Partly After the Chinese Manner: ‘Chinese’ Staircases in North-West Wales

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This case study begins with an unexpected discovery.

In 2011, I was undertaking research at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, looking at photographic records of domestic interiors as part of a broader study of Welsh homes through history. While examining images of houses in the historic counties of Anglesey and Caernarvonshire in north-west Wales, I came across a series of photographs showing some remarkable staircases.¹

Like many staircases found in homes throughout Wales between the early-seventeenth and late-eighteenth centuries, they featured pierced balusters: flat, thin pieces of wood known as ‘splats’ that were cut so as to form particular patterns which, when repeated, formed the full balustrade.² Splat balusters frequently mimicked popular contemporary designs for more expensive turned balusters that were produced from solid blocks of wood using a lathe. Both splat and turned balusters were typically vasiform, with the woodwork mimicking the curvilinear shape and form of ceramic vessels, particularly vases. By contrast, the staircases in the photographs showed balustrades that sported bold, distinctive geometric designs, formed by repeated sequences of alternating and contrasting latticework patterns (see Figure 1 below). The clean lines and strong angles of these staircases were both surprising and intriguing in their appearance. The notes accompanying the photographs describe them as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Chinese Chippendale’ staircases and dated all of them to 1755 – c. 1760.³ Unfortunately, the notes gave no indication of the origins of the staircase design.
Figure 1: The ‘Chinese’ staircase at Trefeilir, probably photographed in the 1930s, showing the main balustrade of the staircase with its latticework patterns. DI2011_1010, NPRN 15898. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

This case study will examine each of the staircases photographed as a unique piece of furniture and as a part of each house - as both fixture and fitting. It locates these ‘Chinese’ staircases within both the wider, global context of ‘Asian-inspired’ material culture design in the eighteenth century, and within more local, contemporary networks of design exchange. I aim to assess if, and to what degree, the East India Company’s trade network impacted on the interior design in the homes of the propertied classes in north-Wales in the eighteenth century.
Resources for the Study

This research draws primarily on records from the National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW), held by the Royal Commission (www.coflein.gov.uk). The Commission was established by Royal Warrant in 1908. Originally, the Warrant stated that the Commission was to ‘make an inventory of the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions connected with or illustrative of the contemporary culture, civilisation and conditions of life of people in Wales and Monmouthshire from the earliest times, and to specify those which seem most worthy of preservation’.4 The basic function of the Royal Commission was to prepare inventories of buildings and monuments, and identify those considered valuable to the national heritage. During its history, the Royal Commission in Wales generated more data and documentation relating to the built environment of the region than had ever previously been held by a Welsh organisation. Although now a key part of the Commission’s function, initially there was no dedicated recording or information service provided for the public. Consequently, documentation originally produced through the various Royal Commissions’ investigations and their compilation of inventories was preserved in sets of working files. The content of these files was later merged with the NMRW to form the current core of the Commission’s archive.

The NMRW was formally instituted as the Commission’s records arm in 1963, with the transfer to the Royal Commission of the Welsh section of the National Buildings Record (NBR). The NBR was an archive created during the Second World War. It was founded in England in 1941 at the height of the London Blitz by a small group of people who were appalled by the scale the destruction of British buildings due to the intensive bombing of the country. The organisation was both independent and professional, and set out to make photographic and hand-drawn records of building before they were damaged or completely destroyed. This collection now forms the core of the Royal Commission’s archive, and is kept as sets of working files that incorporate material from earlier work, alongside newspaper clippings, site notes and later additions and amendments to previous work.
The records accessed for this case study are a composite of all these sources, with successive written reports, photographic surveys and drawings appearing alongside one another in site files. As a result, the sources used for this case study have a strong architectural focus, with an emphasis on the design and appearance of buildings and their features in the context of architectural history, rather than the details of their social or cultural relevance.

County Archives in Anglesey and Gwynedd were also consulted during the course of this research, alongside papers and documentation held by Bangor University, and conversations with curatorial staff at Bangor Museum and Art Gallery, and the National Trust. Unfortunately, despite the multiplicity of potential resources it seems that very little information relating specifically to the ‘Chinese’ staircases in this study survives today, beyond that which exists in the NMRW. Fortunately, there is a larger volume of literature relating to eighteenth-century interior design and its broader context, as well as textbooks and articles relating particularly to ‘Chinese’ staircases, all of which have informed this study.

‘Chinese’ Staircases on Record in North-West Wales

This case study focuses on three ‘Chinese’ staircases in north-west Wales: Tan-yr-Allt in Bangor, Caernarvonshire; Bishopsgate House in Beaumaris, Anglesey; and Trefeilir in Trefdraeth, Anglesey. Tan-yr-Allt and Trefeilir were both originally country houses built or occupied during the eighteenth century, while Bishopsgate House is a townhouse owned and used by the Bulkeley family based at Baron Hill, also in Anglesey. The houses are all within a seventeen-mile radius of one another, and have ‘Chinese’ staircases that survive to the present day, though in variable conditions. The case study will also consider a number of “missing” staircases in the area that were identified as ‘Chinese’ in the written record but that leave little or no material trace.
‘Chinese’ staircase 1: Tan-yr-Allt, Bangor

Tan-yr-Allt (in English ‘below the hill’) is a two storey, Grade II* house in Bangor, Caernarvonshire, built in 1755 for John Ellis, the Archdeacon of Merionedd on a portion of land belonging to his family. It was built in the Palladian style popularised at the time of its construction by Inigo Jones and his contemporaries, and is believed to have been planned by one such Master builder, though there is little remaining evidence to support this supposition. The house was originally situated outside of Bangor, set within extensive formal gardens sloping downhill to the River Adda, with pathways connecting the property to Bangor Cathedral and Bishop’s Palace. However, the house and grounds were purchased by Bangor University in 1928 as part of its post-First World War expansion, along with adjacent land that the university required for its planned development. The house has since been encroached by university buildings, and more recently by the PONTIO Arts and Innovation in Bangor development, obscuring its original rurality (see Figure 2 below).
Tan-yr-Allt was visited by Royal Commission investigators in the early 1950s while preparing the Caernarvonshire Inventories, which were published in three volumes between 1956 and 1964. A plan of the property was made, and photographs were taken of what investigators considered to be key features of the house and its interior, which was by that time in use as Bangor University Student’s Union (see Figure 3 below).
Figure 3: Ground floor interior (likely the drawing room) of Tan-yr-Allt, showing original eighteenth century woodwork and plasterwork contemporary with the main staircase. DI2013_0673, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

Figure 4: The main staircase at Tan-yr-Allt, photographed in 1995, after the building’s listing was upgraded to Grade II*. The staircase balustrade and treads have been painted white, probably when Tan-yr-Allt was in use as Bangor University Student’s Union. DI2011_1033, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
Records at the Commission indicate that at the time of its initial survey the interior features of the building had survived well. They date the main staircase, windows, fireplaces, cornicing and ground floor panelling to the building’s original construction in 1755. Particular attention is given to the main staircase, which the final inventory notes is ‘a good example of the local Chinese Chippendale style’. It ascends from the main entrance of the property to the first floor in a single flight, with a railing on the landing and fluted reveals to the window at the head of the stairs (see Figure 6 below). It features a latticework design, with two contrasting patterns repeating in sequence to form the balustrade. The stair rail on the landing uses two different but equally contrasting patterns across the span of the landing (see Figure 7 below). In addition, the tread end of each step is carved with a stylised wave design (see Figure 4 above). Although the staircase is now painted white, the photographs from the initial 1950s investigation show the original staircase as being dark wood, though it is not possible to ascertain from the images whether its appearance is inherent in its materiality (i.e. whether it is made from mahogany or similar), or whether it is a result of wood staining (see Figure 5 below). This staircase is the earliest of all the surviving staircases examined in this case study, and at the time of writing, the earliest confirmed occurrence of a ‘Chinese’ staircases in north-west Wales.

Figure 5: Photographs from the 1950s showing the original dark wood of the staircase, and the detail of the alternating latticework patterns. DI2013_0675, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
Figure 6: The main staircase from the entrance hall, showing the ascent to the first floor and hinting at fluted window reveals. DI2013_0674, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

Figure 7: The latticework patterns used to form the landing rail are different to those used for form the balustrade, though they too alternate in a repeating pattern to form the full barrier. DI2013_0676, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
‘Chinese’ staircase 2: Bishopsgate House, Beaumaris

Bishopsgate House in Beaumaris, Anglesey was built in the early eighteenth century by the Bulkeley family, who used the property as a dower house. The family’s main residence on Anglesey was at Baron Hill, about a mile from Beaumaris. In their report, Commission investigators noted that the house is substantially eighteenth-century in its fabric but with later alterations to the front room and façade of the property, probably dating to the nineteenth century. Unlike at Tan-yr-Allt, the ‘Chinese’ staircase in the house is not contemporary with the original construction of the building. Following a visit to the property in the 1930s, investigators suggested that the staircase was installed in the house in c. 1760. It was noted that the panelling in the ground floor rooms and the back stairs of the property are likely contemporary with the installation of the staircase and suggest a broader programme of interior change at the house in the 1760s. This home improvement work occurred following the death of its owner James, 6th Viscount Bulkeley (1717 – 1752) in 1752, and possibly in the same year that the Dowager Lady Bulkeley, née Emma Rowlands (d. 1770) married her second husband, Lt. Col. Hugh Williams (d. 1794) of Nant, Caernarvon and Caerau, Anglesey. The 6th Viscount Bulkeley was succeeded by his posthumous son Thomas James Bulkeley (1752 – 1822) who was born eight months after his father’s death, and who therefore had little influence on the interior design of the properties in his ownership at that time.
The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857 – UCL History

Just as at Tan-yr-Allt the staircase is the main stairway in the building, and ascends from the ground floor to the first floor in two flights. Again, the Royal Commission records make particular reference to the ‘Chinese’ staircase at the property. The staircase rail is the same design as at Tan-yr-Allt, and the repeating pattern of alternating and contrasting latticework designs is almost identical with only slight adjustments needed to better fit the space allocated to them, and to accommodate the slightly steeper pitch of the staircase (see Figure 8 above). The pattern for the first flight of stairs is the same as that at Tan-yr-Allt, while the second flight and landing use the same patterns that appear on the landing at Tan-yr-Allt (see Figure 9 below). In addition, the tread ends are decorated with the same carved stylised wave design. The staircase is also constructed from dark wood, though it too has been painted white since the Commission’s investigations. Further work would be needed to identify the specific wood used in construction.

Figure 8: The ‘Chinese’ staircase at Bishopsgate House, showing the first floor landing. The stylised wave design carved into the tread ends is just visible in the bottom centre of this image. DI2011_1011, NPRN 15946. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
Figure 9: Investigators drawings showing the details of the staircase at Bishopsgate House. Detail of the pattern used for the first flight of stairs is recorded in the top right diagram. The pattern for the second flight and landing is shown in the centre of the page. DI2013_0677, NPRN 15946. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
‘Chinese’ staircase 3: Trefeilir, Anglesey

Trefeilir is an eighteenth-century house near Trefdraeth, Anglesey. The majority of the extant structure of the building was constructed in 1735, incorporating the remains of a sixteenth-century house, representing all that remains of an earlier building, into one wing of the property. In a photographic survey of the house, possibly conducted in the 1930s in preparation for the Commission’s Anglesey Inventory (published in 1937), the exterior was photographed extensively (see Figure 10 below). Inside, key architectural features were photographed: two sixteenth century fireplaces and the main staircase. In the notes that accompany the survey the field investigator describes this as a ‘Chinese’ staircase, and suggests it was added to the house in c. 1760, broadly the same date as the staircase at Bishopsgate House about seventeen miles away. It is possible that the new staircase was added to the house in preparation for the marriage of owner Charles Evans (1726 – 1802) to Elizabeth Lewis (1740 – 1805) in 1761. The site file notes that ‘other’ contemporary renovations to the interior of the building, in addition to later modernisation work, were so extensive as to completely obscure the original sixteenth-century floor plan.

Figure 10: The exterior of Trefeilir, Trefdraeth, probably photographed in the 1930s. DI2011_3935, NPRN 15898. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
As at Tan-yr-Allt and Bishopsgate House, the staircase appears to be made from dark wood, and has a reasonably plain handrail, newel and newel cap. The tread ends are also carved with a stylised wave design, though this is slightly more ornate than at the other two
properties (see Figure 11 above). The staircase ascends from the central hall to the first floor in two flights, with different sequences of patterns used for each flight and the landing. However, while the latticework patterns utilised at Tan-yr-Allt and Bishopsgate House and their sequence of use are very similar to each other, the designs used at Trefeilir are only broadly similar. Elements of the designs on individual panels are visible though they are configured differently. The designs appear less complex, with the interlocking lozenge shapes of the patterns at Tan-yr-Allt and Bishopsgate House being largely omitted.

**A Local Style**

![Figure 12: The main staircase at Tan-yr-Allt, photographed in 1995, after the building’s listing was upgraded to Grade II*. The staircase balustrade and treads have been painted white, probably when Tan-yr-Allt was in use as Bangor University Student’s Union. DI2011_1033, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.](image-url)

If we accept the observations and conclusions of the Royal Commission’s field investigators then all three of these staircases were installed in the properties discussed in the five years
between 1755 and c.1760. In each example, the staircase is either part of the original interior design of the building or appears to coincide with a change in the marital status of its owner. From the Commission’s photographs, the staircases appear to be constructed from similar materials (though further investigation is required to ascertain the particulars of their fabrication) and feature designs that are extremely similar to one another, as at Tan-yr-Allt (see Figure 12 above) and Bishopsgate House (see Figure 13 below), or that share basic, characteristic motifs and patterns that have been arranged differently, as at Trefeilir (see Figure 14 below). All properties share the stylised wave motif carved into their tread ends, though at Trefeilir this is more ornate than at the other properties. It should also be noted that the quality of the craftsmanship exhibited in the construction of each staircase is high. When examined in close detail, the photographs reveal a fine finish to the woodwork, with close, precise joints between component parts. However, despite searches of county archives and a number of documents held at Bangor University and the National Library of Wales, it has not been possible at this time to uncover the identity of the craftsmen that physically installed these staircases.

Figure 13: The ‘Chinese’ staircase at Bishopsgate House, showing the first floor landing. The stylised wave design carved into the tread ends is just visible in the bottom centre of this image. DI2011_1011, NPRN 15946. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
The geographical and chronological proximity of these staircases relative to one-another, as well as their similarities of design and construction suggests that their appearance in these houses in north-west Wales in the mid-1750s to c. 1760 may also be related. Furthermore,
the Royal Commission’s Caernarvonshire Inventory notes that the staircase at Tan-yr-Allt ‘is a good example of the local Chinese Chippendale style’ (emphasis added). There are also several “missing” ‘Chinese’ staircases in the region that were mentioned in the record, but that could not be located. In visiting local archives, museums and history groups in Anglesey and Caernarvon a number of ‘Chinese’ staircases were reported to have been in place in private households and even in shops up until the 1970s. However, with no evidence to support this they remain unconfirmed occurrences. Despite this, their frequent appearance in local history discourse hints that ‘Chinese’ staircases may have been more prevalent in the region than records suggest. How, then, might a ‘Chinese’ style become ‘local’ to north-west Wales in the eighteenth century, and how did the contemporary trade of the East India Company affect the appearance of this style of staircase in this area?

Possible Influence of Plas Newydd

In the Commission’s Anglesey Inventory, a summary of key or notable architectural features for buildings in the county is provided. The Inventory States:

The “Chinese” staircases of c. 1760, at Trefeilir (Trefdraeth) and at Bishopsgate House (Beaumaris), are also noteworthy, and an example at Plas Newydd (Llanedwen) has been attributed to James Wyatt.

This note implies that at the time the Anglesey Inventory was being compiled there was a ‘Chinese’ staircase at Plas Newydd in Llanedwen, Anglesey. Plas Newydd, overlooking the Menai Straits, is one of Anglesey’s most iconic buildings, and was home to one of the most influential families in north Wales from the eighteenth century until 1976 when the property passed into the care of the National Trust.
The current Plas Newydd was built in the late eighteenth century, incorporating elements of older buildings thought to date back as early as the fourteenth century. However, apart from the reference in the Commission’s Anglesey Inventory, no evidence can be found of a ‘Chinese’ staircase at the property, let alone one that could be attributed to James Wyatt.

Without further information about the original source for this information it is difficult to pursue this line of enquiry further. However, it is known that in the early 1750s, Sir Nicholas Bayly (1708 – 1782) undertook a refurbishment of the interior at Plas Newydd, for which he acted as his own architect. Although no known plans relating to this work survive, records of later work at the property show that at the time of Nicholas Bayly’s refurbishment, the main staircase of the house was located in what is now the south end of the house. Between 1782 and 1786, Henry Paget (née Bayly, 1744 - 1812), 1st Earl of Uxbridge, called in local architect and stone mason John Cooper (dates unknown) of Beaumaris to make improvements to the property, which was in use as the family’s summer residence. Then, between 1793 and 1799, Lord Uxbridge engaged James Wyatt to undertake further changes,
including refitting the saloon and anterooms, creating the Gothick Hall, and installing a classical staircase. In 1771, Wyatt had undertaken a refurbishment of the Bayly’s main residence, Beaudesert in Staffordshire. This second phase of refurbishment at Plas Newydd was directed by Wyatt in association with Joseph Potter (1756 – 1842), a joiner from Lichfield, who may have undertaken most of the renovation work. At this time, the staircase in the south wing of the house was relocated to its current position at the modern main entrance, possibly so that the layout of the house would better fit the centrally planned floor plan favoured by the master builders and architects at this time. Wyatt’s elegantly ascending cast iron staircase with its stylised anthemion (honeysuckle) motif was more in keeping with the new schema designed for the rest of house and made good use of cast iron, which had only recently become fashionable in interior design (see Figure 16 below).

Figure 16: The cast iron staircase at Plas Newydd, Anglesey, installed during Wyatt’s renovation of the interior. DI2011_1012, NPRN 15824. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
Given that by the 1780s and 1790s, ‘Chinese’ staircase designs were outmoded in Britain, and given the Palladian style of Wyatt’s 1790s renovation it seems unlikely that Wyatt would have chosen to install a ‘Chinese’ staircase at Plas Newydd as part of his refurbishment. However, it is possible that the staircase installed by Nichols Bayly in the early 1750s was of ‘Chinese’ design. If so, it was possibly in situ in the south end of the building for only a few decades between c. 1750 and c. 1790, when it could have been removed by Cooper, Wyatt or Potter in the course of their work on the house. If so, then Plas Newydd would be the first house in north-west Wales to have a ‘Chinese’ staircase installed.

The political and social power and influence of the Bayly family at Plas Newydd would certainly have had an impact on the local elite, who may have mimicked the Baylys’ interior design choices. Sadly, there is simply no surviving evidence that proves there was a ‘Chinese’ staircase at the property beyond one unique reference in the Commission’s Inventory. It should also be noted that the wording of the Inventory is ambiguous at best: the paragraph which describes ‘Chinese’ staircases could also be referring to significant eighteenth-century staircases in Anglesey more widely, reducing the likelihood of a ‘Chinese’ staircase having ever been installed at Plas Newydd and acting as a red herring in this research.

**Local Connections with the East India Company**

Despite the ambiguity of the Anglesey Inventory’s reference to Plas Newydd, it is nonetheless tempting to attribute the development of a ‘local’ trend in ‘Chinese’ staircases to the influential Nicholas Bayly and his possible work on the interior of Plas Newydd in the early 1750s. He certainly had the means to finance a broad programme of renovation work at the house, having married the wealthy heiress Caroline Paget (d. 1766) in 1737. The Pagets also have strong connections to the East India Company: Caroline’s four times great-grandfather William, 5th Baron Paget (1572 – 1629) was an investor in the East India Company, as well as the Amazon River Company, the Bermudas Company and the Virginia Company, of which he was also a Councillor. The family retained its interest in the East India
Company for several generations: the 5th Baron’s grandson, the Honourable Henry Paget (1663 – 1743), held numerous political offices throughout his lifetime, and used his influence in Parliament to champion the cause of the Old East India Company. Records show that on the 24 February 1699 he was involved in, and may have championed on the Old Company’s behalf, a petition against paying a 5 per cent duty on trade to the New Company. Furthermore by 1800, the copper mines on the Bayly family’s lands – most notably Paris Mountain – had agreements with the East India Company for the trade of copper trinkets. The agreements were arranged by Thomas Williams, who was appointed General Manager of the Paris Mine Company in 1784.

The Bayly and Paget families also have a strong tradition of Naval service, with many of the men taking up posts which allowed them to travel extensively around the world, and would have brought them into contact with the East India Company’s ships and merchants.

However, there are no readily discernible connections between the families or houses at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House and Trefeilir, and the East India Company. John Ellis (1720 – 1785), the Archdeacon of Merionedd, had no appreciable connection to the East India Company or to broader contemporary travel and trade to the East. Prior to his ordination into the Church of England, John Ellis is known to have been a chemist and an engineer. However, at the time of writing, little information is available about this period in his life, and nothing to link him specifically to the East India Company either as a clergyman or in his engineering or chemistry background. There also is no obvious or direct connection to be found between the families at Bishopsgate House and at Trefeilir, and the East India Company.

Although no direct connections could be found between the properties in this study and the East India Company, they were all connected by one shared characteristic: all three houses were owned or occupied by wealthy and socio-politically influential families. John Ellis, as Archdeacon of Merionedd, was in a position of power both locally and nationally through the Church of England. The Bulkeleys of Baron Hill owned a significant amount of land in north-west Wales and had lived at Baron Hill since its construction in the early seventeenth century as a residence for Prince Henry, son of King James I and Anne of Denmark, for use
his journey to Ireland (a purpose that was ultimately unfulfilled, as Henry died of typhoid fever in 1612 before he reached Anglesey). Charles Evans (1726 – 1802) of Trefeilir was High Sheriff of Anglesey in 1751, then of Caernarvon in 1752. All three families were invested in local politics; the Bulkeley family were even involved in a prolonged political rivalry with none other than the Baylys of Plas Newydd, in which both parties competed to represent Anglesey in Parliament. All three families were well-connected in society, both within and beyond Wales, holding numerous political positions and posts. They were well-travelled, and held property in London; they were well embedded in fashionable, metropolitan culture. It is likely therefore likely that the decision to install ‘Chinese’ staircases at the three houses considered in this study was mostly affected by much broader consumer trends for interior design and furnishings across Britain in the mid-eighteenth century.

The ‘China Craze’

From the start of this case study the staircases under consideration have been identified as having a ‘Chinese’ or ‘Chinese Chippendale’ design. This is primarily because they are identified in the record as such, but also in order to make a distinction between authentic Chinese material culture and design concepts and a constructed idea of Chinese style known as ‘chinoiserie’, a mixture of Eastern and Western stylistic elements in design ideas. To best understand the genesis of the staircases in this case study, it is first necessary to understand both Chinese and ‘Chinese’ material culture and design in its historical context.

The eighteenth-century fashion for ‘Chinese’ material culture in Britain peaked between 1750 and 1760. The staircases at the three properties in this study were built at the height of the trend between 1755 and c. 1760, when Britain was consumed by a craze for all things Chinese. The Empire of China had long been an object of curiosity to Europeans. Travel accounts published in sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, highlighted China’s architecture, landscapes, material culture and customs to European audiences. Many of these accounts arose from travel undertaken through business, much of which was on behalf of the East India Company. In 1673 an English-language translation of Johan Nieuhof’s (1618 – 1672) *An Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces*
was published. It recounted an account of Nieuhof’s travels from Canton (present day Guangzhou) to Peking (present day Beijing) between 1655 and 1657 when he was appointed steward for a 1,500-mile mission to China by the Dutch East India Company. His book, dedicated to the contemporary administrators of both the East and West India Companies, features 150 illustrations and was disseminated widely. French, German and Latin translations were made available, each of which were published in at least two editions (see Figure 17 below). By the 1730s other influential works on China were also circulating. The most famous of these is Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s *The General History of China* published in four volumes in France in 1735, with an English translation available from 1741. The extensive and detailed text, again accompanied by hundreds of illustrations of contemporary Chinese civilisation, ignited a deeper curiosity about the country and its culture across European society, and kindled a craze for China in architecture and design.

![Figure 17: Illustration from Nieuhof’s Embassy, showing a Chinese pagoda.](image)

However, there was more to the trend for Chinese goods and ideas than colourful travel writings and striking drawings. By the mid-eighteenth century, the East India Company was regularly importing goods from China into Britain. The English East India Company had established a trading post in Taiwan in 1672 and had immediately engaged in frequent,
direct trade with the Chinese, making regular voyages to Amoy, Chusan and Canton. By 1700, the Company had transferred its trading base from Taiwan to its ‘factory’ (trading post) in Canton, and was granted a monopoly on trade with China, which lasted until 1833. While tea fast became the largest trade item in Britain’s trading account, the Company also imported Chinese porcelain and silk.

Some of the products of this global trade are still on show at Plas Newydd in Anglesey, and illustrate how the East India Company’s trade with China had a direct affect on the material culture of British homes. The State Bed in Lord Anglesey’s bedroom has a flying tester covered with Chinese silk, painted with flowers that match Chinese wallpaper that was at the family’s ancestral residence at Beaudesert where the tester was originally displayed until the 1920s. At this time, the 6th Marquess of Anglesey, struggling financially, abandoned the Staffordshire residence and transferred much of its contents to Plas Newydd. Both the tester and the wallpaper are dated to c. 1720. The tester silk suffered water damage following a fire at Beaudesert in 1909, so when the bed was moved to Plas Newydd it was in a reduced form, minus its curtains, which were repurposed as matching window pelmets.20 The wallpaper was possibly sold between 1921 and 1924, making its way to a private owner in Pennsylvania before being passed on or sold again to a series of private owners in New York.21

The influx of Chinese material goods, such as the silk tester, and the popularity of well-illustrated books about the country from the likes of Nieuhof and Du Halde, together provided inspiration for eighteenth-century artisans and architects, who were constantly seeking new aesthetics and designs to tempt the increasingly affluent citizens of a fledging consumer economy to part with their money.22 It has also been argued that the growing inventiveness of British interior design was partly a rebellion against the constraints imposed by the strict classical vocabulary utilised on building exteriors; the ‘Chinese’ style, undisciplined by the five orders that so meticulously structured classical architecture, offered an eclecticism and freedom of form that more conventional designs lacked.23
However, such artistic innovation was not always welcome. Elizabeth Montagu, the ‘bluestocking’, wrote to the Revd Mr Friend in 1749 in despair of the new Chinese trend:

> Thus is happened in furniture; sick of Grecian elegance and symmetry, or Gothic grandeur and magnificence, we must all seek the barbarous gaudy goût of the Chinese; and fat-headed Pagods, and shaking Mandarins, bear the prize from the finest works of antiquity; and Apollo and Venus must give way to a fat idol with a sconce on his head.24

Despite Mrs. Montagu’s disparagement of the style, a report from *The World* in 1753 states that the Chinese was ‘the prevailing whim [...] everything... is Chinese, or in the Chinese taste, or as it is more modestly expressed, “partly after the Chinese manner” [...] chairs, tables, chimney pieces are all reduced to this new-fangled standard’.25

Though widely disparaged by contemporary critics as inferior to classical styles, by the 1750s – when the first ‘Chinese’ staircase appeared at Tan-yr-Allt, in Bangor – interior decoration “partly after the Chinese manner” was clearly popular with wealthy home owners. Just one year after Elizabeth Montagu wrote her letter, an entrepreneurial designer and cabinet-maker based in London capitalised on the enthusiasm for home decoration by publishing a book of furniture designs, including a set of patterns in the Chinese taste likely inspired by the publications and goods disseminating among craftsmen and designers, and the vogue for Chinese style. The book was Thomas Chippendale’s *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director* (1754), and it is the most renowned of a series of publications that are likely to have influenced the installation of ‘Chinese’ staircases in north-west Wales.

‘In the Chinese Taste’

Margaret Jourdain notes that ‘[f]urniture in the Chinese taste owes a debt both in structure and ornamental detail to Chinese originals’, particularly ‘[t]he use of lattice work in the arm panels of seat furniture [which] is of Chinese origin,’ and that very likely inspired the ‘vogue
[for] the use of frets, or card-cut lattices’ in contemporary Western designs, including the designs for ‘Chinese’ staircases.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure18.png}
\caption{Railing designs as depicted in Thomas Chippendale’s \textit{The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director}, p. 206.}
\end{figure}

\textit{The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director} was published in 1754, and revised in 1755 and 1762. The \textit{Director} was both a pattern book and a concise set of ‘how to’ instructions or ‘Orders’ intended for use by cabinet makers, and featured designs in the Gothic, Chinese and contemporary ‘modern’ taste. Chippendale included designs for dressers, cabinets, chairs, fire screens and railings in the ‘Chinese’ taste, and though staircases do not feature explicitly, geometric shapes and latticework patterns proliferate throughout his drawings, sharing strong similarities with the staircases at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House and Trefeilir (see Figure 18 above and Figures 19 and 20 below). Indeed, the Commission’s own inventories attribute the ‘Chinese’ staircases at each property to Chippendale, referring to them as ‘Chinese Chippendale’ or ‘Chippendale’ staircases in both the site files and the official Inventory descriptions. Given that the \textit{Director} was the first popular catalogue of its kind with a widespread circulation across Britain, this suggested provenance is perhaps persuasive. However, it is not clear what evidence led investigators to this specific
conclusion. It is possible that the Director’s publication in 1754, which predates the erection of Tan-yr-Allt, and its 1755 revision, which is contemporary with Tan-yr-Allt’s construction, suggested that the Director was the most likely source for the ‘Chinese’ staircase designs. In addition, the Caernarvonshire Inventories record a number of other items of ‘Chippendale’ furniture broadly contemporary with the installation of the three staircases in this study. At the Parish Church of St. Mary in Trefriw, near Llanrwst, records show that there was an upholstered Chippendale chair in the chancel.\textsuperscript{27} There is also a record of four matching Chippendale chairs in the ‘country’ style in Bangor Cathedral, which was connected to Tan-yr-Allt by a series of tree-lined pathways: we can only hypothesize that the Commission’s investigators envisaged a connection in design between the two properties as well.\textsuperscript{28} The appearance of this furniture alongside the ‘Chinese’ staircases may have hinted further at Chippendale’s suspected influence in home owners’ style choices.

Figure 19: ‘Chinese’ chair designs as depicted in Thomas Chippendale’s \textit{The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director}, p. 72.
The variance between Chippendale’s designs and the actual staircases may be accounted for by Chippendale himself: he did not intend the designs in the Director to be used rigidly. In his conclusion to the preface he explicitly encourages innovation among his fellow cabinet makers, stating that the publication is ‘calculated to assist the one in the choice, the other in the execution of the designs; which are so contrived, that if no one drawing should singly answer the Gentleman’s taste, there will yet be found a variety of hints sufficient to construct a new one’. Chippendale was not ‘a lone craftsman, turning out fine furniture in a workshop, but a successful entrepreneur’, but part of a thriving furniture industry which, by 1750, could supply an amazing diversity of types to consumers across Britain who were ravenous for innovation and choice in interior design. Although the list of subscribers in the Director lists no persons or businesses in Wales, there were many located in London or in wealthy English households that Welsh home owners would have been able to access.

However, a revised edition of the Director was not the only publication available in 1755 to feature ‘Chinese’ designs: between 1750 and 1752, William Halfpenny published Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste in four volumes. The book featured sixty copperplates of
designs ‘for the Decoration of Gardens, Parks, Forrests, Insides of Houses & C.,’ and included – crucially – a design for a ‘Chinese’ staircase. Halfpenny’s work is not as renowned today as the work of Thomas Chippendale or his contemporary Sir William Chambers, but arguably his designs had a greater impact on the installation of ‘Chinese’ staircases in north-west Wales, providing a pattern for staircase designs that bears much greater similarity to all three staircases in this study than anything in the Director (see Figure 22 below). The designs are less complex, with fewer pattern variations and wider frets, and feature the lozenge motif that occurs in all three examples of the staircases in north-west Wales. Importantly, Halfpenny’s design also features a stylised wave motif on the risers of each step, which appears on all three staircases in this study. Halfpenny’s wave motif features more classical design elements than the ones at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House and Trefeilir but is significant nonetheless, as the motif does not appear in any of Chippendale’s designs. Halfpenny’s inspiration was very likely drawn from the same material as Chippendale: the products of travel and trade enabled through the enterprise of the East India Company.

Figure 21: Railing design from William Halfpenny’s *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste*, showing similarities with staircase designs at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House and Trefeilir.
Other works after 1755 only furthered the fashion for Chinese designs among the elite. In 1757, Sir William Chambers published *Designs for Chinese Buildings, furniture, dress etc.* Chambers had served as a merchant in the Swedish East India Company, twice travelling to Canton in 1743 and 1748 as a ‘supercargo’ on the ship *Hoppet*. A supercargo was a person employed on a vessel by the owner of the cargo it carried, and was responsible for managing the cargo owner’s trade throughout a voyage. Four years later in 1761, Chambers started to build the Great Pagoda at Kew for the Princess Augusta. The pagoda was completed in 1762 and has been viewed as the most structurally ambitious chinoiserie building in eighteenth-century Europe. As such, it quickly achieved far-reaching fame. As Aldous Bertram argues, ‘[t]hat England’s most celebrated royal garden should have been a Chinese building serves to remind us that chinoiserie was a fashion of great power and durability’. The erection of the Great Pagoda coincides broadly with the approximate dates of the installation of ‘Chinese’ staircases at Bishopsgate House and Trefeilir as the trend for Chinese interior decoration was coming to an end, and perhaps lends further credence to

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*Figure 22: ‘Chinese’ staircase design from William Halfpenny’s *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste***
Bertram’s claim, and weight to the suggestion that wealthy households in Wales were following English trends in fashion at this time.

‘Along English Lines’

Domestic interiors of the wealthy and elite in eighteenth-century Britain have been the subject of academic interest throughout the last sixty years, with publications and articles exploring every aspect of the home from wall decoration to furnishing, upholstery, soft-furnishings, ceramics and everything in between. However, the vast majority of studies assessing domestic interiors in Britain focus on English homes. Furthermore, Margaret Ponsonby notes that ‘the emphasis in many books about historic interiors has been on wealthy homes and the leaders and innovators of fashion’ which has ‘resulted in London housing and consumption receiving more attention than in other parts of England’. Additionally, the majority of the few detailed studies on non-English British interiors focus more on vernacular architecture and interior architectural features than interior design or the material culture of the home. In Wales, recent scholarship has examined Welsh vernacular architecture and regional decoration, and the Welsh cottage in particular.

While the current dearth of detailed scholarship on the eighteenth-century Welsh interior may at first suggest that Wales was untouched by these developments, it may be argued that in the 1700s the Welsh elite were modelling their homes along English lines, and following fashions for architecture and interior decoration that were popular with the upper class across Britain rather than being influenced by, or limited to, geographical location and trends. Lord Uxbridge’s decision to task well-known architect James Wyatt with the renovation of both his ancestral home in Staffordshire and the family’s summer residence in Anglesey may support this interpretation. In addition, at all three properties in this study the installation of a ‘Chinese’ staircase was part of a scheme to create fashionable houses that could compete with the houses of wealthy contemporaries and peers: Tan-yr-Allt was constructed in the popular Palladian style and was likely designed by a master builder, while renovation work was undertaken in the mid-eighteenth century at both Trefeilir and Bishopsgate House to modernise the interiors, including the installation of staircases in the
‘Chinese’ taste, that were likely influenced by books published in London, and distributed widely across England.

Conclusion: The East India Company and ‘Chinese’ Staircases

Figure 23: The main staircase at Tan-yr-Allt, photographed in 1995, after the building’s listing was upgraded to Grade II*. The staircase balustrade and treads have been painted white, probably when Tan-yr-Allt was in use as Bangor University Student’s Union. DI2011_1033, NPRN 16895. © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

Each of the unique staircases examined in this case study appears in a wealthy household in north-west Wales between 1755 and c. 1760, when the vogue for interior design “partly after the Chinese manner” was at its peak. Despite the tease of a connection to the Pagets at Plas Newydd, who were early investors in, and continuing supporters of, the East India Company, there is no material evidence to connect the appearance of ‘Chinese’ staircases at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House or Trefeilir directly with the East India Company either through individuals, families or trade. However, in the mid-eighteenth century all three
households were in the possession of wealthy local landowners, who had good connections with the elite of Britain through marriage, politics and social station or occupation. The fashionable and affluent families in Britain at that time were spending money on renovating and refurbishing their homes, fitting out ancestral houses and summer residences alike with the newest and most fashionable goods available in a market that was growing not just in size, but in the types and variety of goods available. Consumer appetites for the novel and unique were inevitably influenced by the influx of goods from around the world, and in this instance, by aesthetics and material goods being imported from China by the East India Company.

Sketches of buildings, people and objects by those who had travelled to China on East India Company business, alongside painted porcelain, Chinese silk and Chinese art all made their way into Britain and into the consciousness of the British public, through the East India Company. Designers such as William Halfpenny, alongside the more celebrated Thomas Chippendale and Sir William Chambers, took these things as inspiration and produced some of the earliest catalogues of furniture, featuring many items ‘in the Chinese taste’. Although the ‘barbarous gaudy goût of the Chinese’ was not received warmly by contemporary cultural critics, it was nonetheless an incredibly popular style that led to many wealthy homeowners purchasing ‘Chinese’ goods for their homes. In north-west Wales, the British craze for China manifested in particular in the form of the ‘Chinese’ staircase. As with many local trends, it is likely that the trend started at one house with other local homeowners then mimicking the style in their own houses. While the earliest known surviving occurrence of a ‘Chinese’ staircase in the region is at Tan-yr-Allt in Bangor, it is not possible to conclude that this was indeed the first to be built: it may simply be the earliest extant example of which we are currently aware. It is equally possible that the trend for ‘Chinese’ staircases was sparked by a local craftsman adding the design to his repertoire, probably though exposure to works by Halfpenny, Chippendale and Chambers. However, at the time of writing it is not possible to determine who the manufacturer of each of the staircases was, or if the business was a local one.
It must also be noted that the East India Company’s influence on ‘Chinese’ staircases across Britain does not end when the trend becomes outmoded, and nor does it end at the British border: ‘Chinese’ staircases are an interior design phenomenon found across the former British Empire, appearing in wealthy homes in the wider United Kingdom, for example at Wolverton Manor on the Isle of Wight, as well as further afield in places like Bohemia Farm and Sotterley Plantation in Maryland, USA, and St. Nicholas Abbey in Barbados. The staircases at these far-flung properties were mostly installed in the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century, and it has been suggested that were removed from their original settings in British homes when they became unfashionable and transported overseas alongside other items of outmoded furniture. In this way, the East India Company’s influence on the material culture of the home, and ‘Chinese’ staircases in particular, reached farther than might be expected and extended beyond the brief decade when the fashion for all things China was at its peak.

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**Figure 1:** DI2013_0662, NPRN 16895, © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

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**Figure 3:** DI2011_1033, NPRN 16895, © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

**Figure 4:** DI2013_0675, NPRN 16895, © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

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7 NMR Site Files: Anglesey Domestic SH67NW (Bishopsgate House).
10 An Inventory on the Ancient Monuments in Anglesey (Aberystwyth: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 1937) p. 156.
11 An Inventory on the Ancient Monuments in Anglesey (Aberystwyth: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 1937) p. 244.
13 By Royal Licence on 29th January 1770, Henry Bayly took the surname Paget in place of his birth name.


