

Conclusion

'Wycombe companies were victims of their own success' (Gordon Gray, 2010, a High Wycombe furniture maker).

The first section of this chapter highlights the limitations of the research and provides a brief discussion on the employed research methods. A review of the main findings revealed through the research of this thesis is given. This is followed by the subsequent recommendations based upon this new knowledge which will help the discipline understand more fully what the significant factors that led to the decline of the furniture industry in the region were. Throughout this investigation interesting and varied propositions have come to light that warrant further research. The important themes are highlighted here that have the potential to generate valuable further research. The final section observes the position of the furniture industry in High Wycombe as it currently stands.

The literature review illustrated that whilst there have been attempts (Sparkes, 1979, Edwards, 1994 and Attfield, 1996) to discuss the history of the High Wycombe furniture industry, none have integrated the early development of the industry with the later decline, as this thesis has been able to do.

The aide memoire below lists the main aims of the thesis,

1. To identify the main changes in the High Wycombe furniture industry (1952-2002).
2. To complete the history of the High Wycombe furniture industry, identifying and filling the gaps in the literature (1952-2002).
3. To identify the main reasons for and the extent of the decline of the industry.
4. To understand why High Wycombe was such an important town in both furniture manufacturing and design.
5. To compare the furniture industry based statistical data with the rest of the UK, ascertaining whether the decline of the industry was specific to High Wycombe or whether it reflected what was occurring nationally.

Limitations of research

The employed research methods have enabled a holistic view to be achieved of this very wide and in-depth study. As a consequence the study has come up with a balanced set of findings, which have allowed for a credible set of conclusions. The thesis is content-rich because of the extensive archival research that was carried out. A number of research questions have been identified in the thesis that have been beyond the scope of the investigation and these are presented as further research. The limitations did not allow for some areas to be developed, such as women at work in the furniture industry, but it has been identified as an area for further study.

Evaluation of methods

The literature review enabled standard desk-work research including books, journals and articles to bring together the published history of the High Wycombe furniture industry, and to ascertain the main gaps in the research that required further study. A small number of texts from the literature review were also used to help put the industrial case studies into context in Chapters 1 and 2.

The field work and archival research carried out proved crucial to providing a rich and relevant type of research material. The majority of archives assessed proved rich in content, although the Bruce Castle archives did not have a significant link to the companies in High Wycombe. The case studies of the three main companies in High Wycombe during the 1950s-1980s, Ercol, Parker Knoll and G-Plan, showed the attitude that the furniture companies had to design and production. The evidence that the furniture produced by these companies is currently experiencing resurgence is testament to the original quality of the manufacturing methods and products.

The statistical data available in the Furniture Industry Reports and in NOMIS, although disparate, enabled a full analysis of the decline on numbers of employees' in the furniture industry. The oral history carried out in the form of interviews with personnel from the furniture industry also gave high quality anecdotal evidence, which has been 'threaded' through the thesis to personalise accounts and opinions. A number of the men interviewed sadly did not live to see this thesis published, highlighting the necessity to capture the views of those who worked in a declining industry.

The Main Findings and Contribution to Knowledge

Incorporating both the models of research from Kirkham and Attfield into this thesis, by looking at the literature and archival evidence available such issues as employment, production and working conditions have been researched. Additionally, as mentioned above, this thesis has linked with statistical data from NOMIS and the industry reports and has therefore been able to provide employment figures and other facts such as the export and import figures of furniture in the UK. The comparison with Stoke-on-Trent's pottery industry and UK manufacturing in general has also been a key part of the structure of this thesis. The thesis has shown that each chapter has played an important part in enabling us to understand why the decline of the furniture industry in High Wycombe has occurred.

References have been brought together in the Literature Review of the industry, from the war years and throughout the twentieth century. The Literature Review identified changes in the furniture industry from 1952 including the working conditions, establishing an area that has not been previously researched. Information has been collated on adenocarcinoma of the paranasal sinuses from union records, industry reports, and medical experts, none of which have been previously recorded. Comparing the decline of the disease and the decline of the furniture industry is another major contribution to understanding the decline of the furniture industry.

The following section prioritises the findings that directly relate to the main research question:

1. The statistical data showed the extent of the decline of the furniture industry in High Wycombe. For the first time statistical data showing the number of people working in the furniture industry from the late twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty first century was published and compared with the rest of the UK. From peak employment in 1955 to its lowest recorded figures in 2007 there was a decline of 87 percent. Previous publications were vague as to exactly when the decline happened and how great the decline has been. Interestingly, this pattern of decline is not seen for the rest of the UK.

2. The statistical data and the Furniture Industry Reports also verified the changes in location of the furniture industry in the UK. High Wycombe was a major centre for the furniture industry from the 1950s to the 1980s, with London being the only area that exceeded High Wycombe. 1987 saw Leeds overtake High Wycombe as the area employing the most number of people in the furniture industry. The figures indicate that the years for peak employment in the UK furniture industry were 1989 and then again in 1999. According to FIRA (2012) manufacturing is now much more evenly spread across the UK.

3. Contributions are made to design history, reflecting the products from E. Gomme (G-Plan) Ercol and Parker Knoll. Using previously unpublished archival material. High Wycombe is attributed to designing furniture which is proving to have strong design credentials. Design was often reported as being important but this has been overlooked throughout recent history. The Furniture Industry Reports highlighted that E. Gomme, Ercol and Parker Knoll were topping the list of companies expenditure on advertising in the late 1960s. This demonstrated the pioneering attitude these companies had to advertising the new designs of the time. E. Gomme Ltd and the G-Plan furniture range were to become a huge retail furniture brand from 1952. It was producing high quality, well designed contemporary furniture for the mass market. They were companies that devoted importance to production methods and up-to-date machinery, as well as design and advertising. Investing in designers such as Ib Kofod Larsen (G-Plan) whom produced Scandinavian designs that were modern, but many were left as drawings on paper and many did not make production and Don Peddal (Ercol) who expanded the design repertoire for the business. Moving its upholstery workshops to Nelson did not in the long term save G-Plan from closure, and like Parker Knoll it is only the brand name that continues. Ercol is the only survivor of the three High Wycombe companies under review in Chapter 2. It has changed immensely since Lucian R. Ercolani's vision was first realised in 1920. The company is no longer in High Wycombe, but its modern site is still based within Buckinghamshire and within the Wycombe District. The company no longer relies on local timber, but imports from Europe and

America for the best quality timbers. Ercol was keen to keep pace with technology, purchasing its first CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) machine in the early 1980s. The importance of the company's design and production was prominent in the Utility design of the Windsor chair and also the later 1950s designs, which are still popular today. It still perceives design as one of its main reasons for survival in an industry which has been declining significantly in the area. Parker Knoll was a company which spearheaded brand advertising, long before it was generally deemed important. The quality of its furniture is evidenced by the long list of valuable orders they acquired over the years. The traditional furniture of fireside and wing chairs and then recliners were to become synonymous with Parker Knoll, and the use of new materials less so. Parker Knoll, unlike G-Plan, moved a part of its production from High Wycombe to the Cotswolds. Unfortunately this move did not save the company, and it no longer manufactures furniture in the UK. The case studies also bring together the history of these High Wycombe companies and along with reporting's in the *Cabinet Maker* and other publications, have brought together the published sources on these companies. High Wycombe is also the only furniture making town that is directly attributed to Utility furniture in the Design Council Archives. E. Gomme was also a hugely reported company in *The Cabinet Maker*, alongside Ercol and Parker Knoll, highlighting the design strengths of the High Wycombe furniture industry.

The following is a list showing other significant findings from the thesis:

1. Britain was a dominant country for manufacturing trade export from the 1920s to the 1950s. The decline in trade export of Britain was most obvious from the 1970s. Britain's export in the early 1970s was being overtaken by Germany, France, United States, and Japan, after it led the way in 1929. The industry figures for importing and exporting of furniture indicate that in 1979 the number of furniture imports into the UK exceeded furniture exports, a turning point in the industry. The figures also show the rapid growth of furniture imports into the UK from the 1980s. The industry reports also shed light on the emergence of China, being first mentioned as a potential importer

into the UK market in 2002, and the first importing figures for China being first published in 2011.

2. Research from both national and local periodicals including *The Cabinet Maker* highlighted a number of important issues. The importance of the furniture industry in High Wycombe and its prominence in the Cabinet Maker was obvious throughout. The concern of skilled labour shortage was brought to the attention as being an important contributing factor for the changes in the furniture industry at this time, and its consequent decline. The decline of the industry in High Wycombe was evidenced and issues such as cheap imports and labour rates given as contributing factors. The threat of imports was not hugely reported on in the Cabinet Maker until the emergence of IKEA in the UK. The Furniture Industry Reports also reported that the issue of lack of skills entering the furniture industry had not been addressed by the industry, which was also confirmed in many of the interviews with industry workers.
3. The comparison with the Stoke-on-Trent pottery industry was a useful tool, putting the furniture industry in High Wycombe in the wider UK industry context. Both industries are traditional in the materials that they use and the production techniques they utilise and therefore have much in common, but they have not been researched side-by-side by design historians to any great extent. The scale of both industries was different, the pottery in Stoke-on-Trent having ten times the number of people working in the industry prior to the First World War, than the furniture industry in High Wycombe. Although the scale is different the rate of decline of these two different industries is very similar, with Stoke-on-Trent suffering just over and High Wycombe just under a 90 percent decline in employees, from its peak to the most recent figures. The reasons for the decline in the pottery industry were discussed and the issues of cheaper imported goods from China, cheaper overseas labour, failure to market British goods and the decline of opportunities with the decline of the British Empire comprised the causes.

4. The war years did little to change the face of the furniture industry in the long term, but the women who worked during those war years developed skills quickly and contributed hugely to the success of the furniture industry during that time, and so much acclamation should be given to this forgotten workforce. The final chapter identified the role women had in the High Wycombe furniture industry and brought this previously under-researched subject together for the first time, highlighting its importance and value. Women working in the industry were first reported to work on the matting and caning of chair seats at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as discussed in the literature review. During both the First and the Second World Wars this traditional role was to change drastically. Women were working in the perceived ‘men only’ sections of the machine shop, assembly, polishing and packing. This chapter also includes the union reactions to the inclusion of women working and the view that it will be endured until normality prevails once the men are back. The role of women in the industry resumed its traditional role at the end of the Second World War, which was similar to women in other sectors in the UK.¹

5. One immediate outcome of this study is the combined research with John Capper at Wycombe Hospital, and the publication of a paper on the link between adenocarcinoma of the paranasal sinuses and wood dust exposure from those working in the furniture industry. The final chapter described the changes in the working conditions in the High Wycombe furniture industry, from machines powered by hand to high speed electrical sanding machines. The rate of change in production methods and techniques was not matched by improvements in extraction and protective equipment. The working environment was therefore a dusty place, and depending on housekeeping, some factories would be worse than others. The furniture industry was often seen as a dangerous place to work, especially in the machine shop, with fingers often lost when machinery had few guards. But it would seem the ‘most deadly and silent of killers was the dust’ (Rourke *et al.*, 2013). This

¹ It should also be noted that the author had difficult experiences during a small number of interviews, and had to prove her ‘furniture credentials’ before the interview could go ahead!

chapter highlighted the disease of adenocarcinoma of the paranasal sinuses, and its strong link to High Wycombe's furniture industry. It described the significant reduction in the incidence of nasal adenocarcinoma in Wycombe woodworkers. The chapter also demonstrated that this was not merely attributed to the reducing number of workers in the industry and identified that the reducing incidence had been accompanied by a significantly increasing age at diagnosis. With the long latency of the disease, it was possible that some change in the working environment as far back as the 1970s had resulted in the reduced incidence. There was some evidence to suggest the disease may only have been present since the 1940s. Importantly, nasal adenocarcinoma in woodworkers appeared to be on the decline and may soon be a disease of the past. This chapter brought together the information on this disease from reliable sources within the literature including union records, industry reports, medical publications and medical expertise, none of which had been previously utilised within furniture history. The chapter strongly suggested that there was a significant issue in the furniture industry with the link between nasal cancer and wood dust. Furniture factory management had to seriously consider the conditions that its workers were subjected to. The disease affected everyone in the factory and was therefore taken very seriously. The additional legislation (Factory Act 1973, COSHH 1989) forced companies to invest heavily in modifying machines and improving extraction. This investment would have been financially challenging for a number of smaller companies and could have contributed to the closure of a number of furniture companies in the High Wycombe area, therefore contributing to the decline of the industry. This chapter raises many questions about the linkage between health and safety issues, the welfare of industry personnel and the decline of the industry, but cannot give absolute answers. However the range of evidence should be taken seriously as a major contributor to the situation. This is further reinforced by the increase in furniture production after the Second World War, the improvements in effective production lines, and the introduction of cost effective methods all meant that much of the sanding dust was increased in the working environment within furniture factories and was not effectively extracted until COSHH came into effect post 1989. Factory management had

a choice, to make the required expensive modifications to their production systems to comply with these regulations and to satisfy the unions or to cease trading.

Reasons for the decline of the industry

The research completes the history of the High Wycombe furniture industry from 1952-2002, and has identified the main reasons for the decline of the industry:

- Lack of skilled labour. An issue that the Furniture Industry Reports and the *Cabinet Maker* highlighted extensively. It was also cited in interviews that because the industry got so large and successful, labour was not as flexible and workers stayed on the same machine for example.
- Family businesses were being disbanded. Sons were no longer following fathers and uncles into the 'family firm'. Workers saw engineering and other industries entering High Wycombe as having a better future. (In 1954 Broom & Wade were the largest employer in the town).
- Imported furniture from overseas. Imports exceeded exports in the late 1970s, with cheaper labour costs furniture was being manufactured overseas and imports from China in the early 2000s is widely reported as the main contributing factor to the demise of the industry. Productivity has also been reported as contributing to this increase of imports, with the UK not being able to compete with other European countries and Asia.
- The introduction of retail companies such as IKEA, where the emergence of 'off the shelf' furniture for the younger market, and where much of this furniture is again manufactured overseas. The customer can shop at one location and buy furniture for the whole house.
- The cost to meet better extraction for improved Health & Safety, evidence of this linked to nasal cancer.
- The design of furniture has not always been a priority for furniture companies. The traditional furniture of High Wycombe producing reproduction furniture was common. The G-Plan range was an example where design was pioneering in the late 1950s, but the company failed to expand on this success. The company lost its way in the 1980s and 1990s

where it reverted back to the reproduction, traditional styles and pre-war styles. High Wycombe is not renowned for its design attributes but the designs from the 1950s and 1960s are seeing somewhat of a resurgence, which has not been appreciated by the design press.

- The Furniture Industry Reports highlighted that G-Plan, Ercol and Parker-Knoll were spending huge amounts on advertising in the 1950s and 1960s, peaking in 1966. This did not continue into the 1970s and 1980s, evidenced in the *Cabinet Maker*.
- British Companies helped countries like China develop, and many Chinese companies have British machinery in the factories (including Rye Machinery).

Contributions have also been made to the research procedure that has been used to map the decline and the changes of an industry. A thorough analysis of *The Cabinet Maker* was carried out, which had not been utilised in such detail by other researchers. A full statistical analysis using both NOMIS and the Furniture Industry Reports was carried out; again this had not been carried out by researchers carrying out furniture history studies such as Kirkham and Wilson. The link between industries such as Stoke-on-Trent and the pottery industry has also reflected on the similarities between industrial locations and decline. The author has presented the research at a number of conferences which have been referenced throughout the thesis. This has enabled the research to be disseminated locally and at a national level.

Further Research

There are several directions that it is hoped that the future research might take. First of all the research has generated interest in the support of further development for collaboration and the publication of a book with Wycombe Museum. There are a number of other directions that this research could follow, such as broadening the scope to a UK investigation, and look at companies such as Stag Furniture (a direct competitor to the companies in High Wycombe). The HWFA holds the Stag archive, and the author is currently writing the Stag inventory.

There are many other High Wycombe furniture companies worthy of research, from the larger companies of Thomas Glenister and William Birch to the small family chairmakers, such as Forward and Donnelly. From the contact made with Peter Batchelor, the work of Ted Hoing (Peter's uncle), who was a furniture maker at Nichols and Janes and EMF Browns, has been brought to the attention of the author. The drawings and writings of Hoing's are now in the High Wycombe Furniture Archive.

The Cabinet Maker holds much information on FIRA, and so a further study of the history of FDC and FIRA could be worth pursuing. A study of the FIRA retail figures and consumer spending would also be an area for further investigation. Information on retail sales, demand for furniture, consumer expenditure on durable goods and where furniture fits within this area, are all areas that can be found in the FIRA reports. FIRA have statistical information on the European Furniture Industry, which this research does not cover, and so would also be interesting for further study.

Finally, further research into the role of women in the UK furniture industry would be beneficial. The role of women in furniture design has not been discussed in this study. The common theme that women are generally part of a husband and wife team could be researched using the recently HWeFA acquired Stag archive and the role of Sylvia Reid in the Stag furniture designs could open up research in this under portrayed area. Further research in comparisons with other countries, for example, the research that has been carried out by Catherine Rossi on women furniture designers in Milan from 1945 to 1970, and the contribution they have made to design history (Rossi, 2009). To also research further the role of female imagery in furniture advertising, using the HWeFA, and linking this research to the work carried out by researchers such as Rossi and Kirkham.

Furniture Industry in High Wycombe Survives

According to Vernon (2013) the entrepreneur is and has always been a part of High Wycombe businessmen. The founders of furniture factories in the area and the graduate Designer Makers are joined by those individuals who design and market and work with factories in Eastern Europe or Asia.

The latest furniture statistics published by FIRA states that the number of furniture manufacturers declined by 4 percent from 2008-2011 (FIRA, 2012). The report went on to highlight that those employed in the furniture industry declined by 15 percent in the same period. The industry is no longer dominated by a single manufacturing centre, but is 'generally evenly spread around the United Kingdom with no significant geographical hub. There are a small number of exceptions to this including the fact that the South East has proportionally more companies than any other region and, when combined with London, accounts for almost a quarter of all furniture manufacturers' (FIRA, 2012). Although High Wycombe is no longer mentioned individually in the statistical reports the following section shows that the industry is still very much alive in High Wycombe, though much reduced.

Britain came out of the twentieth century with 8,360 furniture manufacturers, most of them very small, with 112,000 people employed and an annual output worth £8.3 billion. Comfort (2013, p.222) goes on to indicate High Wycombe's continued connection with the Furniture Industry:

The High Wycombe area could still boast seven companies just making chairs, and at Princes Risborough nearby Hypnos manufactured beds. But most British furniture makers faced an uphill task as the volume of imports continued to rise, and closed increased. Undermined by a series of department store collapses, Parker Knoll closed its factories at Chipping Norton, Andover and Bridgend; it is now based in Derbyshire with its manufacturing in Lithuania.

The large Wycombe companies, discussed in this thesis that started business at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth centuries are synonymous with High Wycombe. However, there are other companies that are continuing to design and manufacture furniture in the town today. One notable company is Stewart Linford, which started manufacturing in a small workshop in the town in the 1970s (Studier, 1982). The workforce at Stewart Linford is 'highly skilled' and they specialise in the manufacture of Windsor chairs, almost coming full circle to the starting point of the furniture industry in High Wycombe. Linford describes his love of the furniture industry in the 1980s in 'Practical Woodworker'; the chairmaking industry for Linford has always been a 'way of life' (Anon., 1983, p.768). An article written in 'Thames Valley Business' in 1980 explained that Wycombe was a survivor and puts the history of the prosperity and diversification of the town over the years down to 'the proximity to London, the M40 motorway

and Cressex industrial estate' (Hubbard, 1980). Linford discussed the success of the business to ITV's Ade Edmondson in a recent broadcast, saying that they 'are the only Windsor chairmaker in High Wycombe still manufacturing in the original chairmaking factory' (*Ade in Britain*, 2013).

Alongside Stewart Linford are a number of other 'high-end' furniture manufacturers in High Wycombe. In the 1980s, Verco (formerly known as William Vere & Sons) was the largest manufacturer of office seating in the UK. They introduced 'bar coding' of furniture which is believed to be the first time this was introduced into the furniture trade (Goodearl, 1987, p.56). Unlike many Wycombe firms they have remained a privately owned family business. The family business is particularly proud of being based in High Wycombe throughout the whole of its lifetime.² William Vere & Sons was founded in 1912 by the grandfather of Derek Vere, the current Managing Director. They also took the step of changing production in the 1960s from the traditional Windsor chairs to office furniture predominantly using plastic.³ A walk around the factory today offers a sawdust free environment; the factory is clean, orderly and spacious, and the company continues to manufacture high quality office furniture to the UK market and overseas.

Just over twenty companies remain in High Wycombe today, including 'Hands of Wycombe' and 'Greengate'. Hands of Wycombe produce high quality furniture including; executive desks, boardroom tables, meeting tables, conference tables and reception counters. They have been manufacturing for over 100 years on the existing site and workshop at High Wycombe. Greengate Furniture Ltd is another long established furniture company operating from a workshop in High Wycombe. Greengate started when two workers for Parker Knoll, Edward Chapman and Norman Bloxham, were asked to move to Chipping Norton after the fire in the 1970s. They produce high quality upholstery and are the chosen upholstery makers and distributors for some of the world's top designer brands, including Ralph Lauren.

² Author meeting with Christopher Riley (Sales and Marketing Director at Verco) 10 October 2013

³ Ibid

As this thesis has shown, High Wycombe was the main furniture making town in the UK at the beginning of the twentieth century, with over a hundred factories in the town, but the decline in the industry has left many empty factories and many being demolished (Kaner and Grover, 2011). The changes are apparent but as mentioned throughout High Wycombe will always change to survive and the furniture heritage will always remain part of the town.