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PART I

DATA

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FURNITURE

There are over 3000 firms in Great Britain making domestic furniture and they give employment to some 120,000 persons. Of these firms 40 per cent are situated in London and the south-east of England, 6 per cent in High Wycombe, and 6 per cent in Scotland. The remaining 48 per cent represents the rest of England and Wales. In order to give a comprehensive account of this large and fundamentally important trade, I interviewed as many as thirty manufacturers. Each one was selected because his firm either represented a particular manufacturing technique or catered for a specific market, both of which would be relevant to a certain section of firms in the trade. My selection of firms was also guided by the fact that nearly 80 per cent of the total output of furniture by value is controlled by only 17 per cent of the trade. This means that the bulk of the furniture produced is in the hands of the larger firms. In the London area, where the trade is concentrated and the largest—and some of the smallest—firms are to be found, I visited twelve firms. In High Wycombe I visited five, in Scotland seven, and in the rest of the country six. I did not interview any independent cabinet-makers, or firms with less than twenty employees because, though numerous, their sphere of influence is very small. Evidence from retailers[1] will be dealt with separately.

Before discussing the facts obtained from these firms it is necessary to have before us a general picture of the furniture available to the public. Let us take a large provincial town. In the centre of the town, in its main streets, side streets and dotted here and there among its housing estates, are the hire-purchase furniture chain stores. They are the first to attract attention for two reasons. They are more numerous than any other type of furniture shop and they indulge in fancy, ever-changing, window and pavement displays. The standard of furniture design in these stores is deplorable. Next in the town are the large department stores. The furniture which they display in solemn, sombre phalanxes of wardrobes, sideboards and three-piece suites, is also deplorable, although it is always possible to find two or three pieces of modern design. That is the complete picture for well over 90 per cent of the buying public in such a town. There remain three or four shops where furniture of the highest quality is available. This quality is usually embodied in period forms, either genuine or imitation antiques, but there is also a fair and varied selection of modern furniture available.

[1] See p. 151.

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If timidity or lack of financial resources prevents most people from entering this class of store, there is little chance that they will realize that modern furniture exists.

If that is the situation today, what was it like before the war? What changes have taken place? The chain stores were much the same, but most department stores had no modern furniture. The better-class stores would undoubtedly have some, but it would be relatively much more expensive than the selection shown today. In the years before the war modern furniture was to be seen chiefly in London and the bulk of it was either exclusive to single shops or even to particular clients. There was not sufficient demand for modern furniture to make mass-production worth while. Here, perhaps, is the most significant change which has taken place. Today there are many firms making modern furniture by mass-production and semi-mass-production processes.

The war has had a considerable effect on the furniture trade. Many firms were obliged to change their production from domestic furniture to war-work. In many cases which I have investigated this change has been entirely beneficial. New machines and techniques were introduced which, when the war ended, could be used to make the production of furniture speedier, less costly and more efficient—three factors which have already helped to make modern furniture available to a wider public. But one important war-time technique has not been exploited by the trade. This is the bending of laminated wood as used for the manufacture of aeroplanes, notably the de Havilland Mosquito. Laminated bends presuppose new, and for this country strange, forms and these the trade has generally rejected in preference to forms derived from the more conventional methods of construction. There are a few exceptions. One Scottish firm has used the technique with startling results, but only for high-price furniture. One of the chairs which was made in this way has been put on permanent exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Another firm, in East Anglia, has formed an easy chair entirely out of laminated wood. It is reasonably priced and has proved commercially successful.[1]

The attitude of the trade towards the bending of laminated wood is disappointing, especially as it is merely one facet of the furniture manufacturer's deeply rooted antagonism to any change. Another example of this, also an effect of the war, is connected with the story of utility furniture. In 1942 the timber shortage in this country had become acute. The demand for domestic furniture had grown greater because of damage by bombing, and prices showed a corresponding increase. A system for rationing furniture was required, and the President of the Board of Trade appointed a Committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Charles Tennyson, to

[1] For further discussion of this and other new materials and techniques, see p. 142.

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advise him 'on specifications for the production of utility furniture of good sound construction in simple but agreeable designs for sale at reasonable prices, having due regard to the necessity for the maximum economy of raw materials and labour'. As the decision was taken to leave no initiative in the hands of individual firms, the Committee employed two well-known designers from High Wycombe to plan the first series, afterwards called the Cotswold range. Since the best equipped firms had already been transferred to war-work, the designs and specifications had to be suited to hand-craft as well as part-hand and machine production. The introduction of utility furniture meant that the uncounted number of designs which was produced up to that time, would be superseded by some thirty pieces of approved design. The trade and the buying public alike had no choice in the matter.[1]

The wisdom of this dictatorship must be judged by the results which have, in fact, been far-reaching. The furniture belonging to the Cotswold range reached the shops early in 1943. No one can claim that it was received with much enthusiasm. Even the Committee which had introduced it was divided in its opinion. 'Some members felt that what the public bought before the war...was what it should be given. That is, about 90 per cent Jacobean period furniture and 10 per cent modern.'[2] In 1945 a new range, called the Chiltern range, was introduced, but it, too, made very few concessions to the known taste of the buying public. Mr Gordon Russell, who was responsible for the work of the design sub-committee, has stated that the aim was to give the people 'something better than they might be expected to demand'.[3] The proportions, the clean outlines, the sense of delicacy and lightness, especially in the Chiltern range, were all excellent, and they enabled everyone for the first time to afford modern furniture. Undoubtedly it was a step forward in the education of the manufacturer and the consumer. But was all this accomplished with too much haste? The criticisms of the public, for example 'boxy', 'severe', 'harsh lines', etc., seem to imply that the designs were too advanced to be generally acceptable. Moreover, the designs presupposed that the public had the ability, both financial and artistic, to furnish a living-room or a bedroom with objects of a related standard. Under skilful management utility furniture could be the *raison d'être* of a variety of excellent furnishing schemes. But without that it would merely look stark and plain. A great opportunity was, for the most part, lost. If it had been possible to persuade individual manufacturers to create something acceptable to public taste and yet maintain the design standard of the Chiltern range, a feat which has been accomplished by several

[1] For further particulars relating to utility furniture, see an article by Gordon Russell in *The Architectural Review*, December 1946, pp. 182–6.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

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firms since the war, the crushing reaction, which came when the regulation controlling the appearance of utility furniture was rescinded in November 1948, might never have taken place.[1] The spring sales in 1949 were abundant evidence of this reaction which, in an exhibition catalogue of that year, was expressed in these terms: 'Choice is now playing its rightful part and individual tastes can once again be satisfied. These new 'Freedom' designs in furniture have been given special prominence on the...stand.' A further reason for this reaction must be given. Utility furniture was designed for service, not for selling: for useful work in people's homes and not for 'eye appeal' in the shop window. This made the retailer antagonistic towards the utility designs. Finally, the utility experiment, far from purging people of their love for trite, meaningless ornaments and forms had, in fact, encouraged the trade to return without hesitation to its pre-war standards. Anyone who now asks a manufacturer of 'Freedom' furniture why he does not make modern furniture is immediately disarmed by the reply: 'If utility furniture is what you call modern furniture, then I have tried it and it doesn't sell.'

Before discussing the bulk of the trade which is typified by this remark, it will be necessary to consider why there are more firms making modern furniture today than there were before the war. I visited eleven firms which devote their entire output to modern furniture. Seven of these firms were making domestic furniture of modern design before the war. Two were, and still are, mainly concerned with cabinet work for ships and two had begun work after the war. All these firms are comparatively small. The smallest has 25 employees, the largest 350. The average number would be about 125. Each manufacturer is personally proud of his firm's products. In six firms the manufacturer is also the designer and in the remaining five he takes an active interest in the work of his designer. The chief characteristic is of course the size of the firms. Larger units would be less manœuvrable. Also in few, if any, cases have shareholders to be considered before any risk is taken. The lapse of time from the inception of a new design to its production is rarely longer than three months.

In the seven firms which were making modern furniture before the war an evolutionary pattern of progress is evident. When I made my investigation two factors conditioned their methods of production: the price limit and the demands of the general specification for the manufacture of tax-free furniture, which ensured that it was of sound construction. The second requirement caused little difficulty to these

[1] Although design became free of control, the price regulation for furniture made with the Board of Trade's general specification remained until December 1952. A year after this date there were 2500 firms making this tax-free furniture.

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firms, but the first necessitated an unusually long production run on one design and considerable equipment such as jigs and conveyor-belts. Although certain parts of the furniture were standardized and therefore became interchangeable, a high level of design was maintained. The importance of this will be indicated later when the production methods of the larger firms are considered. The lowest output amongst these firms was twenty-five dining-room suites a week. The highest was seventy suites. If we contrast these figures with the average pre-war weekly output of the same firms, about ten suites, the degree of change will be apparent.

The distribution of their furniture is, however, not wide. Steady orders are received from the leading stores in most provincial towns and little effort has been made to widen their market by including the department stores. The manufacturer is not entirely responsible for this limited demand, because it is customary for the chosen retailer in any given town to request that the design be stocked by him exclusively. In one case I was told that 50 per cent of the firm's production was absorbed by one London store and the remainder was taken by selected retailers in the Provinces. Another manufacturer reported that the small private retailer, again one in each town, was his best client. The close link between the retailer and the manufacturer, is, as we shall see later, peculiar to these firms. There is of course the danger that modern furniture will once again become exclusive, but the arrangement has many good points. When a new design is proposed I found that invariably the retailers' opinions were sought. A mutual interest is created in this way long before the design is in production. The manufacturer benefits because he knows that his first run will be sold and the retailer is able to plan his stock in advance. Moreover, the responsibility, both moral and financial, of launching a new design is shared equally by both parties.

The experiences of the two firms which specialize in ships' furniture are instructive. Both of them entered the domestic furniture market after the war. They pointed out that, unlike other firms, they were unhampered by pre-war policy. They could make a fresh start under their own standards. It is significant that both of them chose modern design standards, although when describing their furniture the manufacturers stressed quality rather than design. The possession of a steady business in ship-work was a natural asset in the early months of these experiments, because of the slow and costly process of building up a new market. This market had to be large enough to absorb such quantities as 1500 dining-room suites a year in the case of the firm which was fully equipped for mass-production. The risk entailed was considerable, but within a year the experiment had justified itself. The work for ships was also useful because the special orders sometimes demanded the use of unfamiliar methods and materials and the cost was not one of the first considerations. This gave the designers

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variety and the freedom to experiment, with the result that the experience gained has been passed on to benefit the domestic furniture.

The two firms which began work after the war were unable to obtain a sufficient allocation of timber. One firm adopted steel and cast aluminium as its media. Armchairs were framed with mild-steel rods, shaped on formers and then welded. The upholstery was prefabricated and then attached to the steel frame. Dining-room chairs and table-legs were made from cast aluminium sections bolted together. From the outset the designs were conditioned by the available materials, in the hands of a first-rate designer, with the inevitable result that they were also modern. The other firm did not turn to a new material, but preferred to use the small amount of wood which could be obtained. As the wood was not of sufficient quality to allow the conventional joinery methods to be used, the manufacturer made it into laminations. For a chair the wood was cemented into strips and moulded in a simple and inexpensive press. Because there are no joints in the construction the chair is exceptionally strong.

From the brief description of these firms two points emerge. First, the use of new materials and techniques has resulted in new forms. Both chairs are more comfortable than many jointed chairs on the market because a spring-like tension is embodied in their construction. The second point relates to the market. In contrast to the pre-war belief that modern design would sell only in the most exclusive shops, these manufacturers have found that today modern or unorthodox furniture will not find a market unless its price is *low*. Their furniture has not yet reached the chain stores generally, but much of it can be seen in every provincial town.

The next group of firms to be described is composed of those which have produced, or are producing, modern furniture not exclusively, but as part of their range. I saw eleven firms in this group. The largest has over 800 employees and the smallest 100. The average number would be about 300. I found that in only two cases was the manufacturer proud of his whole range. Five of the manufacturers are responsible for designing what they call their 'bread and butter' furniture. When something modern is wanted they seldom attempt to design it themselves. These firms are larger than those we have just considered, so the risk of putting a new and untried design into production is considerably greater. Eight of them serve wide markets, ranging from the better class chain store to the department store. The remaining three firms concentrate on the most expensive shops, the bulk of their output being reproduction antiques.

As these three firms are representative of a specialized market it will be necessary to discuss them first. One manufacturer I met was passionately interested in modern

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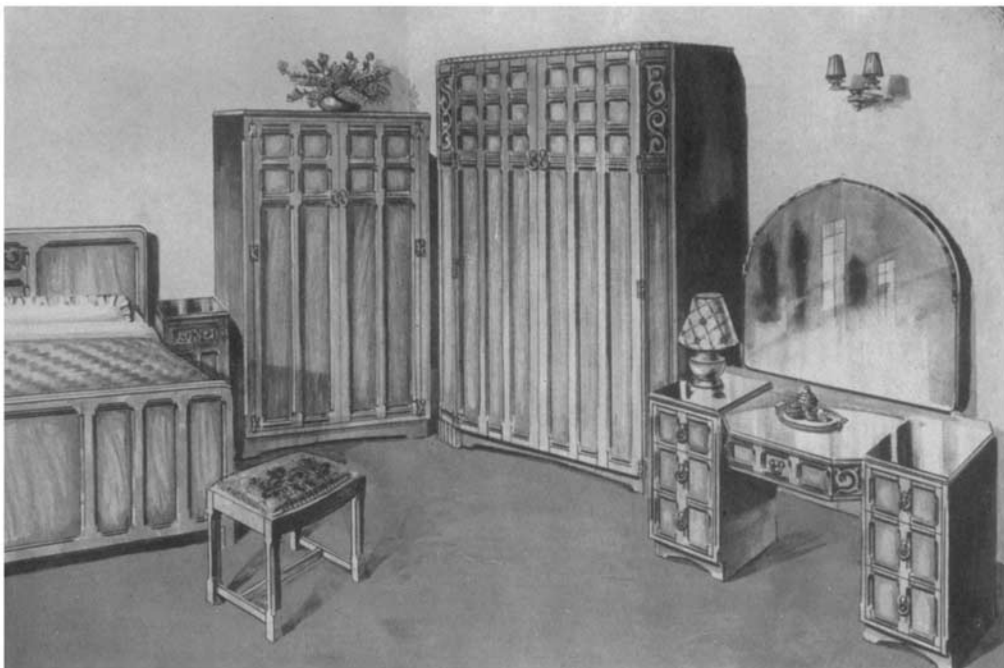
PLATE I

1. How many people realize that there is an alternative to the deplorable furniture designs shown on this page? Yet both dining-room and bedroom suites are representative of the bulk of furniture now put before the public. They are also typical results of the trade's attempt to satisfy public taste immediately after the government restrictions on design for utility furniture were rescinded in 1948.



2. A visit to the annual British Furniture Trades Exhibition in London will prove that these two examples of debased design are not exaggerated. In them we can see the nostalgia for past styles, mainly early seventeenth century, contradicting their effort to be useful objects in the contemporary home. On the sideboard modernistic patterns from the 1920's have been added in the form of cheap machine-made ornament. The plates following prove that there is no longer any excuse for this pathetic *pastiche*.

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PLATE II

1. Oak sideboard which formed part of the Cotswold range of utility furniture introduced in 1943. These government sponsored designs made by firms in all sections of the trade were too austere to be generally acceptable. But it is to their credit that they were designed for service, not for selling.

2. People hanker after decoration and furniture manufacturers can satisfy their needs without relying on hand-craftsmanship. In this sideboard a router has cut a pattern in the veneer of Bombay rosewood to reveal the birch below. *Designed by Booth and Ledeboer for Gordon Russell Ltd.*

3. A further group of utility furniture produced in 1945. The sideboard belonged to the Chiltern range. Like the Cotswold range it was designed for both hand and machine production to suit all firms. It stood half-way between traditional joinery, as in the table, and the newer Swedish influences, exemplified by the splayed legs of the sideboard. Here was modern furniture that most people could afford, but which everybody had to buy if they wanted new furniture at all.

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PLATE III

1. Modern dining-room furniture that makes full use of craft-based techniques. It is moderately expensive and fills the purchaser with an immediate sense of lasting quality. The detailing on the sideboard and the table are typical refinements in the work of this and several other leading firms. *Designed by R. D. Russell for Gordon Russell Ltd.*

2. Modern furniture of an equally high standard as shown in 1, but relying largely on mechanical techniques for bulk production. Two relatively new elements are involved: the unit principle for the sideboard—called a storage unit—which can support a similarly proportioned bookcase; and the chairs with seats and backs of formed plywood to give economy in production and resilience in use. *Designed by Robin Day for S. Hille & Co. Ltd.*

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