PRODUCT INNOVATION IN EARLY MODERN LONDON*

I

The last two decades have witnessed a transformation in our understanding of the material culture of early modern England. At one time it was the ‘pre-industrial’ character of early modern society that was emphasized by social historians. Little attention was given to the material lives of the bulk of the population, but the assumption prevailed that the material culture of the majority was sparse, vernacular and literally homespun, far removed from the currents of high European decorative art that flowed so abundantly through the palaces and mansions of the elite. Now it is the extraordinary proliferation of new goods in the hands of broad sections of the population that excites historians’ attention: the looking-glasses and clocks, the painted calicoes and the beaver hats, the cane chairs and the glass bottles.

There are some dangers of exaggeration here. The material culture of the bulk of the population of England before the sixteenth century was far from immutable. The late Middle Ages saw important changes in the character of, for example, clothing and ceramics that extended well beyond the social elite.¹ Nor did the scale and reach of early modern innovation in material culture match the experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lorna Weatherill has noted how bare by modern standards the domestic interiors of the middling ranks of the population could

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be in the opening decades of the eighteenth century.\(^2\) We do not find at this period the kind of saturation with objects characteristic of many modern western households. Objects were fewer and their range narrower.

Nevertheless, the two centuries from 1550 to 1750 did witness extraordinary and unprecedented innovations in English material culture. Innovation took many forms, which historians have endeavoured to capture in a number of telling phrases: the development of a consumer society; the invention of true modern domestic comfort; the ethnicization of European design.\(^3\) But it is perhaps by considering the goods themselves that the scope and character of innovation can be portrayed most vividly. Some were entirely new products. Among these were artefacts that the English invented, or at least drastically remodelled, including pocket microscopes, drinking glasses made from lead glass, and watches. Others were novelties that originated elsewhere in Europe, such as delftware plates, Venetian glass, and upholstered chairs. Others still, like porcelain and tea, tobacco and mahogany, lacquered cabinets and painted calico, were novelties that arrived from previously unknown or unfamiliar parts of the world, particularly Asia and the Americas.

The phenomenon we are observing here in various guises is that of product innovation. However, we should beware of restricting our use of that concept to the first appearance of goods previously unknown in England. If our interest is those broad changes in English material culture that characterize the period, we must treat product innovation as a process that extends beyond the first moment of invention or import. Simply because the English proved remarkably receptive at every social level to new consumer goods between 1550 and 1750, it should not therefore be assumed that novelties secured their market effortlessly. Modern studies of product innovation have suggested that up to


90 per cent of new products fail.4 Product innovation in the early modern period had to overcome a number of obstacles, not simply ones to do with price.5 Novelty, in certain guises, could be intrinsically attractive to many consumers. Nevertheless, its attractions were always offset by consumers’ attachment to established tastes, by their investment in notions of hierarchy, order and stability which extended to their material world, and, in particular, by their failure automatically to ascribe a use or a meaning to new products. It should be remembered, moreover, that those who promoted novelties often had to face the active hostility of vested interests, such as the manufacturers of substitutes or near-substitutes, mercantilist opponents of imports, or moralists concerned at the deleterious effects of increased consumption. In order to understand how successful new products overcame these obstacles, we need to explore the extended processes of product definition, design, differentiation, manufacture and marketing, whereby unfamiliar or previously unattainable goods were made attractive and available in a variety of forms to different groups of new consumers.

To do so requires close attention to the physical attributes and the individual product histories of the goods concerned. Many of the studies that have so transformed our view of the material world of early modern England have, of necessity, treated objects principally as units to be counted. It is from painstaking quantitative work on the domestic goods listed in inventories that the most dramatic recent findings have emerged.6 Such work has been essential for mapping the diffusion of new products, both geographically and socially. But, as is so often the case with quantitative work, the benefits of counting have become available only when the enormous diversity of instances studied have been reduced to a limited number of general categories — chairs,

4 Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London, 1993), 210. Of course, what is meant by a new product in the modern studies on which this figure is based is often a new brand rather than an entirely new kind of artefact.

5 It is not my intention here to enter directly into the debate between anthropologists and economists over the extent to which shifts in the consumption of established products can be explained in terms of non-economic factors such as taste. This article is concerned with the entry of new products on to the market when new tastes were being formed. It is improbable that this initial process of taste formation can simply be reduced to income and price effects.

tables, clocks, silver, earthenware. This tendency to deal in general categories has been encouraged by the relatively terse and uninformative descriptions of objects available in most English probate inventories, especially after the mid-seventeenth century. Although it has been necessary to subject the diversity of material culture to this process of rigid categorization in order to advance our understanding of the timing and scope of product diffusion, our knowledge of the products themselves often remains very limited. For many kinds of goods, we have little systematic understanding of the enormous range of variation and differentiation that lies concealed within each general category. Yet careful attention to the physical attributes of artefacts is essential if we are to understand the means by which they were introduced.

This article explores the process of product innovation in early modern England in these terms. Its particular concern is the various ways the products themselves were tailored for new markets. It is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the subject, most obviously because it deals only with consumer durables and semi-durables. It does not examine directly the new exotic groceries of the period — tobacco, sugar, tea, coffee and chocolate — and therefore does not consider the medical issues which frequently played such a crucial part in their initial dissemination. Its treatment of the ways new artefacts were configured or reconfigured for the market is developed almost exclusively through an exploration of the activities of dealers and manufacturers, whether as individuals, companies or trades. It does not consider the important contributions made to product innovation by people and institutions whose motivations were not necessarily directly commercial, for example the monarch, the royal court or experts in botany and medicine. Moreover, it focuses principally on the role of London. It does not address the experience of other European cities, like Antwerp and Amsterdam, Venice and Paris, which were important sites of product innovation and


8 For the role of Charles II in introducing the vest in the 1660s, see David Kuchta, “‘Graceful, Virile and Useful’: The Origins of the Three-Piece Suit’, Dress, xvi (1990).
where some of the phenomena discussed here emerged earlier. Nevertheless, the English capital did play a crucial role in product innovation during this period. It was the major British centre of invention and manufacturing, it dominated the circulation within Britain and its colonies of artefacts and information about artefacts, and it was the principal British site where fashion and taste were promulgated and contested. In Britain between 1550 and 1750 it was above all in London that new products were imported, invented, endorsed, Anglicized, copied, adapted, reformulated and marketed.

The pattern of product innovation through a combination of imports and invention witnessed in London in the early modern period was not new. Innovations in the material culture of, for example, late medieval Venice derived from a similar combination of external and internal sources. What was new in early modern London was the intensification of product innovation consequent on the city’s rapid transformation from a significant but essentially peripheral place in European economic affairs into the largest urban centre in western Europe, eventually enjoying a commandung position in a new global trading system. This was a transformation that saw London’s population undergo an eight-fold increase, from approximately 80,000 in 1550 to 675,000 in 1750. The background against which these changes took place is well known. Between the late Middle Ages and the eighteenth century there was a pronounced shift in economic activity in western Europe from the Mediterranean to the north-west seaboard, of which England in general and London in particular were principal beneficiaries. This shift was associated with a massive expansion in direct intercontinental trade between London and both the Americas and Asia, which was accompanied by a corresponding acceleration in the pace at which exotic new commodities arrived in the city. It was also associated with a process of progressive import substitution, whereby London rapidly evolved from a city with an indigenous manufacturing capacity that was limited both in the range and the quality of its products, into a centre of production capable of performing in most manufacturing trades to the highest western European

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9 See, for example, Richard Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600 (London, 1993), 19–20, 252.
standards of technique and aesthetics, broadly at the same level as, for example, Paris or Amsterdam.

It is not the purpose of this article to explore the reasons for these changes in detail, but it is helpful to bear in mind two features of London’s economic transformation in this period that had a particular bearing on the ways product innovation took place. The first is the size and character of London as a market and a manufacturing centre for consumer goods. For an early modern city, London’s population was enormous, but London’s significance as a market was not simply a matter of its size. It also reflected its affluence, its commercialization and its sophistication. London was wealthier than the rest of England.\(^{11}\) Even its poor depended on commercial mechanisms for the supply of basic essentials like food or linen to an extent that was unparalleled in rural areas.\(^{12}\) London, moreover, was the national centre for the circulation of commercial information in printed form, which grew prodigiously, especially after the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 left few official controls on the press other than fiscal ones. The density of information networks and personal interactions in which Londoners were enmeshed, educating them as consumers by exposing them to fashion and novelty in a particularly intense way, was unmatched in even the largest provincial towns. Those who lived in the provinces were well aware of this. It was access to fashionable clothing that drew Jane Martindale, the daughter of a Lancashire freeholder, to the capital in the 1620s, against the advice of her parents.\(^{13}\)

There was a growing tendency for manufacturing to move out of the capital after the mid-seventeenth century, but throughout the period London remained the largest manufacturing centre in the country with, by the early eighteenth century, an astonishingly wide range of industries. The concentration of such a large population of consumers in a relatively small area meant that even under conditions of hand production there was enormous


potential for intense specialization in the manufacturing process and for product differentiation. These often went together. Thus the subcontracting of all or parts of the work to specialists was associated both with the making of luxury bespoke goods like coaches and fine silver, and with the production of relatively cheap ready-made clothing. Specialization was not, of course, simply a factor of the size of the market. Its development was also shaped by other considerations, both economic and non-economic, in particular the weakness of the Livery Companies’ capacity to organize and regulate their trades, especially after the mid-seventeenth century. Nevertheless, the scale of the London market for consumer goods was an enormous encouragement to increased division of labour in both production and marketing.

The second feature of London’s economic transformation in this period that bears on product innovation is the extent to which import substitution provided a context in which innovation could thrive. Although historians have disagreed about the intentions of economic-policy makers in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, it is clear that the cumulative result of their efforts was the adoption of an aggressively nationalistic stance towards the international economy. From the mid-seventeenth century, efforts to promote the nation’s economy focused increasingly on the use of tariffs and other controls on trade to promote exports and to restrict imports. By the second quarter of the eighteenth century a situation had been arrived at where most foreign manufactures were subject to heavy import tariffs, so high in the case of France that a legal import trade was virtually impossible. Moreover, the import of certain classes of goods, Indian cottons and French alamode silks for example, was entirely prohibited. Imports of manufactured goods stagnated or even declined. At the same time, great efforts were made by private entrepreneurs, the state and patriotic societies to establish in England what had previously been exclusively foreign forms of manufacturing. More often than not the initial intention was simply to make English copies of foreign products. Copying and imitation had few negative connotations at this period; originality,

in its uncompromising modern sense, was not necessarily prized.\textsuperscript{15} However, the mix of skills, raw materials and markets available in England and its colonies frequently necessitated adjustments and adaptations that amounted to substantial product innovation.

This article uses a series of case studies to examine the introduction of new consumer products in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{16} It makes no claim that the cases selected are representative of all new products in the period, although (with the exception of one instance of failed innovation) they were all products that established large markets, often extending well down the social scale. The case studies have been chosen for two main reasons. First, to demonstrate the importance of engaging with the physical attributes of objects for an analysis of product innovation, especially if we wish to explore issues of product identity and differentiation. Second, to show the sophistication of the ways in which new products could be configured or reconfigured for the market before the era of the classic Industrial Revolution after 1760. The case studies emerge from a number of different sectors of production and marketing, but their very diversity serves to emphasize in just how many ways innovation might spawn further innovation in a commercial metropolis like early modern London — how a new import made from one material might evoke responses by native producers in all kinds of different materials; how expansion in the physical variety of artefacts might push producers towards new ways of making their products distinctive; how growth in the numbers of goods on offer could encourage new kinds of product standardization, designed to facilitate both manufacturing and marketing. The article's treatment of these issues is informed by studies of twentieth-century product design, innovation and marketing, although it does not uncritically apply the analytical categories used in modern studies to the experience of early modern London.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} For a useful discussion of these issues in the context of eighteenth-century fine art, see Matthew Craske, \textit{Art in Europe, 1700–1830} (Oxford, 1997), 34–6.

\textsuperscript{16} Each of the products concerned has previously been discussed in the specialist historical literature in its field, but they have not before been treated together as instances of product innovation.

The first case study takes the English East India Company’s trade in Indian decorated cotton textiles to demonstrate that successful product innovation could require a radical reworking of the fundamental character of a product. The example of the East India Company’s attempt to introduce the wearing of ready-made cotton shirts serves to show that readjusting product definitions was no guarantee of commercial success, while the emergence of the silver teapot is used to illustrate how such readjustment could be successfully employed by domestic producers facing competition from exotic imports. The use of branding, particularly branded packaging, to establish new product identities is illustrated by the case of proprietary medicines. Finally, the article considers new forms of product standardization and their effects on product definition through the example of sizing for ready-made garments.

II

New products do not automatically find a market. The first task for those who introduce a new product is to configure it for the consumer in a way that makes it comprehensible and attractive. This is partly a matter of price and partly a matter of marketing, but fundamentally it is a matter of product definition. The new product must take a form that can be sold successfully. In the early modern period, the need to confront the issue of product definition was especially pressing in the case of exotic imports from the non-European world. Even when such goods represented fairly direct substitutes for European commodities, they were almost always first introduced into Europe in forms determined by the established consumer preferences of their cultures of origin, which were often far removed from European tastes. In this guise, such goods might fascinate Europeans as curiosities, but they did not necessarily command a large or sustained European market. Hence the frequent need to redefine the product by changing some of its characteristics. The importance of this process of redefinition is graphically illustrated by the English East India Company’s development of its trade in Indian decorated cottons during the seventeenth century.

By the late seventeenth century the import of cotton textiles was the largest single element in the company’s trade. In the early 1680s, when the company’s textile business reached its
seventeenth-century peak, orders were running at over a million pieces of cloth a year and accounted for up to 83 per cent of the company’s total turnover. However, this outcome had not been foreseen by its founders in 1600. Their principal objectives were to sell English woollens in Asia and to secure a direct supply of spices from the Indonesian archipelago. As the company’s business developed during the first quarter of the century, its agents did begin to buy Indian textiles, but principally for the purposes of inter-Asian trading, or re-export to the Muslim Mediterranean. At first, relatively few Indian textiles were supplied for use in England, and these few were luxury items, like quilts and hangings, which sold or were given away as curiosities. From the 1610s the company’s London directors began to develop a market in England for fine Indian decorated cottons for use as table and bed linens, wall hangings and other household furnishings, but the volume of such imports appears to have remained small before 1660. One of the key limitations here was their design. Before the middle of the seventeenth century, the company bought ready-made cottons which had been painted, printed or embroidered according to the requirements of Indian and other Asian consumers. These designs had only a limited appeal in England, beyond their value as novel curiosities. The crucial change came in 1643, when the directors began to require the factors in India to change the designs on the cloth to accord with English taste:

Those [quilts] which hereafter you shall send we desire may be with more white ground, and the flowers and branch to be in colours in the middle of the quilt as the painter pleases, whereas now most part of your quilts come with sad red grounds which are not so well accepted here.

In 1662 the directors went one step further and sent sample patterns for chintz for the Indian workers to copy or adapt. In 1669 the procedure was extended to quilts and hangings. As John Irwin has pointed out, the result, in furnishing fabrics at least, was the use of two-dimensional forms and motifs that came to

18 K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company* (Cambridge, 1978), 282–6. It is important to bear in mind that, throughout the seventeenth century, cloth with sophisticated painted or printed decoration comprised only one element in a trade in cotton piece-goods that included vast quantities of plain fabrics, dyed and undyed.


be perceived in Europe as Indian, but which in fact came to India from England and derived from a combination of English and Chinese visual ideas.  

From the 1660s, therefore, it became a normal East India Company practice to send patterns from London to determine the design of both the domestic-furnishing fabrics that had been the main form of Indian decorated textiles sold in England in the first half of the seventeenth century and the clothing chintzes that enjoyed such extraordinary success in the second half of the century. A typical example of the manner in which design instructions were communicated can be found in a letter of 1683 from the London directors to the Surat factors:

You did exceeding well in observing our direction about Chints as you could then. Now Wee hope you have more Patterns, and our further Instruccons concerning them which if you persue and sometimes alter part of their works and grounds with as much variety in Colours as of late years you have used to doe in Atlases you cannot imagin what a Vast Number of them Would sell here, ... 200,000 of all sorts in a year will not be too much for this Markett, if our direccons be punctually observed in the providing of them.  

As this example suggests, the patterns were not expected to be followed slavishly, but to be adapted and varied in colour.

Despite the enormous distances involved, this was a design process that was successfully able to accommodate (and indeed perhaps contributed to) the move to annual shifts in the design of fashionable western European women’s outer garments that was initiated by the Lyons silk producers, probably from the 1670s. Although the East India Company directors put constant


23 It is widely agreed among historians of textiles and dress that the move to an annual fashion cycle in silk dress-fabrics took place in France and England in the later seventeenth century, although the development awaits comprehensive explanation: see Peter Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks* (London, 1965), 20–1. The East India Company were well aware of this development by the early 1680s: see *Records of Fort St George: Despatches from England*, 1680–1682, ed. H Dodwell (Madras, 1914), 51, London to Hughly, 20 May 1681: ‘Note this for a Constant and generall Rule that in all flowed Silkes, you Change ye fashion and flower as much as you can every yeare, for English Ladies and they say ye french and other Europeans will give twice as much for a new thing not seen in Europe before though worse, than they will give for a better Silk of ye same fashion worn ye former yeare’.
pressure on their factors in India to supply cloth according to the patterns and other instructions they sent from London, they also regularly pressed the factors to find new products and new designs. On some occasions the factors were asked to do this by opening up new territories to trade. On other occasions they were instructed to get Indian merchants and makers to innovate. In 1684 the Madras factors were told:

You may let them [your black merchants] know it will much encrease their trade if they can invent or procure new Sorts of Goods, which they say they were about, and it seems to us easy for them to doe especially in several sorts of Chints of various works, grounds, and Colours, ye more Variety the better.24

But it is not clear whether it was as easy as the directors in London assumed for the established native merchants who organized production to generate new designs. Certainly this was not, according to European commentators, the way they were accustomed to work: ‘In India they do not make Goods for an uncertain Market, but the European Buyers there do Contract with the Indian Merchants for the quantity, quality and prizes of the Goods they want’.25

The search for novelty went even further in the 1690s, the era of the Bizarre style in European silks, when the strange and the visually dissonant became fashionable in patterned clothing fabrics. At this period the directors would occasionally order their factors to seek out Indian designs that were not in the English taste: ‘new fancyes of the country’s invention, nothing like English’, or ‘flowered of variety of small flowers Birds or Beasts according to the Countrey fancy but upon good cloth’.26 The 1690s were unusual, however, and the temporary demand they witnessed for the uncompromisingly Indian did little to alter the fundamentals of a trade which was by then firmly grounded on product specification from London. The whole period from 1660 to 1700 saw attempts by the East India Company to secure new cotton fabrics and designs in India, but these efforts were undertaken within a system of manufacture in which London remained

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the principal arbiter and source of product design and innovation. As John Irwin has concluded, ‘Europe was attracted to Indian decorative textiles on account of their cheapness and technical excellence (especially their fast and brilliant dye-colours), not their qualities of design’. The case of Indian decorative textiles illustrates a process of extraordinarily successful product innovation, but one that depended on a significant redefinition of the product. Late seventeenth-century Indian chintzes may have retained the allure of the exotic for their English wearers, but the range of patterns and motifs they employed often had more to do with European constructions of the exotic than with Indian visual culture.

III

The East India Company was not always so successful in its efforts at product innovation. During the last two decades of the seventeenth century it mounted a number of aggressive initiatives to promote new uses in England for the products of Indian labour. These included attempts to develop the manufacture in India of linen and hempen cloth and yarn, silk fabrics, cotton dimity and diaper cloth, and knitted cotton stockings and gloves. The directors’ principal concern here was to sustain and expand the market for Indian goods at a time when they feared they might have glutted the market for chintz, although, sensitive to mercantilist criticism, they stressed their patriotic desire to replace imports from continental Europe, even in their internal correspondence.

Prominent among these initiatives was an instruction in October 1682 to the Madras factors to have 200,000 ready-made cotton shifts and shirts made up there for sale in England. This was an enormous initial order for a new commodity which appears to have been largely untested in the market. The size of the


28 Shirts of this kind were not an entirely untested commodity. 631, probably ready-made from cotton, had been offered for sale at one of the company’s auctions in 1676. However, shirts did not feature regularly at the company’s auctions in the 1670s and the surviving Surat and Madras correspondence does not refer to them. Moreover, the number offered for sale at the 1676 auction was tiny compared with the scale of the company’s orders in the subsequent decade. See Bodleian Library, Oxford, John Johnson Collection, East India Company, Box 1, ‘A Particular of the Goods to be Exposed to Sale by the East India Company, in September, 1676’, printed bill; also, Brit. Lib., c.136.g.43, ‘For Sale at the East India House, November 10, 1673’, printed bill.
order can be judged by the fact that it represented approximately one cotton shirt or shift for every two adults in London, and it was probably adult Londoners who were the main intended market. Indeed, this single order represented 2 per cent of what Gregory King estimated to be the annual English national consumption of these garments in the 1680s. The importance attached to this development is underlined by the fact that Josiah Child, the governor of the company, wrote personally to Madras that, 'You will find in a List of Goods one article for shifts of all sorts which I would have you looke upon as a matter of great concernment to the Company . . . and be sending them as fast as you can'.

Once again, the issue of product definition was crucial. Shifts and shirts in late seventeenth-century England were made of linen or hempen cloth. The East India Company obviously did not consider it was possible to change this established consumer preference simply by putting cotton cloths that resembled linen shirting on sale in England. To develop the use of cotton for this purpose required a more radical challenge to consumer assumptions about the appropriate fabrics for these garments. Putting vast quantities of ready-made cotton shifts and shirts onto the London market was, Child wrote, 'the onely way I know to introduce the using of Callicoe for that purpose in all these Northern parts of the world'. Two years later the same argument was being repeated, although with rather less confidence. Shifts 'may be (being sold cheap in ye drapers shops) a means to introduce into more general use ye wearing of Callicoe in stead of French Holland, or Flanders Cloth, which we apprehend to be a National benefit'.

29 These are very approximate orders of magnitude, but register the fact that the proportion of children in London’s population was relatively low: see Finlay and Shearer, ‘Population Growth and Suburban Expansion’, 47.

30 See N. B. Harte, ‘The Economics of Clothing in the Late Seventeenth Century’, Textile Hist., xxii (1991), 293. The East India Company correspondence initially refers mainly to 'shifts', the term used for women's linen undergarments, but references elsewhere make it clear that both shirts and shifts were being ordered. King uses the term 'smock' to refer to shifts.


In this new venture, the East India Company was acutely conscious of the need to identify different social categories of customer and adjust the product to suit their tastes and their incomes, just as it was in its dealings in other cotton goods like chintzes and stockings.\(^{33}\) Determined to exploit every major segment of the market, not only the elite, its specifications for shifts and shirts were very precise:

Lett some of the coarsest sort for Seamens and ordinary peoples use be strong Cloath, and some white for the like ordinary use, others white Midling, for Citizens and Midle sort of People and some fine enough for Ladies, and Gentlewomen; if some be wrought on the breasts, and on the sleeves, and in the collar with needle worke, the price here will sufficiently pay for the worke, and cost there, where labour and art are so cheap; take especial care that the sowing be very good and all the Cloth strong in its kind, as well fine as course.\(^{34}\)

Yet despite all the attention devoted to customizing the product for its various potential markets, the initiative appears to have been a failure.\(^{35}\) In November 1684 the directors wrote to Madras cutting the order for the forthcoming year to half the number delivered in 1683. Less than four months later they ordered that no more shirts or shifts should be supplied. The reason for this change of heart emerges in a stocklist of goods remaining unsold in the company’s warehouse in December 1685, which included over 100,000 shirts and shifts, with ‘send none’ written alongside.\(^{36}\) It was made clear to the Madras factors that unless they could be procured more cheaply, no more should be sent.


No attempt to revive this trade in ready-made cotton shirts and shifts was made until three years later in 1689, when the directors once again decided to embark on the re-education of public taste by selling cotton shifts and shirts on low profit margins as a kind of loss-leader. In that year the directors wrote to Madras:

Shirts and shifts formerly sent us from the Fort [Madras], we were unworthily cheated in, they were 40 per cent too dear, and basely made up by ye Taylers, as if ye whole mannagement of yt. busyness had been purposely design’d to discourage ye Company in trading in yt. Commodity, but We hope now We have a more sincere Councill to ye Companys Interest We shall have our Orders more justly and Punctually observ’d, and therefore We are willing to make a further Experiment of yt. Commodity because, if We gain little at present by selling of them so cheap as We have, yet We have observed yt. their cheapness, have introduced the Wearing of Callicoe in Shifts.

They therefore ordered 100,000 to be sent in 1690, ‘to be strong and substantially sow’d for poor Peoples wear’. Yet again the experiment seems to have failed. Although there are some gaps in the company’s records for the 1690s, and the impact of the New East India Company is hard to judge, in 1697 the Old Company’s directors ordered only 12,000 ready-made shifts and shirts from Madras for the next year, and in 1698 they sent instructions that no more should be sent to England. A small number may have been requested for 1699, but thereafter ready-made shirts and shifts are not mentioned in the company’s orders.

Precisely why this initiative failed is unclear, but the way the whole exercise was conducted suggests the company was aware it faced consumer resistance. The generally held belief in the superiority of plain linens over plain cottons is indicated by the use of an unfavourable comparison between the two in 1684 to illustrate the kind of frauds pedlars inflicted on the public: ‘they

37 Records of Fort St George: Despatches from England, 1686–1692, ed. A. V. Venkatarama Ayyar (Madras, 1929), 144, List of Coromandel Coast Goods to be Provided for the Year 1690.
do often sell one thing for another, as Calico for Holland’. The greater durability of linen, particularly when subjected to constant heavy washing, was probably a key issue here, although poor sewing may also have been a discouragement to sales of ready-made cotton shifts and shirts. The strength of British consumers’ attachment to the use of linen for shifts and shirts is suggested by the very slow rate at which cotton ate into this market 140 years later, in the early nineteenth century, when cotton cloth was home manufactured, enjoyed a marked price advantage and had already successfully displaced linen from women’s outer garments. Nevertheless, the failure to promote the wearing of Indian-made cotton shirts and shifts shows that the strategy of reconfiguring a familiar product in order to promote a new and exotic material was no guarantee of success, even when undertaken by an organization with the resources and experience in product innovation of the East India Company in the 1680s.

IV

Producing objects that combined the new with the familiar was not simply a strategy for facilitating English consumers’ acceptance of innovation. It was a crucial way in which London producers in one material responded to product innovation in another, often as part of a wider process of import substitution. The result could be a substantial reworking of the character of the product and an extension of product diversity. One of the most striking instances of this process is the development of the silver teapot in London between 1660 and 1720.


40 The area round Madras did not have a strong tradition of sewn garments and the company clearly considered the making of the initial order of shirts and shifts to have been inadequate. It is possible, however, that embroidery of some of the shifts was done in Bengal: see John Irwin, ‘Indian Textile Trade in the Seventeenth Century: III Bengal’, Jl Indian Textile Hist., iii (1957), 64.

41 Based on an analysis of shirts and shifts stolen in the West Riding of Yorkshire for the five years 1821–5, which shows that only eight out of fifty-two shirts and shifts for which the material was named were cotton: West Yorkshire Record Office, Wakefield, Q/4/55–8, West Riding Quarter Sessions Indictment Books, 1819–26. Indian-made cotton shirts may have been more successful in late seventeenth-century export and re-export markets. A small number (about four thousand) were bought by the Hudson’s Bay Company between 1684 and 1694, although this may have been simply a case of benefiting from the East India Company’s failure in the domestic market: see Beverley Lemire, Dress, Culture and Commerce (London, 1997), 36.
Tea drinking originated in China, and the history of teawares there is a long, complex and geographically uneven one. The claims sometimes made in the literature on European teawares that the Chinese did not make teapots from silver and did not use teapots to infuse their tea are inaccurate.\(^{42}\) It is clear, however, that as Europeans became familiar with tea in China and Japan in the course of the first half of the seventeenth century, it was principally ceramic teapots that they encountered, and it was the practice of infusing the tea in such pots that was adopted in Europe when tea, teapots and other wares for tea drinking were transported there in increasing numbers. In the seventeenth century, ceramic teapots were imported from China into England made from both the famous red Yixing stoneware, which by then was the dominant material for teapots in the coastal areas of China where the English and the Dutch sourced their goods, and from various kinds of porcelain. Among the porcelain artefacts imported as teapots were many items that were used as winepots in China, where wine was usually drunk warm.

Chinese ceramics, especially porcelain, were enormously prized in England throughout the seventeenth century, but the English, like other Europeans, were reluctant to accept dependence on a foreign, expensive and often unreliable source of supply. One consequence of this was the long struggle to find the secret of true porcelain, in England most prominently by John Dwight. But English manufacturers, like those in the Netherlands, also responded to the popularity of Chinese ceramics by producing copies, or at least visual evocations, in more mundane ceramic materials. Thus, as tea slowly became an established commodity in the English market from the 1660s, Chinese porcelain teapots and winepots were imitated by the London delftware potters, and the red Yixing stoneware teapots by Dwight at Fulham and the Elers brothers at Vauxhall.\(^{43}\) But at roughly the same time as these English imitations of Chinese teapots were being undertaken

\(^{42}\) For a nuanced example of the received view, see N. M. Penzer, 'The Early Silver Teapot and its Origin', *Apollo*, lxiv (1956), 208; for a corrective, Simon K. S. Chiu, ‘The History of Tea and Tea Making in China as Recorded in Texts, Paintings and Artefacts’, in *Chinese Ceramic Tea Vessels: The K. S. Lo Collection, Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware* (Hong Kong, 1991), 39.

\(^{43}\) For the activities of Dwight and the Elers in the 1690s, see ‘John Dwight’s Fulham Pottery, 1672–1978: A Collection of Documentary Sources’, ed. Dennis Haselgrove and John Murray, *Jl Ceramic Hist.*, xi (1979), 9–10; for stoneware teapots, see Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), PROB 4/6558, inventory of John Robins of Southwark, potter, 1699; also the tradecard of James Morley of Nottingham,
1. The first surviving English silver teapot (1670–1), 13½ inches tall. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, M.399-1921 (By permission of the V&A Picture Library)
2. A late seventeenth-century delft tile panel of a coffee-house boy with a coffee pot.
Museum of London, 7143
(Courtesy of the Museum of London)

in ceramic, there occurred a much more radical reformulation of the Chinese teapot form as a silver object, which had no immediate direct precedents either in China or in England.

As has often subsequently been the case with many new artefacts, there was initially a marked indeterminacy about the form of these objects. It was not until the start of the eighteenth century that some degree of design stability was achieved as a

(n. 43 cont.)
c.1700, reproduced in Peter B. Brown and Marla H. Schwartz, Come Drink the Bowl Dry: Alcoholic Liquors and their Place in Eighteenth-Century Society (York, 1996), 75; for a delftware teapot of the 1720s, three and a half inches tall, see Victoria and Albert Museum, London (hereafter V&A), museum number C.656-1927.
limited range of type forms became dominant.\footnote{44} Insofar as can be judged from the small number of surviving examples, the late seventeenth-century English silver teapot was characterized by a diversity of forms, not all of them east Asian in inspiration, that suggests a period of experimentation. The first surviving English silver artefact described as a teapot has a London hallmark for 1670–1 and was presented to the East India Company by George, Lord Berkley. It takes the form of a large tapering cylinder, thirteen and a half inches tall, with a leather-covered handle, straight spout and conical lid, weighing over forty-two ounces (Plate 1). In form it has no obvious Chinese or Japanese parallels and is much larger than most east Asian teapots, which are mostly less than six inches in height.\footnote{45} However, it conforms closely in shape and size to the typical coffee-pot used in London coffee-houses in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, which could be made from silver, base metal or ceramic. At this date, although both tea and coffee were very recent novelties, coffee drinking had already become much better established, especially in the coffee houses where large pots were required for serving numerous customers (see Plate 2). The distinctive size and form of this teapot is therefore best interpreted as a version of what was to become a standard shape for a large coffee pot, which itself probably owed its form to a combination of an English tankard body and a Turkish coffee-pot lid. Its dimensions suggest the mode of tea consumption envisaged was akin to that of coffee in a coffee house. A considerable volume of tea was to be made in advance for repeated servings to a large group of drinkers. The East India Company teapot is the only surviving example of its type, but it was probably not unique, as teapots of similar weight are recorded in late seventeenth-century manuscript sources.\footnote{46}

\footnote{44} The range of dominant type-forms, however, would continue to change through the eighteenth century. For a discussion of the issue of product stabilization and type forms in twentieth-century design, see Sparke, Introduction to Design and Culture, ch. 2.

\footnote{45} For example, see Plate 3; also V&A, museum number C.582-1910, a Chinese blue and white porcelain teapot, c.1662–1722, which is two inches tall.

\footnote{46} This teapot is in the V&A, museum number M.399-1921. For its interpretation, see Penzer, ‘Early Silver Teapot’, 209–10. For manuscript references to other silver teapots of similar weight, see C. C. Oman, Caroline Silver, 1625–1688 (London, 1970), 58 n. 2. For a coffee pot of similar form and size dating from 1681, see V&A, museum number M.398-1921.
Other silver teapots made in London in the late 1660s and early 1670s were much smaller and, although none appear to survive, probably very different in form. Teapots supplied by the goldsmiths Robert Blanchard and Thomas Fowle at this period weighed only between twelve and twenty-two ounces.\textsuperscript{47} This is much closer to the weight range of the surviving pear-shaped silver teapots dating from the last two decades of the seventeenth century that loosely follow the forms of Chinese ceramic tea and winepots.\textsuperscript{48} By the early decades of the eighteenth century, when tea consumption began to increase rapidly, silver teapot design had stabilized around this smaller size of pot, with two forms dominant — the plain, squat, pear-shape of the classic ‘Queen Anne’ teapot, and the globular ‘bullet’ shape. Both survive in smooth and polygonal versions. Both derived from Chinese ceramic forms, although the techniques of manufacture and the overall visual effect were radically different from Chinese teapots (see Plates 3 and 4). And both were much more suited than the East India Company teapot for making up tea in limited quantities, for drinking by individuals or small intimate groups.

This transformation of an Asian ceramic object, used for the consumption of an Asian beverage, into a European silver one was achieved despite silver’s functional disadvantages as a material for holding hot drinks. Its high conductivity rendered silver teacups almost unusable and, despite the best efforts of the silversmiths, they never enjoyed the success of silver teapots. The teapots themselves came to be made predominantly with wooden handles to overcome this disadvantage. However, silver did not break when dropped, nor did it crack, craze or bleed colour when in contact with boiling water, in contrast to some of the English-made ceramic substitutes for Chinese porcelain from the period. Like Chinese porcelain, silver was expensive, but in addition it could be melted down and reworked. Most importantly, perhaps, silver objects were socially prestigious in European culture. Tea at this period was an extremely expensive beverage and those few who could afford it were already accustomed to using pre-


\textsuperscript{48} For examples, see V&A, museum number M.48-1939, a silver gilt teapot, c.1685, which weighs eight ounces and is five and three-quarter inches tall; and Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, museum number 1947.63, a teapot by Benjamin Pyne, c.1680, which weighs ten ounces and is five and a half inches tall.
dominantly silver vessels in connection with the consumption of various kinds of food and drink. The London silversmiths of the later seventeenth century who succeeded in reconstituting the teapot as a silver object enabled their wealthy customers to drink the new exotic beverage using containers made from the traditional prestige material which were commissioned in the established manner. In doing so, they staked out a position for themselves in the new elite market for hot-drink utensils which would otherwise have been dominated by exotic ceramics. What remains unclear is the extent to which the initiative for this innovation came from the silversmiths or their customers. Nevertheless, the speed with which the London silversmiths began to make teapots in silver is remarkable. Perhaps the earliest explicit reference to the availability of tea for sale in England is in 1658 and the first mention in the East India Company’s records is in 1664, yet silver teapots were being manufactured in London
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, M.224-1930
(By permission of the V&A Picture Library)

by 1667. But however impressive an example of product innovation by London silversmiths the silver teapot may have been, it was far from being an isolated one. The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the visual transformation of many existing categories of silver plate and the introduction of a number of entirely new categories of silver object. All these innovations by silversmiths took place in the context of increasing competition from other materials, particularly glass and ceramics. The overall result was a progressive expansion in product diversity, especially

in the range of materials from which consumers could choose similar kinds of object.

V

One effect of this general diversification of output which characterized the period was to encourage some producers to reformulate the objects they made in ways that increased product differentiation and established distinct new product identities. Innovations that enhanced product difference took a variety of forms. One was to intensify the difference between the new and the old, by accelerating commercial cycles and organizing them on a more regular systematic basis. The late seventeenth-century introduction of annual changes in the design of the silk fabrics for fashionable western European women’s outer garments had this effect.\(^{50}\) So too did the invention of the newspaper.\(^{51}\) Another way of enhancing product difference was to supply objects in sets that matched in terms of material, form or decoration, as silversmiths and potters did with tea services, thereby encouraging greater consumer loyalty to particular materials or makers. However, perhaps the most radical innovation during this period in product differentiation and the establishment of product identity was the development of branded goods.

The emergence of nationally advertised and distinctively packaged branded goods is usually associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and there is no doubt that this later period saw their number, their range and their market-share greatly expand. Nevertheless, extensively marketed branded products were not unknown in the seventeenth century, and became increasingly common as the eighteenth century progressed.\(^{52}\) Probably the earliest such products, and undoub-

\(^{50}\) See n. 23 above.
edly those that became most familiar to late seventeenth and eighteenth-century consumers, were proprietary medicines.\textsuperscript{53} Anderson’s Scots pills were available from the 1630s.\textsuperscript{54} They were still widely sold in the later eighteenth century, as were brands like Epsom Salts and Daffy’s Elixir Salutis which were established by the end of the seventeenth century. In a society where life-threatening illness was widespread, but access to professional medical practitioners expensive, self-diagnosis and self-prescribed treatment through over-the-counter medicines was the primary form of treatment for many. Branding medicines was a means of establishing a distinct product identity which held out to the consumer a (highly questionable) guarantee of consistent standards and effectiveness. It enabled the owners of the brands to distinguish their products from the generic medicines sold by apothecaries and other local retailers, and thereby both to establish larger national and international markets and to command a price premium. At the same time, the use of personal brand-names provided a link between the new, increasingly systematic, marketing of commercial medicines and the established local and regional reputations already enjoyed by individuals expert in the preparation of medicines, often on a philanthropic basis.\textsuperscript{55}

All this constituted an attractive sales proposition in a market where consumer motivation to pay for effective treatments was very high, but where competition was fierce and unscrupulous, and the quality of the product, whether pill or potion, was well-nigh impossible for the ordinary consumer to establish. Despite the fact that these goods are often referred to as patent medicines, most of those advertised were not patented, including some of the most famous like Daffy’s Elixir.\textsuperscript{56} However, the acquisition of a patent, though expensive at approximately £120 and limited

\textsuperscript{53} Although there were others, such as Holman’s Ink Powder, patented in 1688 and extensively advertised over a number of years: see R. B. Walker, ‘Advertising in London Newspapers, 1650–1750’, \textit{Business Hist.}, xv (1973), 125. For the best discussion of the whole phenomenon of proprietary medicines, see Roy Porter, \textit{Health for Sale: Quackery in England, 1660–1850} (Manchester, 1989), chs. 2 and 4, although Porter does not deal with the issue of brand-specific containers that is discussed here.


\textsuperscript{56} Christine MacLeod, \textit{Inventing the Industrial Revolution} (Cambridge, 1988), 86.
to a fourteen-year term, could reinforce many of the benefits of branding. A patent offered some legal protection against piracy while providing a promotional opportunity in the form of a kind of official, indeed royal, endorsement.  

As with twentieth-century branded products, advertising was crucial to establishing and sustaining branded medicines in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century marketplace. It is not surprising, therefore, that proprietary medicines were among the first products to be advertised in the early newspapers printed in seventeenth-century London, as well as in books, pamphlets and handbills. 58 Their number appears to have grown with the expansion of the periodical press, although as most of our knowledge of them comes from newspaper advertisements it is difficult to verify this trend independently. Certainly in the eighteenth century they became one of the largest single categories of advertisement in most newspapers, whether London or provincial, although by mid-century, when the newspaper market had become more specialized, they tended to be clustered in the papers with a lower social class of readership. 59

The prominence of proprietary medicines among advertisements in newspapers partly reflected the fact that those who owned the newspapers were often involved in the distribution and sometimes the ownership of the brands concerned. Indeed, from the mid-seventeenth century the trade in proprietary medicines enjoyed an intimate relationship with the London publishing trade. The two businesses had key features in common. They both dealt in standardized goods whose production was centrally controlled, usually in London. The products of both were marketed nationally to the final consumer by means of a name which identified their contents, whether it be the title of the book or the brand name of the medicine. National distribution and national advertising were crucial to the commercial development of both products. 60 The London book trade had a system of

57 Ibid., 18, 76, 85.
nationwide distribution through local booksellers. Frequently those booksellers acted as agents for proprietary medicines. The London newspapers, as they developed in the course of the seventeenth century, provided the only significant medium for national advertising. It was a medium that was exploited from its first emergence by the publishers and the medicine sellers alike. By the early eighteenth century, the London newspapers were predominantly owned by the book publishers, a number of whom also invested in proprietary medicines.

One consequence of this symbiosis between the medicine and the publishing trades was that advertisements for medicines often appear to have been placed in both London and provincial newspapers free of charge (except for tax), or for payment in kind. This was a trend that began as early as 1679 when Benjamin Harris, the London publisher of the Domestick Intelligence, advertised his own ‘Admirable and Effectual Water for the Gaping of the Guts’. It continued into the eighteenth century when, for example, William Dicey, the owner of the Northampton Mercury, and Robert Raikes, the publisher of the Gloucester Journal, shared part ownership of the rights to Dr Bateman’s Pectoral Drops, and John Newbery, who owned the Reading Mercury and later came to dominate the London publishing world, was part owner of Dr Hooper’s Female Pills and Dr James’s Fever Powders. By the second half of the eighteenth century, Dicey and Newbery were two of the best-known and widely advertised brand proprietors.

Indeed, it was the sellers of branded medicines more than any other seventeenth- or eighteenth-century entrepreneurs who developed the techniques of print advertising, particularly through their use of woodcut illustrations, display typefaces, testimonials, endorsements, claims of royal and aristocratic patronage, and knocking copy. However, their marketing innova-

61 Alden, ‘Pills and Publishing’.
63 Eighteenth-century newspapers did carry illustrations, usually woodcuts, but their use was not extensive. It is striking, however, that, like display types, illustrations were used much more frequently in advertisements than in the editorial columns. The discrepancy suggests printers were concerned to make advertisements prominent, and represents, perhaps, a deliberate attempt to woo advertisers. For the use of images in eighteenth-century advertising, see Julia Muir, ‘Printing Persuasion: Advertising Goods in Eighteenth-Century England’ (Royal College of Art M.A. thesis, 2000).
5. Robert Turlington’s rectangular Balsam of Life bottle, curved on front and back (May 1748); the neck of the bottle has been broken. Museum of London, A22882
(Courtesy of the Museum of London)
tions were not confined to advertising, but, like twentieth-century branded goods, extended to packaging and containers. Here again, the key issue was product differentiation. In their physical characteristics, there was little to distinguish most of the proprietary medicines. Usually they took the form of a liquid, a powder or sometimes a pill that might have a distinctive colour, but little else that the layperson could use to verify the product’s authenticity. Hence the addendum to John Lamport’s advertisement in 1685: ‘Note, My Fever Pills, which I have made use of many years, is not the same with Matthews’s Pill, save in the original only; mine containing some eminent Cordial Ingredients which are not in that’. 64 Anxious to establish a distinct product identity among consumers, and faced with the constant threat of piracy, the owners of the proprietary medicine brands developed a number of ways of making their products physically distinctive. The most radically innovative of these was the small glass bottle blown in a mould to produce a distinctive brand-specific shape, with the brand name and other information about the brand embossed on the surface of the glass. 65

The most visually adventurous implementations of this strategy in the mid-eighteenth century were the rectangular, violin and tablet shaped bottles introduced by Robert Turlington of Lombard Street, London, for his Balsam of Life in the 1740s and 1750s (Plates 5, 6 and 7). Other proprietary medicines employed distinctive shapes, like the bulbous bottles illustrated in advertisements for Richard Rock’s preparation of Daffy’s Elixir in 1743, and the square bottles described in advertisements for Widow Clark’s Balsamic Viper Drops in 1754, but Turlington’s were the most elaborate at this period. 66 His bottles were identifiable not simply because of their shapes, but also because almost every surface was heavily embossed with letters or images. These included Turlington’s name, a statement that the product enjoyed the king’s patent, and his own and the royal coats of arms. To

64 Lamport, Direct Method of Ordering and Curing People, 16.
65 A cheaper and more common means of making the product physically distinctive was the use of a wax seal with a distinctive coat of arms: see Francis Doherty, ‘The Anodyne Necklace: A Quack Remedy and its Promotion’, Medical Hist., xxxiv (1990), 270 n. 15.
66 Advertisement for Daffy’s Elixir, The Daily Advertiser, 29 Oct. 1743. Advertisement for Widow Clark’s Original and only Genuine Balsamic Viper Drops, The Public Advertiser, 1 Jan. 1754: ‘To prevent Counterfeits, all Persons are desired carefully to observe that these Drops are put into square Bottles, sealed with the Impression of a Viper, and round it these Words, Fra. Clark’s Viper-Drops’.
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Va., 1982/35
(By permission of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)
7. Robert Turlington’s tablet-shaped Balsam of Life bottle (January 1754).
   Museum of London, P681
   (Courtesy of the Museum of London)
reinforce product identity, the bottles were sold with an accompanying printed bill of directions and a booklet containing testimonials to the efficacy of the medicine. To ensure authenticity, the bill of directions illustrated the current shape of the bottle and listed the embossed information. When combined with newspaper advertisements and handbills also carrying woodcut images of the bottles (Plate 8), what we have here is an integrated strategy for identifying and differentiating Turlington’s Balsam, which linked the product, the brand name, the distinctive packaging and the extensive promotion.

It was, however, a strategy born of desperation. Turlington did succeed in establishing a long-lasting and widely known brand, but the sophistication of his packaging in the 1740s and 1750s was a consequence of his problems with piracy. Turlington patented his balsam in 1744, but had to change the design of his bottle at least four times in the next decade. He had already altered his bottles to the rectangular shape illustrated in his 1747 newspaper advertisements (Plate 8) when, in May 1748, he was obliged to adopt yet another new shape — a tapered rectangle, curved on the front and the back, with embossed lettering and two crests (Plate 5). By August the next year, however, these too had been pirated by the Whitefriars glassworks in London. The much more elaborate violin-shaped bottle of 1750 (Plate 6) and tablet-shaped bottle of 1754 were Turlington’s responses (Plate 7).

67 For successive examples of the handbill entitled ‘Directions for Taking Turlington’s Original Balsam of Life’, see Kent County Record Office, Maidstone (hereafter KRO), U120, Z17/14 (a), undated [1748]; Metropolitan Museum, New York, Landauer Collection, vol. Ch–Cz, undated [1750] (I would like to thank Michael Snodin for this reference); Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Ab. n.d. — 226, undated [1754]. For an example of the booklet see Brit. Lib., 7461.a.71, By Virtue of the King’s Patent: Turlington’s Balsam of Life . . . The Efficacy and Virtues of which Incomparable Medicine are Exemplified by an Account of Some of the Cures Perform’d Thereby, in this Book Briefly Mention’d (London, n.d. [1748]).

68 For Turlington’s illustrated newspaper advertisements, see Plate 5; also, Adams’s Weekly Courant [Chester], 21 Jan. 1752. For handbills for Turlington’s Balsam, see n. 67, above. The packaging was tailored to different levels in the market, with a standard-sized bottle priced at 3s. 6d. and a smaller size at 1s. 9d., ‘in order that the poorer Sort may not be deprived of its Kindly Influence’.

69 Francis Buckley, ‘Old English Glass: Patent Medicine Bottles’, Glass (June 1933), 234–5; also Ivor Noël Hume, Glass in Colonial Williamsburg’s Archaeological Collections (Williamsburg, Va., 1969), 42–5. I would like to thank Frederika Launert for allowing me to use information from her 1992 V&A/Royal College of Art M.A. course essay on Turlington’s bottles. Turlington himself described his 1750 bottle (Plate 6) as being in ‘the shape of a violin’ in his advertisement in Adams’s Weekly Courant, 21 Jan. 1752.
His experience demonstrates that, by the eighteenth century, entrepreneurs were well aware of the ways packaging could be used in the marketing of branded products, but it also indicates the difficulty of using package design to establish a secure and stable product identity when the law regarding copyright and trademarks was extremely weak, as it would remain for another century (the patent protected the medicine, not the design of the
bottle). And of course it must be remembered that the commercial success of the medicine sellers in establishing a number of famous and nationally recognized brands was achieved at the cost of enormous public suspicion and ridicule, which saw their products derided as quack medicines, and which contributed to the deep suspicion of all printed advertising that characterized eighteenth-century polite society.

VI

Standard sizes for ready-made garments — the last of the innovations to be considered — embodied another form of response to the challenge presented by an increasingly large, diverse and above all better-informed market. If product differentiation represented one strategy for dealing with this challenge, standardization represented another. The two were not necessarily at odds. In economic and design history, the use of the term ‘product standardization’ has usually been attached to the strategy of restricting product diversity in order to achieve the lowest possible manufacturing costs characteristic of the more extreme forms of Fordist mass production in the twentieth century. In the American motor industry between 1900 and 1940, for example, the implementation of mass-production strategies was associated with a huge increase in car ownership, but a rapid decline in the number of automobile producers and in the range of models on the road. Standardization in this sense, associated with radical reformulation of product design and restricted product variation, may have been a feature of a number of mass-production industries in the first half of the twentieth century, but it is less obvious in the consumer goods industries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As we have seen, during this earlier period strenuous attempts were often made to regularize product definitions and to establish clear product identities, but these were

driven by the imperatives of marketing more than manufacturing, and rarely seem to have restricted product diversity. 71

Nevertheless, the early modern expansion in the range and variety of consumer goods was associated with radical changes in the way such goods were manufactured, especially through an extension of the division of labour. Greater specialization in manufacturing was often accompanied by innovation in product standardization, but usually not of a kind that required the narrow constraints on product variation emphasized in the literature on the twentieth century. Two aspects of standardization were particularly important for early modern consumer goods. First, the use of finished or semi-finished components made to standard specifications, such as cast feet and finials in the manufacture of silver plate. In London, these components came increasingly to be supplied to the final assemblers of the products concerned by specialist subcontracting businesses. 72 Their availability enabled even individually commissioned and short-run luxury goods to be assembled on a partly modular basis. Second, and related to the first, was the use of standard measurements. Again, this was particularly important for intermediate goods. Standardization in this sense was particularly widespread in the manufacture of textiles, where yarn counts were established, sometimes by law, from at least the sixteenth century. 73 Yarn counts were not uniform across the different textile fibres, nor were they national in scope, but they were effective within each regional industry and were widely enough recognized to facilitate interregional and international trade in yarn. In addition, standardized systems of measurement were increasingly applied to some finished consumer goods, particularly clothing, in order to facilitate the manufacture and sale of ready-made products.

The manufacture and sale of ready-made clothes was already well established in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but appears to have been confined mainly to accessories like shoes, caps and gloves. It did not extend on any large scale, even

71 For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Styles, ‘Manufacturing, Consumption and Design’.
73 For yarn standards in the worsted industries see the following acts of parliament: 7 Jac. I, c.7 (1609); 13 and 14 Car. II, c.5 (1662); 17 Geo. III, c.11 (1777); 24 Geo. III, St.3, c.3 (1784); 25 Geo. III, c.40 (1785); 31 Geo. III, c.56 (1791).
in London, to the production of main garments — women’s gowns and men’s breeches, doublets, and later, coats and waistcoats — which were generally custom-made for a particular individual. The extent to which ready-made accessories were sized is difficult to establish, given the lack of business records and the limited and inconsistent nature of the information carried in probate inventories. It is clear from early seventeenth-century shoemakers’ inventories and from the contracts made for clothing the New Model Army in 1645 that a widely recognized numerical system for sizing ready-made shoes was in operation at this period.\textsuperscript{74} However, sizing was not essential to the successful sale of ready-made clothing. A vast second-hand trade was carried on in clothing of all sorts throughout early modern England, which, by its very nature, could not use standard sizes.\textsuperscript{75}

Making and selling ready-made main garments appears to have begun its major expansion in London in the second quarter of the seventeenth century. It is then that salesmen (retailers of ready-made clothes) began to seek loans from the Merchant Tailors Company in large numbers and when systematic complaints against their activities started to be made to the company’s officers.\textsuperscript{76} Even in 1681, in a complaint about the damage salesmen were inflicting on other trades, it was still possible to describe their activities as ‘this new Trade’ and to assert that ‘many remember when there were no new Garments sold in London, as now there are, only old Garments at second hand’. Nevertheless, by the last quarter of the seventeenth century, retailers of ready-made main garments were well established and were able, it was claimed, to supply these garments at lower prices than the bespoke tailors.\textsuperscript{77} This development was, of course, an instance


\textsuperscript{77} [Anon], \textit{The Trade of England Revived} (London, 1681), 36; Earle, \textit{Making of the English Middle Class}, 21–2, 286–8.
of the wider tendency, already discussed, towards greater functional and product specialization in many London trades as the city grew. It saw specialist retailers selling ready-made goods becoming increasingly prominent in a number of trades, including some of the most genteel, like the goldsmiths. In the case of ready-made main garments, the trend may have been encouraged by the large orders placed for military uniforms during the Civil War, by the expansion of shipping and colonial settlement and the accompanying demand for clothing for sailors, indentured servants and plantation slaves, and perhaps by a shift in some men’s and women’s garments to simpler styles in the later seventeenth century. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the rise of the salesman began before most of these developments, and rested primarily on the rapid growth in the size of London as a market. Ready-made clothes were made and sold outside London, but it remained the dominant centre for their manufacture and supply through the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with London salesmen marketing their wares to the provinces and provincial salesmen going to London to acquire stock.

Human bodies vary greatly in size and shape, but main garments, which even among the poor were made almost exclusively by professionals, were expected to fit in a regularized way that conformed to contemporary notions of fashion, or at least decency. The makers of ready-made main clothes had to confront problems of measurement and fit that were more complicated than those faced by most manufacturers of dress accessories, and which did not arise at all in making many other ready-made goods. These problems did not make standardization of sizing essential, but some sort of sizing system must have been very attractive to manufacturers, retailers and customers alike. Sizing ready-made main garments not only made the retailer’s task of selection for the customer easier. It also enabled retailers to place

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79 For a London salesman in the provinces, see PRO, PROB 32/67/129, Probate Inventory of Samuel Dalling of Southwark, salesman, 1699; for stock from London, see *Norwich Mercury*, 13 May 1758, advertisement for C. Kett; also Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, ch. 2.
orders with manufacturers in quantities that reflected the distribution of sizes among the population.

It is not clear whether such a sizing system was introduced during the period when the making and sale of ready-made main garments emerged in seventeenth-century London. At least one of the orders for uniforms placed on behalf of the New Model Army in 1645 specifies size, but only by the phrase ‘the largest size’, in marked contrast to the numerical system used in the orders to specify shoe sizes. However, there is no doubt that a numerical sizing system based on a scale of 1 (small) to 10 (large) was in use in London for civilian ready-made clothes for men by the 1740s. At least one Houndsditch salesman had his orders supplied by his manufacturing tailor in nearby Shoemaker Row according to this scale. What remains obscure is how much uniformity there was in sizing standards among different retailers and manufacturers at this period, and the extent to which their customers were familiar with the sizing system. By the 1780s a sizing system similar to that in use in the 1740s appears to have been common to all the London slop-shops, where cheap, ready-made clothing was sold, and was a matter of general public knowledge.

The application of sizing to ready-made main garments was an innovation that involved a significant reconfiguration of a product range in the interests of standardization. In contrast to some of the instances of product reformulation discussed earlier, this reconfiguration was intended to remain concealed, at least when the garment was worn. The objective of the ready-made clothes-seller was to provide a garment that looked and wore like a piece of bespoke clothing, while actually being made in a limited number of standard sizes. In this aim seventeenth and eighteenth salesmen were not wholly successful. London caricatures of the

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80 Mungeam, ‘Contracts for the Supply of Equipment’, 109. The lack of precision in the specifications for garment sizes for the New Model Army may simply indicate that it had already adopted the practice that was to be followed by eighteenth-century army regiments of having the clothing supplied ready-made by the contractors, before being taken apart and re-made by the tailors serving with the regiment in order to ensure a correct fit: see H. Strachan, British Military Uniforms, 1766–1796 (London, 1975), 27; also J. R. Western, The English Militia in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1965), 354.

81 PRO, E140/85/2, Exchequer Masters Exhibits, Smith v. Goater, 1745, Books A and B.

82 [Anon.], Instructions for Cutting out Apparel for the Poor (London, 1789), 56, 58, 59.
9. ‘Snip’s Warehouse for Ready Made Cloaths’ (1791)
British Museum, London, Department of Prints and Drawings, DG 8036
(By permission of the British Museum)
later eighteenth century make it clear that ready-made garments were as notorious for the inadequacy of their fit as those who sold them were for the mendacity of their sales patter (Plate 9). Here is an instance of early modern product standardization where the quest for lower prices through manufacturing efficiency led to design restrictions that evoked widespread consumer resentment.

VII

This article has argued that product innovation in early modern London was not simply a matter of bringing new and unfamiliar products to market, but involved the formulation and reformulation of product definitions and identities in such a way that new products were rendered comprehensible and attractive to consumers. It is important to emphasize that what is at issue here is not simply the process by which manufacturers imitated luxury objects in cheaper, sometimes new, materials for broader, less affluent, markets. Early modern manufacturers were undoubtedly keen to exploit opportunities to make semi-luxury, ‘populuxe’, or simply cheap products that copied expensive objects, or at least captured elements of their look for less wealthy customers. Ready-made clothing represents one example of this practice. Sheffield plate, a fusion of silver and copper discovered in 1742, represents another. It is a particularly impressive example, because objects made from Sheffield plate substituted for silver objects three or four times their price, yet were visually indistinguishable. The practice can be identified earlier in ceramics where, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, inexpensive blue and white delftware mimicked costly Chinese porcelain, and lowly slip-trailed earthenware reproduced precisely the kinds of engraved decoration applied to valuable silver items. However dissimilar copy and original may appear to the modern eye, the

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parallels must have been clear enough to those who made and bought them.\textsuperscript{85} It is hardly surprising that these cheaper adaptations of costly objects were widely available at this earlier period, given the character of the English market. The prosperity of the middling level of English consumers was already a matter of comment in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{86}

Cheaper adaptations of costly objects were common, therefore, throughout the early modern period, although between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries there was a marked increase in their number, in the range of materials and techniques employed, and in the visual sophistication of the results. Nevertheless, cheaper adaptations composed only one aspect of the work of formulating and reformulating the physical attributes of new artefacts. The silver teapot, as we have seen, was a copy that was at least as expensive as its original. The East India Company’s clothing chintzes were intitially, in the 1660s and 1670s, more successful at middle and lower levels of the market than at the top.\textsuperscript{87} The dredging box, used for sprinkling seasoned flour or breadcrumbs on roasting meat, an increasingly common item of kitchen equipment in the early eighteenth century, appeared first in lowly tinware and only later in costly silver.\textsuperscript{88} What was common to all attempts at product innovation, irrespective of the intended level of the market, was the need to render novelty meaningful and recognizable. The newness of the new product had to be reconciled with consumers’ pre-existing experience, knowledge and expectations. Innovation had to be domesticated in almost every sense of that word, from the national to the personal. Consumers had to be offered an idea of the new artefact’s potential (both practical and symbolic) which they could

\textsuperscript{85} For a discussion of the ways expensive ceramic and metal objects were copied and adapted in the medium of cheap earthenware, see Darron Dean, ‘The Design, Production and Consumption of English Lead-Glazed Earthenware in the Seventeenth Century’ (Royal College of Art Ph.D. thesis, 1997).

\textsuperscript{86} See, for example, [Anon.], \textit{Trade of England Resived}, 32–3. It is important to stress that this process of adaptation was well-established long before the eighteenth century, however much it might have blossomed then. For a different view see Maxine Berg, ‘New Commodities, Luxuries and their Consumers in Eighteenth-Century England’, in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds.), \textit{Luxury and Necessity: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850} (Manchester, 1999), 76–7.


\textsuperscript{88} For dredging boxes, see Sara Pennell, ‘‘Pots and Pans History’’: The Material Culture of the Kitchen in Early Modern England’, \textit{Jl Design Hist.}, xi (1998), 209.
recognize. It is for this reason that so many of the new products discussed here came to incorporate references to previously familiar objects. Product innovation demanded of the supplier not just persuasion and education, but compromise and sometimes concealment.\(^{89}\)

It is also the contention of this article that many of the techniques for promoting public demand for novelty and fashionability by careful management of the design of new products, which historians have presented as innovations of the early years of the Industrial Revolution, were already familiar in eighteenth-century London.\(^{90}\) This is not to suggest that the activities of a Josiah Wedgwood or a Matthew Boulton in the second half of the eighteenth century were unoriginal. These men were innovators, or at least early trendsetters, in a number of important aspects of design, production and marketing that bore on product innovation. For instance, the very fact that they conducted ‘high design’ businesses on a national and international scale directly from a provincial base was itself novel.\(^{91}\) So too was the precision with which they shadowed every significant change in architecture and fine design, assisted by a tightly knit group of collectors, antiquaries and architects.\(^{92}\) The systematic way in which Wedgwood, in particular, went about developing entirely new materials tailored to the requirements of contemporary taste had few precedents. Both Wedgwood and Boulton were precocious

\(^{89}\) This analysis draws on Wolfgang Fritz Haug’s notion of ‘aesthetic illusion’, although it is not intended to endorse his views on the debasement of use value consequent on commodification, or the dominant role of sexuality in making commodities desirable; see Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, trans. Robert Bock (London, 1986). The need to render novelty unthreatening is central to Adrian Forty’s analysis of late eighteenth-century neo-classical objects, but I would contend that, far from being peculiar to the late eighteenth century, the phenomenon is a general one, characteristic of commercial societies: see Forty, *Objects of Desire*, ch. 1.


\(^{91}\) Although, of course, in France the Lyons luxury silk industry had operated on this basis for over a century.

in their employment of some of the ever-widening range of techniques for the dissemination of commercial information, like Wedgwood’s London retail showroom, where some of his products came to be displayed in ways that mimicked the new art exhibitions of the 1760s.\textsuperscript{93}

If Boulton and Wedgwood can be identified as pioneers in each of these instances, in none of them can they be said to have made a decisive break with the broad modes of product innovation that prevailed in England from the later sixteenth to the later eighteenth centuries. Throughout the intervening two hundred years, designing and marketing new products relied on developments in the communication of commercial information which arose from innovations in transport, the postal service and publishing. Particularly important was the dissemination of design information in printed form, the use of advertising in handbills and newspapers, and, more generally, the progressive intensification of the flow of information between makers, marketers and customers. Throughout the intervening centuries, too, product innovation was linked with refinements in the division of labour, between people, between processes and between places. During the same period, product innovation regularly benefited from the endorsement of those among the social elite who were most influential on taste and fashion, and from the introduction of new materials, frequently imported, often copied from overseas, but increasingly invented in Britain.\textsuperscript{94} And, as this article has repeatedly emphasized, throughout the period it was customary to configure and reconfigure the physical character of new artefacts according to, or in advance of, changing public taste in order to secure success at various, often carefully targeted, levels in the marketplace. Indeed, this is hardly surprising, as product management of this kind was probably essential to successful innovation in any large, sophisticated, early modern market economy like that of London.

\textsuperscript{93} On the relationship between Wedgwood’s showroom display and art exhibitions, see Malcolm Baker, ‘A Rage for Exhibitions: The Display and Viewing of Wedgwood’s Frog Service’, in Hilary Young (ed.), The Genius of Wedgwood (London, 1995). But note that Wedgwood did not invent the West End London showroom: porcelain manufacturers had opened showrooms in the West End in the 1750s, well before Wedgwood’s opened in Great Newport Street in 1768; see Hilary Young, English Porcelain, 1745–95: Makers, Design, Marketing and Consumption (London, 1999), ch. 8.

\textsuperscript{94} See, for the East India Company’s cultivation of royalty during the seventeenth century, Douglas, ‘Cotton Textiles in England’, 29.
Yet even in a wealthy, information-rich and commercially vibrant metropolis, where novelty was familiar, product innovation faced many complex obstacles. As the East India Company’s marketing of ready-made cotton shirts demonstrates, sophisticated and determined attempts to manipulate product identities could fail. Moreover, despite the fact that the other examples of innovation were successful, in the sense that large markets were established for the products concerned, in each case that success was a qualified one. Carving out a large English market for Indian chintzes aroused such hostility from powerful domestic manufacturers of woollen and silk textiles that between 1701 and 1721 imports of Indian cottons came to be almost entirely prohibited by law. Successfully transforming the teapot into a silver object did not establish the predominance of silver on the tea table. The practice of mixing a variety of both metal and ceramic materials in preparing and drinking tea became common even among the very wealthy, as it did in the consumption of other beverages and foodstuffs. Robert Turlington established a brand name that survived into the late nineteenth century, but his branded packaging was ineffective in preventing piracy of both his medicine and his bottles. The development of sizing for ready-made main garments failed to eliminate their reputation for poor fit.

It is precisely because the success of much early modern product innovation has to be qualified in these ways that this article has resisted those crude polarizations between supplier and consumer that characterize so much recent historical literature on consumption; polarizations intended to establish the supremacy of supply or demand, of manipulative entrepreneurs or active, knowing consumers. The article has outlined some of the ways suppliers attempted to manipulate product identities for their own advantage, but it has also emphasized the precariousness of their efforts. Novelty in various guises had powerful attractions for many consumers, but success for the innovating supplier was far from guaranteed. Instead of assuming a crude polarization between the interests of supplier and consumer, the article has suggested that during the early modern period (as before and after) product innovation in a commercial metropolis involved an extended process of negotiation between the two, through which their expectations might be adjusted and their interests reconciled, in some senses at least.95 This process of negotiation took

95 ‘The use of the term ‘negotiation’ here bears comparison with its use in Sally Clarke’s discussion of the relationship between twentieth-century American firms and
a variety of forms. Product identities could be forged and reforged in many different ways in a sophisticated early modern city like London. Our understanding of the processes at work is not greatly enhanced if we treat them (as historians sometimes do) simply as an index of the emergence of some global phenomenon labelled consumerism or the consumer society.96 Nor can it be substantially advanced just by counting new products, as itemized in documentary sources. Analysing product innovation as a process of negotiation requires us to address a product’s physical attributes and ask how and why those attributes were contrived. It obliges us, in other words, to engage with products as artefacts.

Victoria and Albert Museum

John Styles

96 For a critique of this tendency in recent historical literature see Styles, ‘Manufacturing, Consumption and Design’, 535–42.