Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

GILLOW OF LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 5



Gillow bookcase - Judges' Lodgings Museum, Lancaster

Gillow furniture

This bookcase was bought by Lady Mary Rawlinson in 1772 for £17 17s 0d (£2772 in 2020 money). It was bought for the nation for £260,000 in 2007 and can now be seen in the Judges' Lodgings Museum in Lancaster.

The Rawlinsons were wealthy West Indies traders. Gillow of Lancaster, who made it, produced furniture of the very highest quality for the very wealthy – for their country and town houses, for British and Russian royal yachts, for Cunard liners (the *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*) and a carriage for Edward VII's Royal Train. They made tables, chairs, mirrors, chests, desks and wood panelling.

Their furniture was remarkable for both the craftsmanship and the range of expensive woods they used. They started by producing designs from Sheraton, Chippendale and Hepplewhite and then they created their own styles of chairs, tables and bookcases. They invented new types of furniture – expanding tables, secretaires, small billiards tables and the Davenport desk.

Their use of exquisite woods, usually tropical hardwoods in beautiful combinations, is perhaps their enduring mark. The wood came from the southern USA, Central and South America and the Caribbean islands. They used over a hundred different woods, solid and veneers, inlays and marquetry. Eventually they sold complete interior furnishing schemes including wallpapers and upholstery.

The company's longevity is also attributable to their moving with the times, supplying 'Gothic' styles in the later Victorian period and Art Deco furniture in the interwar years, for example. Their London showroom (176 Oxford Road, now Oxford Street) was critical after 1764 for reaching their rich clients and detecting swings in fashion. Manufacturing in Lancaster was cheaper than in London where many clients were.

The family and the firm

Robert Gillow (*c.*1703-72) set up the firm, which continued long after all the Gillows had withdrawn. Robert completed his apprenticeship in 1728. Ships sailing from Liverpool and Lancaster to West Africa and the West Indies brought back not only rum, tobacco, spices and sugar from the plantations there but also the tropical hardwoods that were to become so important for Gillow furniture. The tax on tropical hardwoods had been removed in 1720-1 and Gillow was an early importer of mahogany. Though succeeded by his sons Richard (1733–1811) and Robert (1745–93) and other family members, outside partners were soon brought into the firm and by 1814 the immediate family connection had lapsed and the company was run by Leonard Redmayne and others. In 1897 Gillow entered into an arrangement with Waring, the Liverpool cabinetmakers, and were in effect taken over by them in 1903.

The Lancaster workshops were closed in 1962 soon after Waring and Gillow had been taken over by Great Universal Stores. A wealth of skilled trades was lost to Lancaster. Waring and Gillow continued as a retail name, merging in 1980 with another cabinetmaker, Maple & Co, and then being taken over in 1990 by the former Allied Maples Group.

Gillow sites in Lancaster

The first major Gillow factory was on Castle Hill, just by the entrance to the Judges' Lodgings Museum. In 1878 they completed a new larger factory on St Leonard's Gate and in 1881 opened a large showroom on North Road (both now student accommodation).

The Custom House (1764) (now Lancaster Maritime Museum) on St George's Quay was designed by Richard Gillow, Robert's son who had trained as an architect. During the World Wars Gillow made tents, trench covers, camouflage nets and parts for gliders and aircraft. The Gillow Mausoleum (*c.*1830) at the Church of St Thomas and St Elizabeth in nearby Thurnham village is worth seeing for its imaginative Egyptian design.



Judges' Lodgings Museum - https://www.lancastervision.com/judges-lodgings-museum-lancaster/

Where to see Gillow furniture

In Lancaster, their work is found in the Judges' Lodgings Museum, Church Street, Lancaster (satnav use LA1 1YS). Other examples can be seen in the Shire Hall and Grand Jury Room in Lancaster Castle, Lancaster Town Hall and St Joseph's Church (Skerton).

In the surrounding area their furniture can be seen at Leighton Hall (Carnforth), which was the Gillow family home from 1827, Levens Hall, Sizergh Castle, Holker Hall and churches in Hornby (St Mary), Melling (St Wilfrid) and Yealand Conyers (St Mary).

Further afield, you can see examples in Tatton Park and Dunham Massey (Cheshire). Gillow furniture can also be found in the Houses of Parliament in London and Cape Town. Some of these places have seasonal or irregular opening times for the public, so do check before setting out to visit.



Early Gillow premises, Castle Hill



Former Gillow factory, St Leonard's Gate



Former Gillow Showroom, North Road

Another Guide of interest is No. 90 on Thurnham Church and the Gillow Mausoleum.

Reference:
S.E. Stuart (2008) *Gillows of Lancaster and London 1730–1840.*Woodbridge (Suffolk), Antique Collectors Club.

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