rail, were placed in a



Inventory label attached to the back of one of the commodes



Detail showing the close correspondence between the profile of the side panels and the skirting in the former Ball Room, now the Reynolds Room

room with walls that were flush at dado level. Moreover, the panels themselves have been shaped at the base to match the profile of the skirting in the room where they were intended to stand; and when, as an experiment, the commodes were recently placed in the spot where they most probably stood, on either side of the chimney piece in the former Ball Room, the fit was so close that, even allowing for likely changes in the floor level and depth of the skirting board, it seems reasonable to suppose that this was indeed their original position when installed by Lord Burlington after the alterations of 1815.

Another compelling piece of evidence is a label attached to the reverse of one of the commodes, which carries the name of Lord Burlington's younger son, the Hon. Charles Compton Cavendish (1793-1863), later 1st Baron

Chesham, and the date 1854. Cavendish inherited Burlington House on his father's death in 1834, and lived there until 1854, when he sold the building to the British Government. The label must surely have been added when the contents of Burlington House were being packed up prior to Cavendish's departure; and the number it carries (787) presumably corresponds to that in a contemporary inventory, now lost.

Following their removal from Burlington House the commodes were transferred to Latimer, Buckinghamshire, another of the properties inherited by Lord Chesham from his father, which became the family's principal seat; and it was from Latimer that the commodes were sold by the 4th Lord Chesham in 1945.

The commodes subsequently entered the collection of the 2nd Lord Glenconner, by whom they were sold again in 1957, although by this time the Burlington House provenance had apparently been forgotten, receiving no mention in the catalogue. From this point the connection with Burlington House was lost; and when the commodes were sold once more at auction in 1984, and later through the trade, the provenance was again omitted.



One of the commodes on display in the Saloon, Burlington House

It is only now that the link to Burlington House has been re-established, confirming the commodes' unique importance as the only pieces of furniture known to survive from this major architectural landmark before it became the home of the Royal Academy. After an interval of over 150 years the commodes have recently returned to Burlington House, where, through the generosity of the present owner, a descendant of the Cavendish family, they have been placed on temporary exhibition in the magnificent Saloon.

Attribution

When sold from the Glenconner collection in 1957, the commodes carried an attribution to the royal cabinet-maker William Gates (*fl.* 1774 – after 1800), who is known to have supplied commodes of similar form and style to the Prince of Wales, later George IV, for his apartments at the Queen's House, St. James's Park, later rebuilt as Buckingham Palace, illustrated in *Burlington Magazine* (Jul. 1931), 22-7.

However, the stylistic and historical evidence strongly points to Gates' contemporaries, John Mayhew and William Ince, whose partnership, spanning the years 1758/9 – 1804, was among the most important and productive of the period, including commissions from both the royal family and the senior nobility.

The use of burr-yew inlay, prominently deployed in the form of large semi-elliptical

panels to the tops, is a characteristic feature of their work, closely paralleled on other pieces they produced at the same period. The scale and quality of the commodes are likewise typical of their production, as is the combination of highly-figured satinwood and Neo-classical marquetry, with pronounced ormolu mounts of Anglo-French design.

A related group of satinwood and marquetry furniture, now in the Devonshire collection at Compton Place, Sussex, shares the same attribution and provenance, having almost certainly been commissioned from Mayhew and Ince by the 1st Earl of Burlington, who left Compton and its contents to his grandson, the 7th Duke of Devonshire;

and it is also known that Mayhew and Ince worked extensively for Lord Burlington's elder brother, the 5th Duke of Devonshire, who owned Burlington House at the time Lord Burlington lived there in the early 1780s, when the commodes were made.

Similarities also exist with a group of previously unattributed commodes, including an example in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, illustrated in Lucy Wood, *Catalogue of Commodes. The Lady Lever Art Gallery*, National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, HMSO, 1994, pp. 254-59, and in Percy MacQuoid, *The Age of Satinwood*, 1988 ed., p. 377, fig. 850. Shared features include identical or near-identical ormolu mounts, and the same use of festoons to the frieze.



Detail showing burr-yew inlay to tops