

BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE NEW UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Design, Media & Management

Sharon Grover

The Decline of the High Wycombe Furniture Industry: 1952-2002

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PhD

Abstract

This thesis is a study of furniture-making in High Wycombe in the years between 1952 and 2002. The primary aim of this thesis is to conduct an appraisal of the High Wycombe furniture industry during this period, starting at the end of the Utility furniture scheme and ending when the majority of furniture companies had closed, to ascertain the reasons for the decline of this industry.

Much has been written on the rise of the furniture industry in the town, from the bodgers in the woods to the factory developments in the town at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. Little has been written on the subject post the Second World War. The first chapter builds upon this history and provides new insights into the furniture industry in High Wycombe. It identifies emissions in the literature that required further investigation and hence themes of study were established. Chapter 2 considers the context and position of the research by looking at archival evidence and industrial case studies.

Chapters 3 to 5 develop the argument and discussion of the thesis. Chapter 3 considers emerging reasons for the decline of the industry through an examination of a number of industrial periodicals, local and national press which report on the activities being conducted in High Wycombe. Chapter 4 concentrates on wider UK manufacturing, offering a comparison with the furniture industry and it also considers the similarities with a related industrial town, Stoke-on-Trent and the pottery industry. It also examines the Furniture Industry Reports and statistical data relating to the numbers of people working in the High Wycombe furniture industry further establishing reasons for the decline. Chapter 5 reviews the working

conditions in High Wycombe furniture factories, especially issues of division of labour, which has links to nasal cancer discovered in Wycombe woodworkers.

The conclusion presents the main findings of the thesis, which establish the reasons for the decline. Finally, a short review of the current state of the declined industry is conducted, which is still active in the town today.