East India Company at Home, 1757-1857

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Partly after the Chinese manner

‘Chinese’ staircases in north-west Wales

Rachael Barnwell

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) holds among its extensive collections photographic records of domestic interiors of houses across Wales. In the records of the historic counties of Anglesey and Caernarvonshire in north-west Wales are a series of photographs showing some remarkable staircases.¹ This chapter explores these staircases by working to understand their designs, origins and influences in north-west Wales.

Like many staircases found in homes throughout Wales between the early seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, the staircases under discussion here feature 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 unusual staircases in the photographs showed balustrades that sported bold, distinctive geometric designs, formed by repeated sequences of alternating and contrasting latticework patterns (see Figure 14.1). 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.
To date, and with the exception of the continuing work of Huw Bowen and Lowri Ann Rees, there has been a limited assessment of the impact of the East India Company (EIC) on and in Wales, particularly with regards to the domestic environment. This chapter draws primarily on records from the National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW) held by the Royal Commission, and contributes to the ongoing project of exploring the influences of global trade generally, and EIC trade specifically, on Welsh homes. It 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. Its aim is to assess if, and to what degree, the EIC’s trade network impacted on the interior design in the homes of the propertied classes in north-west Wales in the eighteenth century.

‘Chinese’ staircases on record in north-west Wales

This chapter 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 17-mile radius of one another, and have ‘Chinese’ staircases that survive to the present day, though in variable conditions.

First, 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. It was built in the Palladian style popularized at the time of its construction by Inigo Jones and his contemporaries, and is believed to have been planned by one Master builder, though there is little remaining evidence to support this supposition. Originally, the house was situated outside 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’s plot has since
been encroached on by university buildings and more recently by the ‘PONTIO Arts and Innovation in Bangor’ development, obscuring its original rurality.

Royal Commission investigators visited Tan-yr-Allt in the early 1950s while preparing the ‘Caernarvonshire Inventories’, which were published in three volumes between 1956 and 1964. By that time the building was in use as Bangor University Student’s Union. Records at the Commission indicate that at the time of its initial survey the interior features of the building had survived well. They dated 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’.

Figure 14.1 The main staircase from the entrance hall at Tan-yr-Allt, showing the ascent to the first floor and hinting at fluted window reveals. DI2013_0674, NPRN 16895. © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
It ascends from the main entrance of the property to the first floor, with a railing on the landing and fluted reveals to the window at the head of the stairs. 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. In addition, the tread end of each step is carved with a stylized wave design. 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 it is made from mahogany or similar, or whether the look of dark wood is the result of wood staining. This staircase is the earliest of all the surviving staircases examined in this chapter, and at the time of writing, the earliest confirmed occurrence of a ‘Chinese’ staircase in north-west Wales.

Second, Bishopsgate House in Beaumaris, Anglesey: built by the Bulkeley family in the early eighteenth century, it was originally used as a dower house (see Figure 14.2). The family’s main residence on Anglesey was at Baron Hill, about a mile from Beaumaris. 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,

Figure 14.2  The ‘Chinese’ staircase at Bishopsgate House, showing the first floor landing. The stylized wave design carved into the tread ends is just visible in the bottom centre of this image. DI2011_1011, NPRN 15946. © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
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 suggesting 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 (1717–52) 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 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.

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. The pattern for the first flight of stairs is the same as at Tan-yr-Allt, while the second flight and landing also use the same patterns that appear on the landing at Tan-yr-Allt. In addition, the tread ends are decorated with the same carved stylized wave design. The staircase is again constructed from dark wood, though it too has been painted white since the Commission’s investigations.

Third, 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 Inventories’ (published in 1937), the exterior was photographed extensively. Inside, key architectural features were photographed: two sixteenth-century fireplaces and the main staircase (see Figure 14.3).
In the notes that accompany the survey the field investigator again 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 17 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.

As at both Tan-yr-Allt and Bishopsgate House, the staircase appears to be made from dark wood, and has a reasonably plain handrail, newel

Figure 14.3 The ‘Chinese’ staircase at Trefeilir, probably photographed in the 1930s, showing the main balustrade of the staircase with its latticework. DI2011_1010, NPRN 15898. © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
and newel cap. The tread ends are also carved with a stylized wave design, though this is slightly more ornate than at the other two properties. 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 utilized 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

If we accept the observations and conclusions of the Royal Commission’s experienced and highly qualified field investigators then all three of these staircases were installed in the properties discussed in the 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 materials and feature designs that are extremely similar to one another, as at Tan-yr-Allt and Bishopsgate House, or that share basic, characteristic motifs and patterns that have been arranged differently, as at Trefeilir. All properties share the stylized 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. The similarities in both design and materials support the Commission’s interpretation of the staircases as part of a ‘local’ trend. 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.

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). How, then, might a ‘Chinese’ style become ‘local’ to north-west Wales in the eighteenth century, and how did the contemporary trade of the EIC affect the appearance of this style of staircase in this area? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by considering the local connections and contexts of the families involved, the broader taste for ‘Chinese-style’ goods in Britain in the mid eighteenth century, and finally, the particularity of Welsh engagement with the Chinese style.

Possible influence of Plas Newydd

The Commission’s *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Anglesey* includes a summary of key or notable architectural features for buildings in the county. The *Inventory* states that ‘[t]he “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’. The note implies that at the time the *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 *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 (1708–82) 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 installing...
a classical staircase. In 1771, Wyatt had undertaken a refurbishment of the main Bayly residence, Beaudesert in Staffordshire. Wyatt directed the second phase of refurbishment at Plas Newydd, in association with Joseph Potter (1756–1842), a joiner from Lichfield. 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 stylized anthemion (honeysuckle) motif was more in keeping with the new schema designed for the rest of the house and made good use of cast iron, which had only recently become fashionable in interior design.

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 Nicholas 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 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.

Local connections with the East India Company

Despite the ambiguity of the 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 had strong connections to the EIC: Caroline's four times great-grandfather William, 5th Baron Paget (1572–1629) was an investor in the EIC, 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 EIC 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 EIC for the trade of copper trinkets. At the same time, the Bayly and Paget families also had 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 EIC's ships and merchants.

In contrast to Plas Newydd, there are no readily discernible connections between the families or houses at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House and Trefeilir, and the EIC. The Archdeacon of Merionedd John Ellis (1720–85), had no appreciable connection to the EIC or to broader contemporary travel and trade to Asia. Prior to his ordination into the Church of England, 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 EIC 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 EIC. Nevertheless, although no direct connections could be found between the properties in this study and the EIC, they all share one 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. 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. Likewise, all three families were well-connected in society, both within and beyond Wales, holding numerous political positions and posts. They were well-travelled and possessed property in London; they were well embedded in fashionable, metropolitan culture. It is 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 chapter the staircases under consideration have been identified as having a ‘Chinese’ or ‘Chinese Chippendale’ design, primarily because they are identified in the record as such, but also to distinguish 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 embedded in European-manufactured objects. To best understand the genesis of the staircases in this chapter, therefore, it is 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 the sixteenth to 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 EIC. In 1673 an English-language translation of Johan Nieuhof’s (1618–72) An Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces was published (see Figure 14.4). 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 steward for a 1500-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, featured 150 illustrations and was disseminated widely.
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 accompanied by hundreds of illustrations of contemporary Chinese civilization, ignited a deeper curiosity about the country and its culture across European society, and kindled a craze for China in architecture and design.

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 EIC 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 EIC’s trade with China had a direct effect on

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**Figure 14.4** Illustration from Nieuhof’s *Embassy*, showing a Chinese pagoda. French, German and Latin translations were made available, each of which were published in at least two editions.
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 his Staffordshire residence and transferred much of its contents to Plas Newydd. Both the tester and the wallpaper are dated to c.1720.

The influx of Chinese material goods, such as the silk tester, and the popularity of 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 fledgling consumer economy to part with their money. 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 utilized 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.

However, such artistic innovation was not always welcome. The ‘bluestocking’ Elizabeth Montagu, wrote to the Reverend Mr Friend in 1749 in despair of the new Chinese trend: ‘thus it has 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’. Despite 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’. Though widely disparaged by contemporary critics as inferior to classical styles, by the 1750s – when the first ‘Chinese’ staircase appeared in north-west Wales 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 capitalized 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 (see Figure 14.5).

‘In the Chinese taste’

*The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director* was published in 1754, and revised in 1755 and 1762. The *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 Trefeiliwr.

Indeed, the Commission’s own inventories attribute the ‘Chinese’ staircases at each property to Chippendale, referring to them as

![Figure 14.5](image)

*Figure 14.5*  Railing designs as depicted in Thomas Chippendale’s *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director*, 206.
‘Chinese Chippendale’ or ‘Chippendale’ staircases in both the site files and the official Inventory descriptions. Given that the 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 pre-dates the erection of Tan-yr-Allt, and the book’s 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. 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. The appearance of this furniture alongside the ‘Chinese’ staircases may have hinted further at Chippendale’s suspected influence in homeowners’ style choices.

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 (see Figure 14.6). 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’, 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. Moreover, 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 property owners would have been able to access.

While the Director was clearly important and influential, it 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 (see Figures 14.7 and 14.8). The book
featured 60 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.

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 stylized 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 EIC.

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
Figure 14.7  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.

Figure 14.8  ‘Chinese’ staircase design from William Halfpenny’s *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste*. 
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 merchant 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 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’

While the current dearth of detailed scholarship on eighteenth-century Welsh interiors 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 modernize 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

Each of the unique staircases examined in this chapter appears in wealthy households 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 EIC, there is no material evidence to connect the appearance of ‘Chinese’ staircases at Tan-yr-Allt, Bishopsgate House or Trefeilir directly with the EIC 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 EIC.

Sketches of buildings, people and objects by those who had travelled to China on EIC 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 EIC. 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.27 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 a local craftsman sparked the trend for ‘Chinese’ staircases by adding the design to his repertoire, probably through 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 EIC’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 they 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 EIC’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.