

## Chapter 2. Archival Evidence and Industrial Case Studies

*'I, myself, have never made furniture to make money, but I have made money to make furniture,' Lucian R. Ercolani in Cabinet Maker and Retail Furnisher (Anon., 1964c).*

The Literature Review included well-known previously published images of traditional furniture making in High Wycombe. There are a number of archives included in this study that hold the history of the furniture industry in high esteem. The archives clearly show that High Wycombe, even though it has been neglected in much design literature, has been visually captured as giving a significant contribution to UK furniture design and production.

As the Literature Review has indicated, there were hundreds of furniture factories in High Wycombe at the beginning of the twentieth century and many have influenced the national furniture industry. One of the main objectives for this study was to devise case studies, which questions High Wycombe's requirement to be attributed to the design of furniture as well as its manufacturing capability. Initial research from the Literature Review indicated that the three main furniture companies in the post war High Wycombe furniture industry were E. Gomme (G-Plan), Ercol Furniture Limited and Parker Knoll. These three companies have been consistently recognised as important to the industry by researchers. They represented the key types of furniture to be manufactured in High Wycombe. The Design Council Archives and VADS also recognised the importance of these three companies and this chapter investigates the main changes within these companies during the time frame of the study. It will bring together the published sources and material found in archives and in doing so will complete the history of these prominent High Wycombe furniture companies.

This chapter will address the following main aims of the research:

- To identify changes in the High Wycombe furniture industry.
- To bring together related published and previously unpublished images, linking the history of the furniture industry.
- To include any evidence suggesting reasons for the decline of the furniture industry.

- To demonstrate High Wycombe's design influence on the UK furniture industry.

## **2.1 VADS and the Design Council Archives**

The importance to High Wycombe of the Windsor chair has been discussed in detail in the Literature Review. In addition it was the only chair design chosen to accompany a series of films on design by the Design Council. The visual aid (Figure 42) was produced to accompany a film strip on how to make a Windsor chair. The image shows the image of the elm tree and a wheel back Windsor chair, traditional to High Wycombe. It was one of two films completed during 1948 (the other was about fabric). The COID's visual aids were produced to help 'foster an effective demand for better design', without which there was no adequate incentive for the supply of well-designed products (COID, 1948-49). The inclusion of the Windsor chair within the Design Council Archives highlights the importance the COID had for this simple traditional furniture and its inclusion within the archive.

As discussed in the Methodology, VADS holds images that highlight the importance of some High Wycombe companies relating to furniture design and production. Figure 43 links the High Wycombe Company Parker Knoll with the renowned furniture design of Ernest Race Ltd. Another connection with Race is the image of a G-Plan and Race furniture label photographed together. This illustrates the importance of G-Plan branding, which will be discussed later in the thesis.

The VADS collection of photographs, posters and publications reflect many aspects of social and cultural change throughout the twentieth century. The collection includes the Design Council's picture library, a comprehensive photographic survey of products and interiors from Britain and abroad and of landmark exhibitions such as 'Britain Can Make It' and the 'Festival of Britain' (University of Brighton, n.d.).

VADS captures various room sets using furniture manufactured by E.Gomme and Parker Knoll, and designed by men such as Robin Day and R. D. Russell. The Council of Industrial Design was responsible for the collection of all manufactured exhibits for the Festival of Britain 1951. Figure 44 illustrates the use of Wycombe furniture in a room set designed by Robin Day for the Festival of Britain. The use of

E. Gomme's furniture for such an exhibition shows the status this company was given in relation to furnishing the houses of Britain after the Second World War. The image also captures the fact that Gordon Russell's brother (R. D. Russell) kept the connections he had made with Wycombe during the 'Utility' years, which was seen in Figure 17. As well as furniture models from High Wycombe companies held on VADS, there are also a number of photographs of Jack Goodchild<sup>1</sup> held on the website.

The VADS website does not hold all of the Design Council Archive images relating to furniture. Indeed the majority of images related to High Wycombe are un-catalogued photographs in the Design Council Archives, housed at the University of Brighton. The images of High Wycombe chairmakers are the only record of traditional chairmaking that the Design Council Archives hold, again reiterating the importance of this tradition nationally. The collection holds images of High Wycombe chairmakers, factories, production methods and furniture models. High Wycombe's prominence in the archive collection also shows the significance it has in terms of manufacturing and design, at this time.

An iconic piece of furniture from E. Gomme 'The World's Most Comfortable Chair' was chosen to furnish a room set at the exhibition 'Design Centre goes to Times Furnishing' (Figure 45). The exhibition highlighted modern design in the UK and included fifteen special room settings. The fact that High Wycombe furniture was included in this exhibition in the late 1960s shows that the design influence of the town was still apparent. A small selection of other un-catalogued images from the Design Council Archives can be found in Appendix G, Figures G1-G4.

As well as images addressing production and design of furniture, the Design Council Archives collection also holds Council of Industrial Design Reports, and images. These address the necessity for a design culture in the UK furniture industry. The following is taken from the twenty-first annual report from The Council of Industrial Design:

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Goodchild was a famous Windsor chairmaker, discussed in the Literature Review – he trained as a 'bottomer' but went on to complete chairs.

It has been widely recognised in recent years that while much can be done to keep manufacturing companies in business by improving and updating existing products, a continuing programme of new product development is vital if British industry is to be competitive in the long term. The high costs and the risks involved have, however, made companies reluctant to invest in innovative new designs, with the result that imports have increasingly penetrated the UK market. Meanwhile, the profitability of British industry as a whole has declined (COID, 1965-66).

There are a number of photographs from The Council of Industrial Design in the Design Council Archive, many of which are the familiar designs from Ernest Race Ltd and Ambrose Heal, but a large proportion of them are from High Wycombe companies. The collection of images includes a number of furniture designs that were manufactured in High Wycombe factories; primarily E. Gomme, Ercol and Parker Knoll. The fact that there were over 130 images relating to Wycombe companies highlights the quality of the designs and manufacturing. Figures 46-48 show the archive records of the designs from these Wycombe companies. The images capture the main pieces that the companies were well-known for; Ercol and the Windsor range of dining furniture, Parker Knoll's fireside chairs and dining and bedroom ranges from G-Plan. A small selection of photographs of furniture models can be found in Appendix H, Figures H1-H13, showing furniture referenced to High Wycombe.

Another interesting area to be collected by the Design Council is the photographs showing Utility furniture. They do not have reference to the manufacturer on the back; the only exceptions to this were furniture made by Wycombe companies and furniture made at Remploy.<sup>2</sup> The reference to High Wycombe shows the importance of this town to the furniture industry, especially in the interwar and post war years. Indeed Russell explains in a talk he gave, of which the transcripts are kept at the Design Archives; 'I think it is true to say that some of the Utility schemes in Great Britain have made the public conscious – of the advantages of good and simple design' (Russell, 1950). Indeed a fitting reflection of furniture to be designed and produced in High Wycombe. Russell also suggested that High Wycombe was a town rich in furniture design knowledge and production expertise. In a radio broadcast he said 'Even today there are certain types of chairs which it is not easy to get made

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<sup>2</sup> Remploy is a non-departmental public body, funded by the Department for Work and Pensions. Remploy Furniture is a company specialising in manufacturing, supplying and installing Educational Furniture, providing sustainable employment opportunities for disabled people.

outside High Wycombe' (Russell, 1946b). Figures 49-50 show Utility images relating to companies in High Wycombe. The images show the automated production and modern machinery for the time. In fact the hand planing seen in Figure 50 would normally have caused a bottle-neck in the flow of timber through the factory. This machine planed four sides at once and was accurate to a paper thickness. More images related to Utility production can also be seen in Appendix H.

## **2.2 E. Gomme Limited (G-Plan)**

E. Gomme Limited was a long established furniture manufacturing company in High Wycombe. Ebenezer Gomme (1858-1931), the founder of E. Gomme Ltd, was born into a furniture making family. His father worked for the Wycombe chairmaker, James Cox; furniture making was a family tradition going back a number of generations:

James Gomme in 1798 was labelling his furniture 'Sold at the original Upholstery Warehouse of James Gomme, in High Wycombe, where cabinet work is done, and orders for household furniture of every description, in the best and most fashionable manner' (Sparkes, 1979, p.110).

According to Rattue (2002, p.32) E. Gomme was established in 1895, but according to The National Archives website (Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, 2011) it was established in 1898. The company was actually established in 1897 by Ebenezer Gomme behind his house in Totteridge Road, as is stated by G-Plan itself (G-Plan, 1980).

In 1909 a modern brick factory was constructed in Leigh Street and output was not limited to the production of simple, well-made, wooden chairs but also embraced upholstery (Rolfe, 1970). An illustration of a settee by E. Gomme, showing deep, loose velvet cushions, with low backrest and two large scatter cushions was published in *The Cabinet Maker* in 1915. It had wooden fronts to arms that descended to ball and claw feet all elaborately carved, showing that E. Gomme was capable of producing good quality work even if yet more up-market settees with more exotic carving were then being produced by Nicholls & Janes (Anon., 1915).

E. Gomme was also expanding its production and manufacturing methods at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ebenezer Gomme's new factory built in 1909 was made by sinking a great deal of capital into new machinery to extend the mass production methods from the Windsor and the common cane and rush seated chairs into the better class work. Both of Ebenezer's sons Frank and Ted joined the firm at the end of the First World War, and this period was characterised by an expansion into cabinet furniture making. After being engaged on National Work during the First World War, they now intended to make furniture of 'comfort, utility, strength, durability combined with modest price but also continue making high class reproductions' (Anon., 1918). Frank is recorded as saying that attitudes to design had changed as a result of the influence of organisations such as the Design & Industries Association but also due to economic conditions there was 'a distinct desire for simpler furniture' (Rutland, 2001). When their factory was gutted by fire in 1922 this prompted a rapid rebuilding along more modern lines and, as it is recorded that Frank visited the USA to buy the latest machinery, it seems likely that this happened at the same time.<sup>3</sup> This investment in machinery and production methods was to be the catalyst to the success of E. Gomme's for the following eighty years. By 1926 they needed more space and acquired a large site adjacent to the railway across the tracks from the Ercol factory. Figure 51 shows an aerial view of Ercol and the second E. Gomme factory, known as Spring Gardens. It became operational in 1927 with cabinet furniture production being concentrated there whilst the original Leigh Street factory was devoted to upholstery and chairs. Worden (1994) describes the improvements to the factory:

By 1922 [E. Gomme] was employing 300 full time workers. E. Gomme's were able to keep the number of employees down by increasing, by the use of machinery, the output per man. This increase in productivity in relation to labour enabled the firm, because they had capital for investment, to pursue a policy of expansion throughout the 1920s. In 1925 W. Birch took over the Leigh Street site and E. Gomme's built a factory at the eight acre site near the LNE railway. ...it was described as one of the "best equipped factories in the British Isles.

According to George Rolfe, the G-Plan accountant, under the supervision of Frank Gomme, Spring Gardens was managed by a man of remarkable all round ability and strong personality, who did almost everything, Laurie Barnes (Rolfe, 1970). The

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<sup>3</sup> The HWeFA holds the diary of Mrs Gomme, Ted Gomme's wife, depicting a visit to the USA they made in April 1937, in which Ted visited timber suppliers and customers.

earliest catalogues surviving in the High Wycombe electronic Furniture Archive are from the late 1920s and demonstrate that E. Gomme's were by then making furniture for dining room, lounge and bedroom which was most unusual for that time, as firms tended just to concentrate on a single specialisation. According to George Rolfe; 'Gomme's claim to have been the first manufacturer to make the whole dining room suite, sideboard, table and chairs' (Rolfe, 1970). Their furniture was soundly constructed and this was emphasised in the catalogues with drawings of joints and constructional details but it was aimed at a mass market by being reasonably priced and promoted to furniture retailers through a series of catalogues. Their trade mark was a drawing of a wide road leading through an avenue of trees to a silhouetted E. Gomme factory over a variation of Emerson's dictum: 'If a man make better chairs than anyone else, you will find a broad beaten road to his house though it be in the woods' (see Figure 52). Retailers were urged to: 'Follow the broad beaten road by stocking Gomme chairs'. That they were successful can be assumed from the fact that batches of components were machined up in quantities of 500 for cabinets and 2000 for chairs (Rolfe, 1970).

By the mid-1930s E. Gomme's marketing through catalogues had evolved from the small trade catalogue into what became known as 'Silent Salesmen', a later example of which can be seen in Figure 53, which is held in the HWFA.

Even in the 1930s the firm was aware of the need to get across direct to the public the breadth of their range and its desirability. However to placate the retailer these were almost anonymous, not mentioning the E. Gomme name, merely discreetly carrying the initials E.G. Ltd, H.W., in a long standing trade tradition. However the idea of a national brand with a widely available, reasonably priced, comprehensive range of furniture evidently existed before 1939 so that the growth of G-Plan in the 1950s can be seen as a logical progression for an ambitious company (Rolfe, n.d.).

In the same manner E. Gomme was becoming one of the largest furniture makers in High Wycombe, producing high quality pieces of well-designed furniture:

Probably the most adventurous large maker of furniture produced in the mid-thirties some quite exceptional furniture which was not for specialist shops but was for the High Street furniture shops and for that reason was quite unique. The designs came

from their resident designer, L.G. Barnes. Not only did he produce new shapes but he was not afraid to bring chromium plate, limed oak, and colour together. Barnes was an exceptional man (Dunn, 1980, p.40-41).

Worden (1994) also reiterates the fact that E. Gomme was producing high quality well designed pieces of furniture from 1932-3. They showed a range of designs, with a great deal of variety. Common features include the importance of veneered surfaces and the elimination of leg and stretcher supports. These changes were the result of the use of new materials: veneer and laminated board. Examples can be seen in Figure 54. These comments reiterate the author's claim that High Wycombe furniture companies were not just making reproduction furniture, of various qualities, but that the design office was a significant part of furniture manufacturing and that these well designed pieces were available to buy for the sophisticated buyer as well as for more general consumption of the wider buying public.

After the Utility years Leslie Gomme, grandson of the founder Ebenezer Gomme, is quoted as saying 'Can we, by some new marketing technique, restore the mass-production efficiency of the Utility days?' (Edwards, 1994, p.117).

In 1952 it was design, marketing and advertising that catapulted E. Gomme into a well-known furniture company and with it probably the most famous furniture brand. Donald Gomme, brother to Leslie, 'designed a range of modern furniture that was suitable for the whole house, and called this range of contemporary modular furniture G-Plan' (Hyman and Braggs, 2007, p.19).

Advertisements by other manufacturers in issues of the trade journal *The Cabinet Maker* during this period show that most of what was available on the market at the time was still in a 1930s Art Deco style. Although the Festival of Britain in 1951 had shown the public new ideas for 'contemporary' furniture, it was still only available from a small number of up-market makers. Joel in his book *The Adventure of British Furniture* records that as late as 1951, when the Utility controls finally finished six years after the end of the war, 90 percent of furniture being sold was classed as Utility furniture (Joel, 1953, pp.141-150).



The famous G-Plan range was furniture based on standardised components which allowed increased factory productivity, and offered the buying public something very different from pre-war furniture. According to Attfield (1992) 'It was also something of a breakthrough in its wide appeal to a younger less traditional market defying the usual regional patterns of taste'. It was still not a cheap purchase, but the suggestion was that the customer could buy items of furniture slowly over a period of years and not all in one go. The extensive advertising emphasised the versatility and flexibility of its system, 'which allowed people to buy individual items as needed rather than complete suites' (Hoskins, 2004, p.8). According to Edwards (1994, p.117), 'some thought (G-Plan) had 'in fact changed the whole philosophy of furniture purchase, their decision resulted in a six-fold profits increase between 1952 and 1958'. The original G-Plan range was called Brandon and was finished in a light oak material, not the dark brown tones from previous designs (Figure 55).

According to Hyman and Braggs (2007, p.37) each piece of furniture had a red label which was stamped with an embossed gold mark. However research for this thesis showed that the label did change over time. The first was not a label but a gold stamp embossed onto the furniture. The red labels seem to be later (Figure 56).

The G-Plan concept of heavy advertising of the brand was a totally new idea, as manufacturer's names were usually totally hidden from the public by the retailer. Design, range, marketing and retail were what made the G-Plan brand (Hyman and Braggs, 2007, p.19). By the early 1950s contemporary or modern styles were to be seen in many stores and the success of unitised ranges such as G-Plan, illustrate how market research could be useful to furniture makers and consumers alike (Edwards, 1994, p.185). It is widely accepted that G-Plan was the pioneer in branding its furniture and Hyman and Braggs (2007, p.19) state that:

Before 1953, the public chose their furniture from retail outlets, who routinely marketed it under their own name. The manufacturers were anonymous and at the financial mercy of the retailers. Led by G-Plan, the furniture manufacturers broke with this traditional dominance and created a new concept. Buying by brand, which revolutionised furniture marketing, put the manufacturers in control of their industry and gave the public G-Plan, Stag, Ercol and Parker Knoll.

An advertising programme was planned starting in the southern half of the country in April 1953, led by the successful JWT advertising agency.<sup>4</sup> The list of stockists shows that in this sector alone there were already over two hundred retailers with G-Plan displays including the major multiple furniture retailers Perrings and Times as well as the leading West-End department stores. Black and white advertisements (many of these advertisements are found in the HWeFA) were placed in the London Evening Standard and the London Evening News. In the autumn these papers were used again a number of times in the Birmingham Mail<sup>5</sup> and the glossy magazine House & Garden; examples of these can be found in Appendix I, Figures I1-I3.

Before the end of 1954 E. Gomme had bought an additional factory (Castle Brothers) in order to try to help meet the demand for G-Plan. G-Plan continued to change and develop throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Tola range, a darker veneered finish, elegantly depicted the late 1950s, and profits continued to rise:

As the fifties ended, the furniture industry was in good shape....G-Plan led the way in proving conclusively that well designed mass-market furniture could sell well and, thanks to their taking this lead, quality levels increased dramatically. ...It was the manufacturers, not the retailers, who were in charge (Hyman and Braggs, 2007, p.36).

E. Gomme's situation in 1960 was a classic combination of excess capacity, increased competition, and a static if not declining market (Farrant, 1970, p.103). And so, at this time there were some changes for E. Gomme. Donald Gomme left the company in 1958 and new designs of cabinet furniture were launched:

In an attempt to re-capture the magic formula E. Gomme introduced numerous different designs (in 1960). The Limba range was loved by the trade, its straight grain wood making matching easy, but the public hated it. Fortunately the firm had a success in the World's Most Comfortable Chair,<sup>6</sup> designed in 1962 by Paul Conti<sup>7</sup> (Hyman and Braggs, 2007, p.67).

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<sup>4</sup> JWT is one of the largest advertising agencies in the world. According to Leslie Dandy, Doring Gunding at JWT came up with the name 'G-Plan'.

<sup>5</sup> In the Autumn of 1953 the advertising campaign was extended to include Birmingham as well as the London area.

<sup>6</sup> 6250 The World's Most Comfortable Chair. Recognised as one of the great modern pieces of furniture, this chair really deserves its title. Its big wings and soft foam cushioning with deeply buttoned back provide the ultimate in comfort. For added luxury it rocks, glides and swivels too - and to put your feet up on The World's Most Comfortable Footstool (6251) to match. Leslie Dandy's notes establish the final design for The World's Most Comfortable Chair had been completed by 1962. ref: HWFA Research Material, September 2007, Leslie Dandy notes 'A Designer's View. Unpublished comments.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Conti, according to David James, taught at High Wycombe College for a while but was "a bit of a whizz-kid" and did not stay long. His image can be found in Appendix L, Figure L17.

In 1960 G-Plan also took over a closed down cotton mill near Nelson, Lancashire for its expanding upholstery business. The National Union of Furniture Trades Operatives (NUFTO, 1960a) reported in 1960 that they ‘should have been consulted in regard to staff at the factories, ensuring they became union members’. The NUFTO minutes at this time reiterate this move to Nelson, but fail to guarantee the security of the jobs at High Wycombe stating:

The Company [E. Gomme], in order to expand its upholstery production, needs to develop the factory in Nelson and we are unable to give any special guarantee to our employees in the Upholstery sections in Wycombe. The company has been manufacturing upholstery in High Wycombe for many years and intends to continue to do so (NUFTO, 1960d).

David James,<sup>8</sup> who worked at E. Gomme’s at this time was one of eight employees sent from Wycombe to Nelson to set up the factory in Nelson. According to James, Wycombe was getting too expensive and recruitment was getting difficult. Another important reason for the move was that the upholstery trade unions were notoriously militant and blocked change and development. Thus the radical decision was taken to close down all upholstery work in Wycombe. Images of the Nelson factory can be seen in Chapter 3. The success of the factory at Nelson lasted thirty years:

The Nelson factory proved to be a successful strand to the business for thirty years, employing up to 750 men and women in 1977 (Lawson, 1977) and at that time made all the upholstery for the company. Employment decreased to 350 in 1990, when the G-Plan factory in Nelson closed with all its workers being made redundant (Anon., 1990a).

E. Gomme was one of the worst afflicted furniture companies when furniture demand stagnated in the early 1960s. Not until 1968 did the company at last overtake its 1959 level of sales and profits (Farrant, 1970, p.103).

Imports from Scandinavia were seen as a huge problem to E. Gomme, and so they hired their own Danish designer, Ib Kofod Larsen. He came up with a completely new range for the company, called G-Plan Danish. Figure 57 shows a sideboard from the Danish range from the HWeFA. The design is simple, but utilises teak, which was to become synonymous with G-Plan.

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<sup>8</sup> HWFA interview with David James, 8 June 2007. David James worked at G-Plan, Glenister, Ministry of Works and was an upholstery lecturer at High Wycombe college until he retired in 2004.

According to Hyman and Braggs (2007, p.67) it made the rest of the existing G-Plan range look dated and E. Gomme now lost its position as market leader, But according to Leslie Dandy<sup>9</sup> very few of the designs (the HWeFA holds 369 design drawings by Ib Kofod Larsen) were ever put into production. To date, research has shown that Figure 58 was not a production piece. According to Leslie Dandy, Ib Kofod Larsen was contracted at £2000 per year, without royalties, to produce designs exclusively for G-Plan, with the company retaining full copyright. Leslie Dandy also explained that Ib Kofod Larsen's designs were not generally successful, being too expensive to produce and the style and proportions not suiting the British taste and home.

E. Gomme continued to design and manufacture successfully into the late 1960s and 1970s, 'introducing their most successful range of teak furniture for the dining room and bedroom, Fresco in 1967' (Hyman and Braggs, 2007, p.72). Figure 59 shows a range of the 1970s Fresco furniture, this furniture is much more traditional in its design than the Danish range, yet it was much more popular with the UK customer.

E. Gomme classics of this time included the glass-topped coffee table with teak surround and sculpted legs. Imports from Scandinavia were just the initial hurdle for E. Gomme. Another significant development at this time was Terence Conran's<sup>10</sup> ground breaking Summa range in pine for Habitat. It was purchased by the customer in kit form, so the customer could take it home the same day (Hyman and Braggs, 2007, p.68). Habitat was different to other furniture stores at that time; other household products were available to buy and the consumer bought into a 'lifestyle' choice. Buckley (2007, p.177) states that:

Conran recognised that traditional furniture retailers provided for the general public at large, but he decided to target a particular market and to sell that market a number of coherent looks in furniture and accessories. Conran also recognised that designers and retailers had to generate the 'desire' for new products, since the consumer had already satisfied the basic 'need' for them.

The idea that the customer could buy modern or classically designed furniture and walk away with it was a huge difference from the traditional furniture retailers

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<sup>9</sup> HWeFA interview with Leslie Dandy, 9 January 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Terence Conran founded the hugely successful Habitat store, opening in first store in 1964, Fulham Road in Chelsea.

offering a six to eight week delivery time. Another company to tempt the furniture buyers into a particular lifestyle away from the traditional high street stores in the 1980s was Next,<sup>11</sup> and the concept of Next Interiors hit the high street in 1985. Buckley (2007, p.226) describes the Next interiors look as ‘diverse and eclectic: classic sofas, dining furniture was modern and minimalist’. It did though owe much to Habitat for the similar way it composed room settings and the use of additional products to create the ‘lifestyle’. According to Hyman and Braggs (2007, p.67) IKEA was another major factor that ‘led to the downfall of the leading furniture manufacturers in the 1970s.

With the changing face of the furniture retailer, from the traditional high street store to the out of town shopping centres and retail parks introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, many of the furniture manufacturers providing the traditional retailers have been affected. However as with other High Wycombe companies such as Ercol and Parker Knoll, G-Plan furniture is again proving a popular choice:

G-Plan, hardly the most cherished brand at the time, is now a cult collectible in some quarters. A certain Richard McLean (profiled in *The Times* magazine earlier this year) over on the West Coast of America (in Pomona, California, to be precise) has done the unthinkable and turned G-Plan into a must-have among Hollywood’s gilded set. He has developed a niche in selling vintage G-Plan pieces in his furnishing store, Futures Collide, which specialises in mid-20th-century pieces. The internet auction house eBay is another great source. But in the meantime Christopher Clarke, a member of the family that owns and runs Clarke’s store in Maidstone, Kent, has a business selling vintage G-Plan (Post, 2004).

G-Plan closed in 1993 and with it many more jobs were lost from the industry (Figure 60 shows an image of the factory just after its closure). Ironically the brand name is the only survivor, and so G-Plan furniture continues, but it is not the furniture company founded by Ebenezer Gomme in 1897. G-Plan, as with Ercol, is seeing a resurgence of interest; today it is seen as a retro choice. In fact in the 1950s it was companies including the Wycombe companies which were making accessible and affordable furniture for the majority of the people, iconic design classics of the time being just too expensive for most people. The 1950s G-Plan sideboards and coffee tables are often chosen to dress room settings in popular design magazines:

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<sup>11</sup> Next was established in 1982 by the designer George Davies (Next, Next for Men, Next Accessories, Next Interiors, Next Boys and Girls, Next Too, Next Collection, and Next Directory).

The abstemious furnishings of 1950s Britain are also influencing designers and retailers. Original G-Plan pieces in teak have been popping up in the Metro Retro concession at Selfridges, including vintage coffee tables (Burroughs, 2008).

### **2.3 Ercol Furniture Limited**

The story of Ercol started with an Italian boy called Lucian Randolph Ercolani, who came to England before the turn of the twentieth century. Figure 61 shows Lucian R Ercolani with his family, his two sons would later take over the company. Lucian R Ercolani was born in a small town on the borders of Tuscany called St Angelo en Vado in Italy in 1888. His family were Protestant in a staunch Catholic area, and as a direct result of religious persecution, the Salvation Army relocated Lucian and his family to the East End of London. Lucian started his long and happy life in England at the age of 10 years (Grover and Tadros, 2007).

After studying technical drawing and design at the Shoreditch Technical Institute in London (now London Metropolitan University) Ercolani sent drawings of a musical cabinet he designed to the 'Cabinet Maker' and these were published in the periodical. Figure 62 is a photograph of this musical cabinet which now takes pride of place in the Chairman's office at Ercol. The designs were noticed by Frederick Parker in 1910, the owner of the renowned furniture making company in High Wycombe, which became Parker Knoll Furniture. Ercolani's first brush with High Wycombe was when Harry Parker (Frederick's second son) asked him to carry out some design work (Ercolani, 1975, p.55). Ercolani described the work of Parker Knoll as the 'jewellery' of furniture, and was taken on under the 'real master man' himself, Harry Parker (Ercolani, 1975, p.56).

Some four years later Ercolani joined E. Gomme, another prominent High Wycombe furniture firm. Ercolani actually lived with Ebenezer Gomme and his family for some time. In 1920 Ercolani left E. Gomme and started his own furniture making business, Furniture Industries Ltd, in High Wycombe. According to Mike Pengelly and Brian Rogers 'The Old Man', as he was affectionately known in the latter years,

was a hard task master, he had enormous drive, and if you got something wrong you knew about it for days! He was a great man and a great teacher.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 63 shows the original drawing by Ercolani produced on the evening of 13 March 1920, the day he first visited the site. Here he thought, step by step, the perfect factory could be built. Some thirty years later a carpenter, removing a wooden partition, came across an old drawing, crumpled and partly torn. Sensing its importance, he showed it to Ercolani and it was mounted. The image currently hangs in office of the Ercol Chairman, Edward Tadros, Ercolani's grandson.

This factory built on a large piece of land east of High Wycombe town centre, was parallel with the main London railway, being the start of Ercol Furniture Ltd, the company that is one of the great British furniture manufacturers of the twentieth century (seen earlier in Figure 51). In the twenty years to follow Ercol were making furniture that reflected styles of existing forms. Ercolani himself said 'they took great care not to be too original as retailers seemed to have an antipathy to forms and shapes which were strange to the public' (Ercolani, 1975, pp.96-97).

The early types of furniture Ercol was producing between the years of 1920-1939 were of traditional, very heavy styles of mainly solid oak timber, (Figure 64). It was not only technology and materials science that were to benefit from the wartime experience. The resulting innovations of the 1940s and 1950s gave Ercol the designs now recognisable throughout the UK:

Ercol always remained at the forefront of technology, assisted by the most sophisticated machinery and computers. The extent of the accomplishment in producing the chair can be seen in its standing as the best-selling Windsor Chair in the United Kingdom, even today (Beeks building contractors and developers, 1999, pp.92-95).

In 1944 Ercol was approached by the Board of Trade to produce a fairly low cost Windsor chair, of the type for which the High Wycombe furniture companies were renowned, as discussed in the Literature Review. Ercol was given the time to design and develop this chair for the Utility furniture coupon scheme, Figure 65. This was a considerable advancement since the Windsor chair had been arduously made by

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<sup>12</sup> Author interview with Mike Pengelly and Brian Rodgers, 12 March 2008. They both worked at Ercol in the design office for 35 and 45 years respectively.

hand in the area for centuries. Because there was an availability of elm in the South of England which has been drying for five years, Ercolani wanted to use it. It was though necessary to carry out research in the use of elm for furniture, as Ercolani himself said; ‘It was brought home to me that elm was a tenacious timber subject to warping and shaking even during the process of drying, no matter how long you kept it under cover in the open air’ (Ercolani, 1975, p.142).

The Ercol Windsor range, although based on historically well-known types, was adapted from this wartime contract for chairs by Ercolani. By breaking down the manufacturing process into small operations for subsequent assembly, he had laid down the groundwork for the development of the range into, what is today, a well-known and respected brand of furniture. After consultation with the Forest Products Research Laboratory (FPRL) in Princes Risborough on kilning elm, a timber that previously was thought of as useless for production. (Although this timber had been used for the seats of Windsor chairs for 200 years.) Eventually Ercol had 30-40 kilns built (Ercolani, 1975, p.142).

This range of Windsor furniture, was ‘born out of simplicity’ (Ercolani, 1975, pp.152-153) and was produced from mainly solid beech and elm finished in natural colour. Furniture Industries exhibited at the ‘Britain can Make it’ Exhibition in 1946 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, ‘and the spirit of austerity suited furniture maker Lucian Ercolani just fine. He specialised in less-is-more chairs. What made him different is that he did it in wood’ (Pearman, 2004). They also exhibited at the ‘Festival of Britain’ in 1951, where the Ercol furniture was widely accepted as beautifully designed furniture:

The firm Ercol did much to revitalise the Windsor chair and, even more important, created a whole range of kitchen, dining room and sitting room furniture which matched it in both materials and design, making the rural chair much more an integral part of modern furniture than it ever was in the past (Sparkes, 1981, p.31).

This successful application of a combination of machine and hand methods since the 1950s has been the making of this successful High Wycombe Company. Figure 66 shows the early production line at Ercol, and highlights the flow of throughput on a roller system. They were able to produce an article that was efficiently produced but



still had something of a craftsman's finish, as Edwards (1994, p.75) highlights the extent of the changes over fifty years of production:

Each chair has a sculptural feel deriving from a true appreciation of form. Effective sanding of curved members is accomplished by air filled rotary balloon type abrasive drums which yield to the contours, and hand-waxing completes the job. Using this technique Ercol was producing 2,000 units per day. Today the company uses CNC machines to create motifs in Windsor chair back splats but still finishes with the philosophy of combining high technology with hand finishing.

In 1947 an amazed furniture world saw the first production line Windsor chair. Ercol were now able to produce one of these chairs every twenty seconds. According to Tom Dean, the Windsor chair was Ercol's 'bread and butter', making 3000 per week in the first automated production line in the furniture industry in the UK.<sup>13</sup> Ercol's design principle was to make the best modern furniture, inspired by the best of the past, using British materials, such as elm, beech and ash (Baren, 1992, p.34).

There are a number of timeless classic designs that were also designed in the 1950s by Lucian R Ercolani, a selection of which can be seen in Figure 67. The Ercol Butterfly chair launched in 1958, was created with extensive development work of bending thick wood laminations to create the beautiful curves. The Ercol stool was never widely produced; it was manufactured internally for the designers in the drawing office. The future products of the company were in the mind of Ercolani, even at this early stage. 'My original, simple designs did set a pattern which I hope will be good enough to meet the changes in time to come' (Ercolani, 1975, p.170).

The link between Ercol and furniture education was also strong, and started at the very beginning of his furniture career. Ercolani was 'appointed to teach advanced furniture design at evening classes at the Technical Institute in High Wycombe between 1910 and 1920' (Ercolani, 1975, p.12). Although design issues had been deemed as low priority to many Wycombe furniture companies, with many producing reproduction furniture, Ercolani was not of this mind-set:

It seemed to me that there was a desire for fairly inexpensive, but attractively designed furniture. I emphasised that the desire to acquire could come about as a

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<sup>13</sup> Author interview with Tom Dean, 3 September 2009. Tom Dean worked at Ercol for 54 years and was previously Managing Director.

result of good design, which appeared to me in those days to be at a very low ebb (Ercolani, 1975, p.86).

Ercolani was keen to portray good design and fit-for-purpose furniture even in the early days of Furniture Industries. In 1937 Ercolani visited the new Durham Agricultural College and set about designing furniture to suit this individual and ‘stupendous building’ (Ercolani, 1975, p.123). This furniture is still used in the boardroom of Houghall College in Durham City, Figure 68 (additional images are in Appendix J, Figures J1-J2).

Ercol had designed furniture based on English elm because of the tradition of the use of this timber for Windsor chair seats, and a natural disaster was to change the way the company worked. Dutch elm disease was captured in picture in the 1940s in Figure 69, showing diseased elm being felled. This early strain of the disease was mild, compared to the disease which spread across much of Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, leading to the death of most mature elm trees (Grover and Tadros, 2007). Fortunately Ercol had seen this coming and used American elm for the first time in 1980. Ercol bought a share in two American timber companies in North Minnesota, Renneberg Hardwoods and Bagley Hardwoods, where they purchased American elm. They changed over to American elm completely in the mid-1980s (Grover and Tadros, 2007). Ercol continued designing and manufacturing furniture in the UK but the timber processing now took place in the United States.

As well as changing its timber supply, Ercol was also facing a change in its furniture production methods. Ercol was keen to stay ahead of the pace of technological change. This led them to purchase their first CNC (computer numerical controlled) machine in 1984, from Rye Machinery, a local firm (Figure 70). It improved the quality of the machining and increased throughput (Grover and Tadros, 2007).

The worsening economy in the 1980s had led to a three day week. Coupled with the change away from processing elm in the UK, the early 1990s were an extremely difficult period for Ercol (Grover and Tadros, 2007). Ercol Furniture remained in High Wycombe until the late 1990s, when a move away from a factory in a residential area was necessary. Towards the end of the 1990s Ercol was beginning to have real difficulties with the local environment (with its surrounding neighbours

and the fact that there was no possibility of expansion), and so in 1999 they bought the 23 acres of the old Forest Products Research laboratory in Princes Risborough, about seven miles from High Wycombe and built a new factory. They moved into the purpose built 160,000 square feet facility in the summer of 2002. Figures 71-72 show the up-to-date building away from a residential area and providing a spacious, clean, dust free and light environment in which to manufacture furniture. The new facility according to Edward Tadros,<sup>14</sup> meant job security for the firm's 400 workers, many of whom had been with Ercol for the majority of their working lives (Kirby, 2002). The huge investment made it possible to capitalise on the skills base and innovative new product lines (Kirby, 2002).

This building was designed to be sustainable. Ercol worked closely with the architects and Wycombe District Council to achieve high standards of noise attenuation, and use of energy and control of the internal atmosphere. The air is constantly being changed in the building; extracted out, cleaned of dust and particles, and re-circulated onto the plant. The waste is collected and burnt in the boilers which provide heat for the factory. The factory uses only waterborne stains and lacquers. The building won RIBA's award for an industrial building in the South East of England and also SEEDA's award for a sustainable business in 2003 (Grover and Tadros, 2007).

At the same time there was the emergence on a dramatic scale of the importing of furniture manufactured in Eastern Europe and the Far East (Grover and Tadros, 2007). Ercol therefore decided that there were two ways to approach this; one was through outsourcing themselves and the other through design. (Figure 73 shows Ercol furniture being manufactured in Poland in one of the factories that supplies Ercol ranges.) According to Roger Bennett 'at Ercol there was much frustration to get the designs recognised'.<sup>15</sup> Tadros reiterated this belief to Peter March of the Financial Times:

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<sup>14</sup> Ercol Chairman and grandson of Lucian R Ercolani.

<sup>15</sup> HWFA interview with Roger Bennett, 10 June 2008. Roger Bennett was a furniture designer at G-Plan and worked as a designer at Hands of Wycombe and Evans, where he designed the Go-Go Chair, seen in Appendix K.

We are doing this [Moving to Princes Risborough] because we have faith in the future of the company and we believe that by concentrating on good quality furniture made to high design standards we can increase sales significantly. The company spends heavily on design. It is the one way we have to differentiate ourselves and stop the company being buried by the Poles and the Chinese (Marsh, 2000b).

Ercol is still perceived to have the same values started by Ercolani in 1920:

Ercol produced furniture made from solid wood (mostly beech and elm), lovingly crafted with the sort of design ethic that would have appealed to the Shakers. Every single piece was useful. Decorative detail was non-existent. Quality was very, very high and the aim was to produce pieces that were 'functional, beautiful and affordable' (Post, 2004).

Furniture from the 1950s has been having somewhat of a resurgence in the last decade, and Ercol furniture has been at the centre of this. Certain Ercol post-war furniture items have become extremely fashionable in today's market, both vintage and re-editions. Margaret Howell, the fashion designer whose clothes are a byword for 'Englishness' launched a number of Ercol re-editions. Many Ercol pieces of furniture can be found in the popular design press, which can be seen in Appendix A. Kevin McLeod, 'Grand Designs' presenter, announced that the biggest investment he had made in furniture was a set of twelve Ercol butterfly chairs. 'The thing that gives me such a buzz about the chair is that, rather than being made in some factory in China, it's made in the Chilterns, where I grew up, by people who are real craftsmen' (Machell, 2008). Ercol are continuing to survive the difficult business of manufacturing in the UK. They achieve this according to Tadros because of the ongoing design development and the fact that production is spread across Eastern Europe, as well as in Princes Risborough.

## **2.4 Parker Knoll**

Parker Knoll Furniture was another much respected and familiar furniture company in High Wycombe and its name represented quality up-market furniture. Frederick Parker set up his own furniture company in 1871, which became one of the most successful and important furniture manufacturers in the country (Cross and Newton-Short, 2007b). Frederick Parker moved his family and company from London to Frogmoor Gardens, High Wycombe in 1898, after a conversation he had with one of his suppliers Alan Janes, a Wycombe furniture maker. According to Cross and Newton-Short this move was driven by the availability of timber, cheaper rents and

more space. Unlike other firms in the area they were producing high quality upholstered furniture, specialising in chairs and sofas, and not the familiar Windsor chairs of the area. According to Bland (1995, p.28) Parker Knoll was ‘the first in the area to do so’. It was a company recognised as one of the best furniture makers in the UK, producing high quality reproduction furniture, and the company Frederick Parker and Sons Ltd was registered in 1904. ‘Parkers’, as it was informally known, was to furnish some of the most lavish interiors of its time, including the Aquitania ocean liner (Figure 74 shows the range of chairs produced, including arm chairs and dining chairs) first of the great steamships, embassies, the Houses of Parliament and other Government contracts (Vernon, 2013).

The quality and traditional designs of Parker Knoll have been synonymous with the company and as Post (2004) explains the comfort of these chairs has been a top priority for the company:

Its unique selling point was always to home in on comfort and it was one of the first companies to take the study of ergonomics seriously. It aimed, said its founder Frederick Parker, to “manufacture furniture that pleased the eye and relaxed the body”. This clearly is not the most glamorous of messages, but to those who want nothing so much as something deliciously comfy to sink into at home, Parker Knoll was always a name to conjure with.

During the First World War, as with many furniture companies in Wycombe, Parkers ‘took on as much war work as they could obtain and this ran alongside such normal production as could be sold’ (Bland, 1995, p.41).

Historically, furniture firms have had influence on the design education in High Wycombe and in the late 1920s Parkers also found time to be involved in the High Wycombe Technical Institute. Harry Parker (Frederick’s second son), together with Lucian R Ercolani agreed to help set technical questions and inspect the final work of apprentices at the Institute. Bland (1995, p.63) explains that ‘Messrs Parker, Ercolani and Gomme formed a sub-committee to consider how the trade could support the apprenticeship classes.’ They also offered prizes for the best specimens of work. It is apparent that these three High Wycombe companies were at the forefront of supporting emerging talent into the furniture industry.

The familiar company name 'Parker Knoll' we know today came about with the development of a new range of furniture:

The Parkers had always been excited by new innovations, so when Willi Knoll from Stuttgart, Germany, put forward a revolutionary idea for spring furniture, Frederick Parker and Sons saw the design as having great potential (Parker Knoll, 2011).

According to Worden (1994) Willi Knoll had contacted another Wycombe furniture company. 'W. Birch also of High Wycombe had been approached but they did not take up the patent'. Indeed, Willi Knoll was a friend of Ambrose Heal. Bland (1995, p.68) retells the conversation Heal had with Nancy, Thomas Cornwell Parker's youngest daughter (Thomas was Frederick's forth son), who was working at Heals at the time, ensuring that she told her father to look at Knoll's sample chair.

Frederick Parker & Sons protected their designs by taking out a registered trade mark for the system of patent springing,<sup>16</sup> using the trade name 'Parker Knoll' for all their chairs using tension springs. The start of the Parker Knoll success story started, putting this family firm's mark on the history of the High Wycombe furniture industry. From this new idea, a new partnership was born. According to the Parker Knoll website, the name of the company was changed, showing the success of this range. 'At the British Industries Fair in February 1931, the company Parker Knoll was founded' (Parker Knoll, 2011). This is not entirely correct, as Figure 75 shows, the range of Parker Knoll furniture was launched, but the company name continued to be Frederick Parker & Sons Ltd. Bland (1995, p.68) explained that 'when the Company exhibited at the British Industries Fair at Olympia, this was probably the first time the new Parker Knoll chairs were displayed to the trade'. The Parker Knoll company were not officially listed until 1950 (Cross and Newton-Short, 2007b).

The company continued to exhibit throughout the 1930s showing Parkers' traditional cabinet and upholstery alongside the Parker Knoll range. Indeed, according to Vernon (2013) Parker Knoll was one of the first companies to make the furniture industry out of High Wycombe a truly international business. The Parker Knoll

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<sup>16</sup> Fabric braiding on the springs. When the springs were in use they could not stretch beyond the give of the braiding. Parker's also hooked the springs into a metal eyelet embedded in webbing which would also move with the spring. This meant that wear on the eyelet was kept to a minimum (Worden, 1994).

range had a disappointing start as ‘their traditional customers were conservative and reluctant to experiment’ (Bland, 1995, p.75). Much effort was required from this furniture family who had no real experience in promoting the company by advertising, indeed there was no precedence from any furniture company at this time:

Parkers failed to realise how much effort would be necessary to translate their confidence into a leading brand name. The eventual success of Parker Knoll owes a great deal to the vision and direct thinking by Thomas Cornwell Parker, in areas of promotion never before used by a furniture manufacturer (Bland, 1995, p.77).

Much has been written about the G-Plan revolutionary take on creating a brand name in furniture, and this will be discussed in the following section of this chapter. But Parker Knoll it appears was delivering a furniture brand twenty years earlier. The seemingly slow start to Parker Knoll must have been disappointing, but other furniture makers were quicker to appreciate the merits of Parker Knoll than the retailers. As Bland (1995, p.77) quotes Thomas Cornwell Parker, ‘the first thing that happened as always in the furniture trade if you have a good idea, everybody copies it.’ In 1932 the family gave over the advertising to Harold Vernon. His company C. Vernon & Sons created the famous ‘man on the spring emblem’ (Figure 76) and registered the trade mark ‘Parker Knoll: Tension Suspension’. This created the identity for Parker Knoll with both the trade and the public.

Parker Knoll was therefore one of the very first manufactures to advertise its own products and the retailers were very critical of this. They must have worried that Parker Knoll was planning to sell direct to the public. ‘All furniture makes were supposed by the retail trade to be anonymous, and there had never been such thing as a brand name’ (Bland, 1995, p.79). Informing the public of this new innovative range of furniture was to prove the success of the company, and helped retail sales, slowing the retailers’ opposition. Branded furniture was therefore accepted and national advertisements were established, making way for many more to come:

Opposition slowly faded as retailers realised the customers liked what they saw and sales were made. Thus nationally advertised, branded furniture was established for the first time (Bland, 1995, p.79).

The value of Parker Knoll chairs was reiterated in valuable orders in the 1930s, including the new BBC Headquarters, the Trust House Group of hotels, Westminster Abbey and the Queen Mary Atlantic liner. Even King Edward VIII is portrayed sitting in a Parker Knoll chair, Figure 77.

At the end of the 1930s Parker Knoll had become the predominant brand name in chairs. However, with war declared on 3 September 1939, apprehensions arose in the manufacturing industries across the UK. Parker Knoll was able to continue as normal for a short time. As the war progressed, as discussed in earlier chapters, with men being scattered and reducing material supplies, work at Parker Knoll was much reduced and work on the war effort was priority.

It was at this time that the company changed its name to Parker Knoll Ltd. (not as earlier mentioned in the Parker Knoll company website which states that: ‘At the British Industries Fair in February 1931, the company Parker Knoll was founded’) (Parker Knoll, 2011).

By the end of 1940 the Directors realised that the traditional furniture of Frederick Parker & Sons would not be made again. The Parker Knoll range had been sufficiently successful to expect a strong market after the War. Parker Knoll Ltd was created on 24 March 1942 (Bland, 1995, p.100).

Bland writes that the early war orders ranged from easy chairs for the Admiralty to examination couches, stretchers, ‘A’ frames for the trenches, artillery boxes, tent pegs and snow shoes. The later years of the war saw Parker Knoll being taken over by The Ministry of Aircraft Production, and the construction of the De Havilland Mosquito Aircraft, Figure 78. Again this image shows the female workers in the making shop. It also repaired and conditioned damaged Airspeed Horsa Gliders. However the majority of the furniture made at Parker Knoll during the war was to be Utility, as its war contracts tailed off. In early 1945 the company applied to make Utility designs and were designated number 423 (Bland, 1995, p.105). Parker Knoll designed a chair that was eventually accepted as a Utility design in 1948. Approval of the Parker Knoll design opened the way to produce and market a chair bearing the company’s name. The side seat rails were printed with the legend ‘Parker Knoll Utility Chair, Model 1450 PK’ (Figure 79), ensuring the public was aware this was a quality Utility piece of furniture.



It was at this time that Parker Knoll steered away from using entirely wood for its chair frames and developed the Toledo chair (shown earlier in Figure 15) using a metal construction with a small amount of wood on the back rail and arm inserts. This use of metal was extremely unusual for furniture companies in High Wycombe. Edwards (2004, p.73) highlights the positive advancement using materials other than timber, and that it was possible to adapt the materials to recognisable styles without losing the technical advantages:

This effect was demonstrated in 1949, when furniture makers Parker Knoll used aluminium alloy in the frames of the Toledo fireside wing chair...The transfer of aluminium technology was successful because it was seen as appropriate to parts of the furniture business at that time.

With Utility furniture rules becoming less stringent, and companies able to design again providing the company conformed to specific dimensions and prices, Parker Knoll developed a new range of furniture. The three keenly priced chairs, the PK 704 Cambridge, the PK 708 Romsey and the PK 709 Campden (Figure 80) were a huge success. The company was exceeding its capacity and the Parker Knoll wing chair had a delivery time of nine months at one point. In fact according to Bland, Parker Knoll's fireside and wing easy chairs amounted to 10 percent of all UK production for 1951. Parker Knoll and its subsidiary businesses were expanding into the 1950s. 'Henry Goodearl's business, (a Wycombe chair factory represented in the Geffrye Museum archives, Figure 81), was taken over by Parker Knoll after the war and the factory rebuilt' (Goodearl, 1992, p.11). It was though, sometime after the war that this took place, in 1956. This was to provide the much needed space that the company required for its growing business. Photographs held at the Geffrye Museum showed that Parker Knoll and Goodearl Bros, were experimenting with new materials alongside companies such as Ernest Race, Heal & Sons and Knoll Associates, Figure 82. Both were working with new developing foams using latex:

When Parker Knoll decided in 1949 to explore the possibilities of replacing spring filled cushions with latex foam, they began by simply substituting one for the other on various chairs....several members of staff kept the chairs in their own homes for several months, in order to test them under all possible conditions found in the home. These crucial tests showed that the sitter sank deeper into the chair than with the usual spring filled cushion, and some compensation in the design was needed to get the full benefit of the extra depression. All that was necessary was to raise the chair leg by about a quarter of an inch and to lower the arms by the same amount (Desbrow, 1951).

Parker Knoll were not only producing the more traditional designs but in the 1950s they were also 'spurred on by the home interest magazines, and the import of Scandinavian cabinet furniture' (Bland, 1995, p.153). They produced the more modern 'avante garde' designs, the Menton PK768 and the PK769 Meriden using another modern material, fibre glass shells, Figure 83. New materials required ingenuity to turn them into viable furniture products. Another glass fibre shell chair, the Tirano (Figure 84) was awarded a certificate for good design and craftsmanship from the Furniture Makers Guild and did much to project the Parker Knoll image for up-to-date styles and production techniques.

An additional site in Chipping Norton in the Cotswolds was opened in 1962, to deal with the expanding company and its range of three piece suites, (it had started to manufacture the Gavotte three piece suite in that year). It was thought unlikely that the necessary wood machining skills would exist outside of High Wycombe and so research was carried out into a less expensive glass-fibre type material. Another less expensive moulding technique was discovered, Novacore, a sheet material able to be moulded, and the Novella suite was launched, Figure 85.

Parker Knoll fireside and wing easy chairs accounted for 9.6 percent of total output for the United Kingdom and the majority of the public would recognise the success of Parker Knoll with its recliners which were not then made in this country. The recliner model, N30 Recliner, at that time (1966) was the most expensive model ever marketed by the company (Figure 86). It swiftly became the best-selling new chair in the trade for years.

Parker Knoll Ltd took over Dancer & Hearne (a well-established High Wycombe furniture company founded in 1840, Figure 87), in 1967. Unfortunately the Ministry of Education decided to favour metal framed chairs with plastic seats instead of the wooden, plywood seated school chairs, which the image shows being produced in the factory. The company closed down in 1970, 'depriving Dancer & Hearne of the core of its business' (Wycombe Museum, n.d.). The National Union of Furniture Trades Operatives (NUFTO) reported that 190 members became unemployed with the Penn Street operation closing (NUFTO, 1970c).

In the 1970s Parker Knoll were sticking to what they did best: designs in traditional styles of upholstery for the higher price markets. According to Bland (1995, p.228) the retail trade and public in general were not yet ready to depart from convention and invest in furniture of advanced design. In 1976, Martin Jourdan (seen with the author in Appendix K) and his brother Tom became the family's fourth generation to accept responsibility for the future of the business and of shaping it to meet the changing demands of the late twentieth century.

The years that followed saw Parker Knoll close its High Wycombe factory in the late 1990s (Figure 88 shows the factory in the middle of High Wycombe, surrounded by housing) and move its operations to the Chipping Norton site. Twenty years earlier NUFTO had reported that upholstery and polishing would be undertaken at Chipping Norton and the union were fighting for the labour to be from High Wycombe (NUFTO 1970b). In 2000 the Lancashire based Silentnight Group took over the company and in 2005 it decided to move operations abroad and lose the remaining 250 jobs at Chipping Norton. Figure 89 show the site being demolished and new housing starting to be built on the site. Both the Parker Knoll site in High Wycombe and Chipping Norton have since been redeveloped. A supermarket is now on the High Wycombe site and the road name Parker Knoll Way (off Glenisters Road) evidences the heritage of the spot, as the Literature Review discussed. A housing estate was built on the Chipping Norton site and the street names tribute the furniture firm that was so successful and a huge employer of the town, Figure 90.

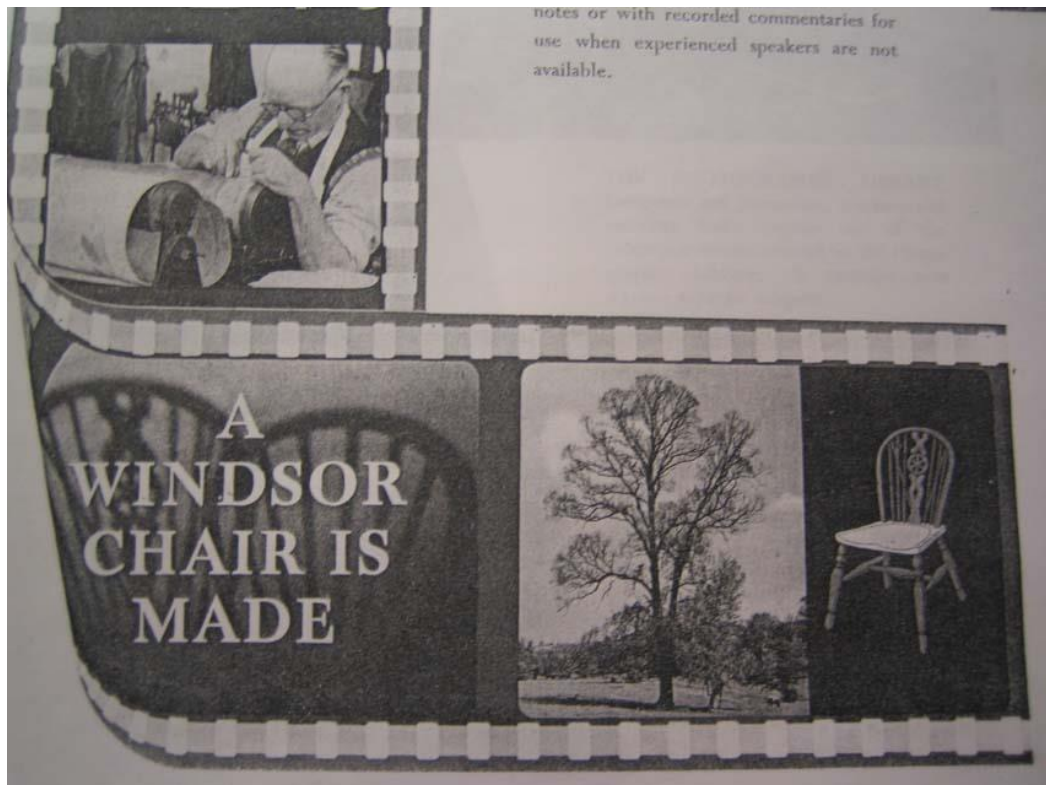


Figure 42 A visual aid to accompany a film strip on how to make a Windsor chair, 1948

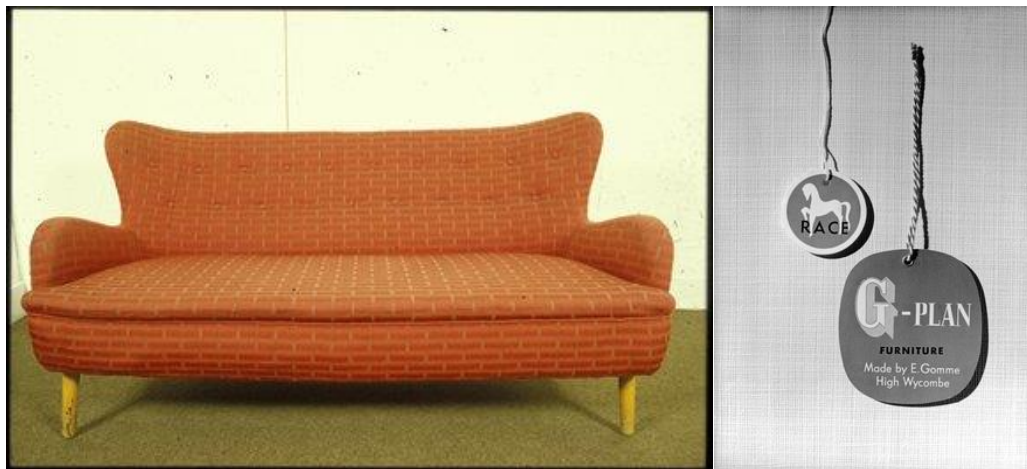


Figure 43 Left: Race DA6 settee, c.1956 covered with Grosvenor, a Parker Knoll Textiles cloth designed 1953 by Marianne Straub. Right: Examples of typography. Product labels by E. Gomme and Ernest Race, 1956



Figure 44 Dining area in a room setting designed by Robin Day in the 'Entertainment at Home' section of the Homes and Gardens pavilion at the Festival of Britain South Bank Exhibition, London, 1951. Shows wooden dining table and chairs designed by R. D. Russell and made by E. Gomme Ltd



Figure 45 A living room setting in the Design Centre Goes to Times Furnishing, 1968



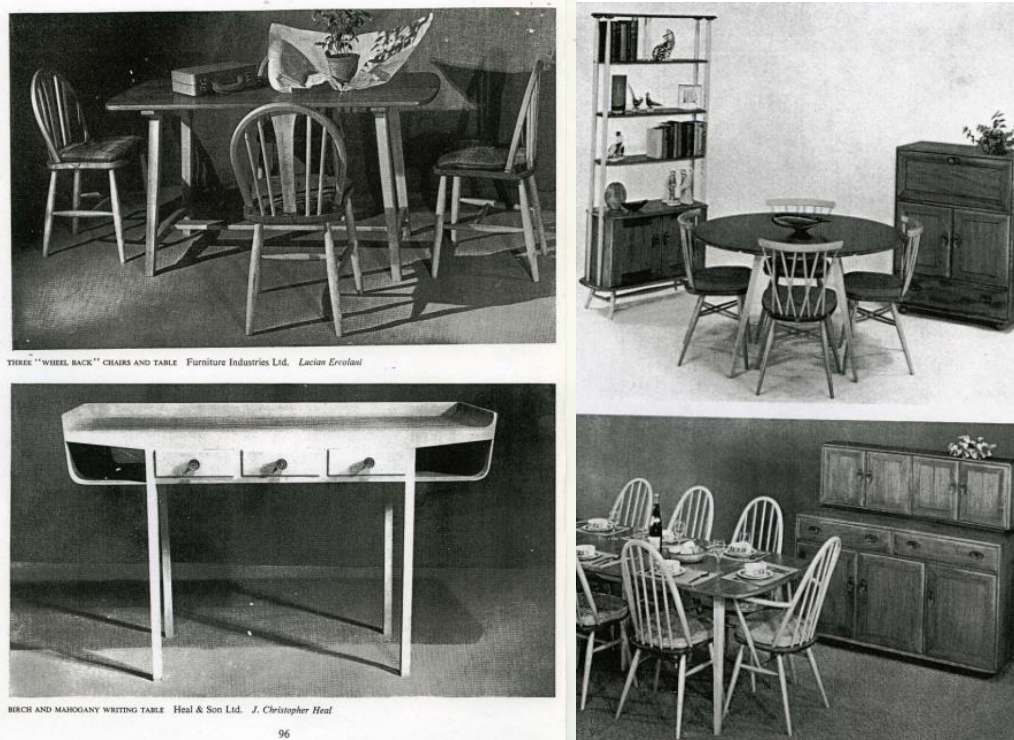


Figure 46 Furniture Industries Ltd (Later became known as Ercol) table and chairs, 1966



Figure 47 Parker Knoll chairs, 1966

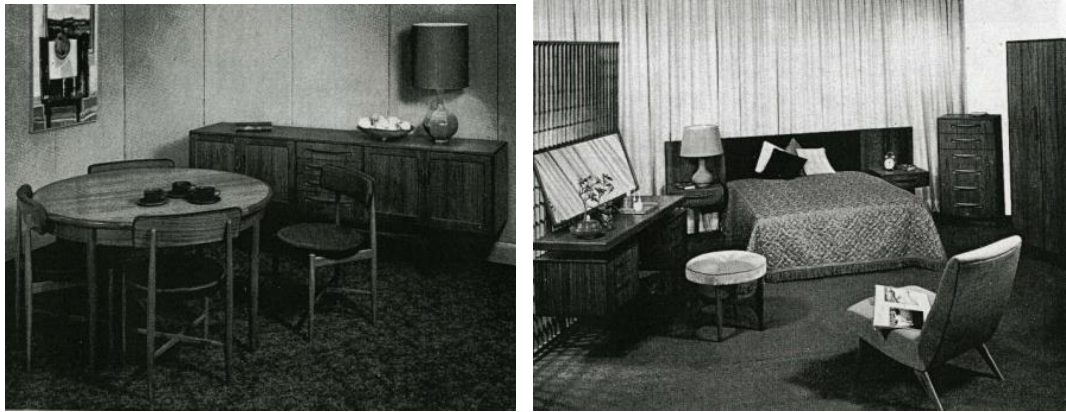


Figure 48 G-Plan dining and bedroom suite, 1966



Figure 49 The manufacture of Utility Furniture (dressing table) at a High Wycombe Factory, c. 1940s



Figure 50 The manufacture of Utility Furniture at a High Wycombe Factory, c. 1940s



Figure 51 Aerial view of Ercol and G-Plan factories. Ercol factory is on the right, showing the timber storage yard. G-Plan can be seen to the left of the railway line. West Wycombe can be seen in the distance, c.1965-67



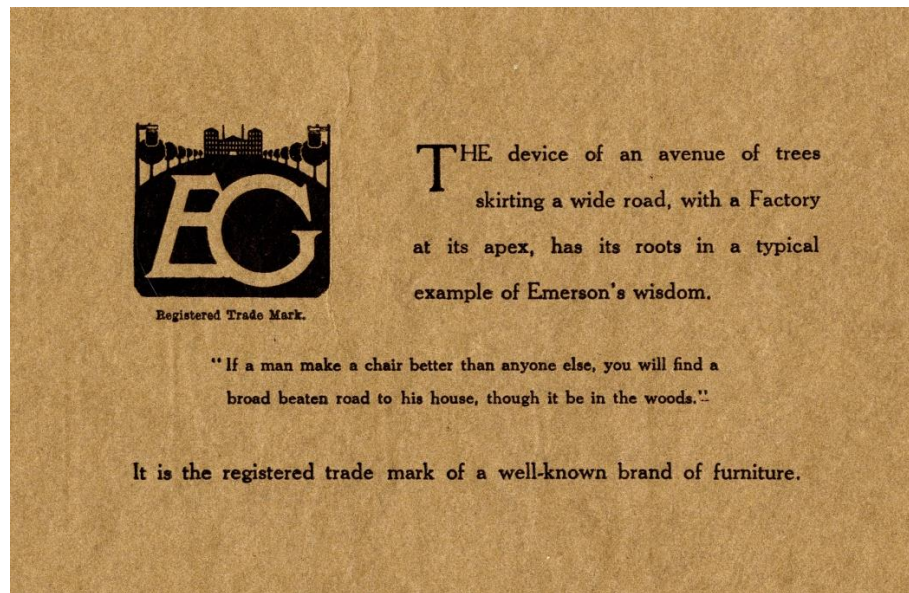


Figure 52 E. Gomme furniture catalogue 'Chairs', showing Emerson's dictum, 1920s

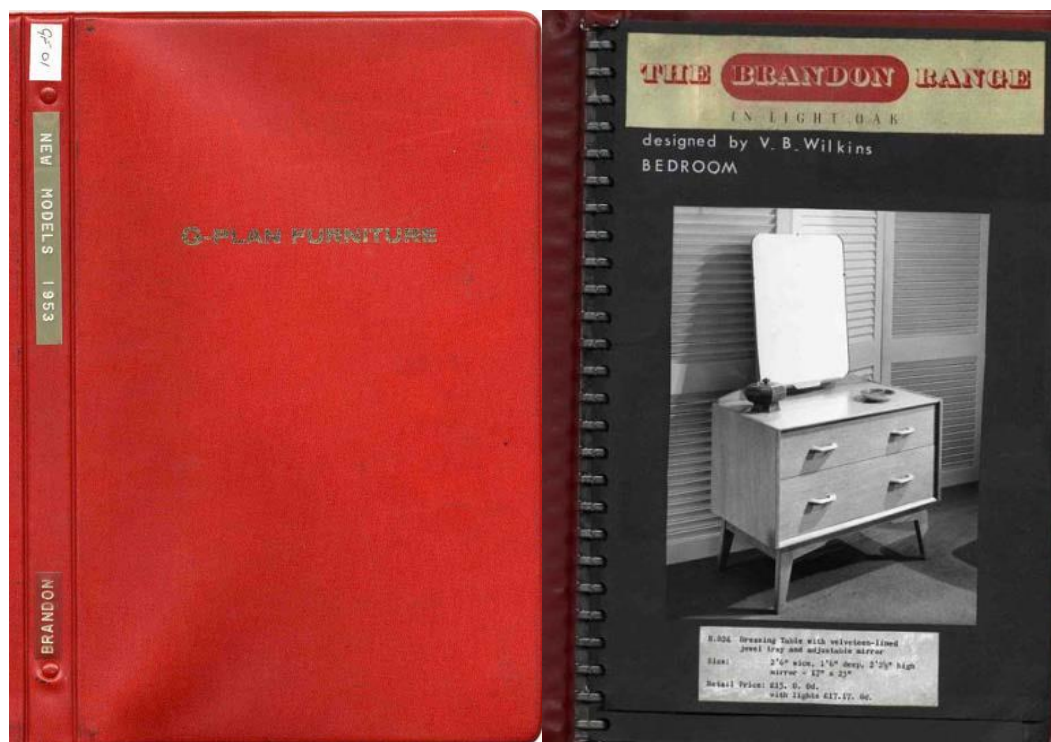


Figure 53 Later example of 'Silent Salesman' catalogue, 1953

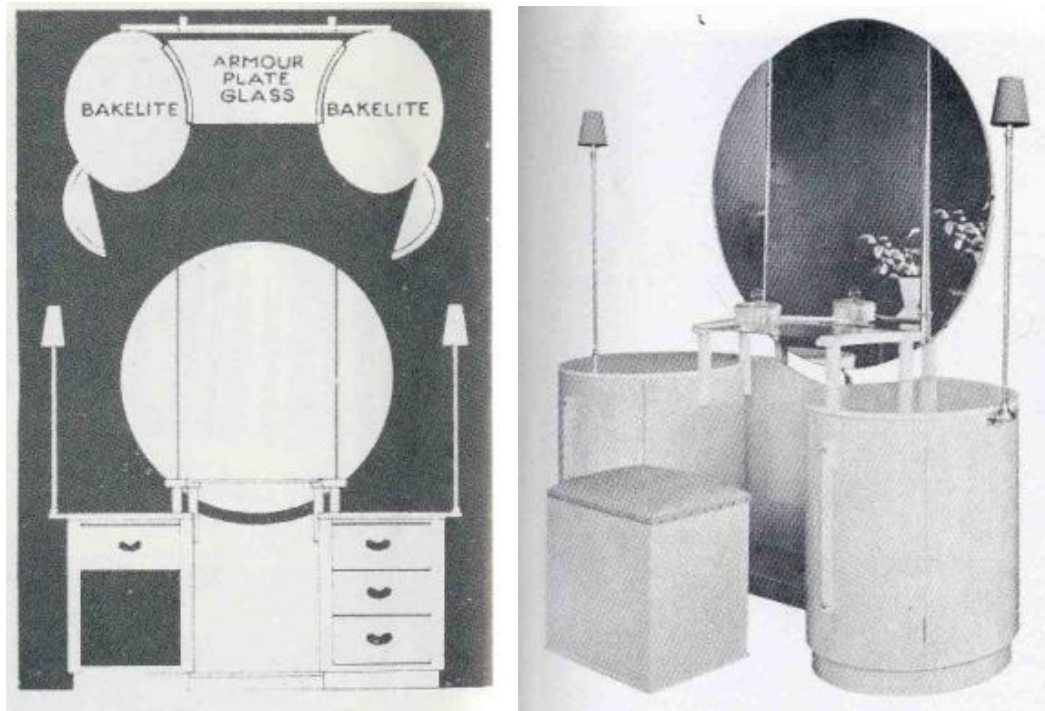


Figure 54 Pages from an E. Gomme catalogue of the early 1930s showing a bedroom suite lacquered in duck egg green

## What is the G-plan?

THE G-PLAN is the very newest idea in home furnishing—an idea that is right in line with today's way of living.

No more old-fashioned suites that clutter up and overcrowd your rooms! Now you can assemble your own individual room arrangements. You can choose from a range of well-designed, modern, easy-to-move furniture that is space-saving and quick to clean, and above all a joy to look at and to own.

### Suit yourself

The G-Plan offers you a full, comprehensive range of furniture for the whole house! From this range you assemble, piece by piece, the room arrangements that best suit your own home. Because the design is so good, you can't go wrong. Yet there is ample scope for everyone to exercise his or her own individual good taste. You will find, too, that the elegant design of this furniture harmonizes perfectly with any traditional pieces you may already possess.

You can buy the pieces separately if you like, or you can buy complete sets for your bedroom, lounge or dining-room, each individual piece of the set your own choice. And you need not buy all the furniture at the same time—if you add a piece later, it will still match up.

### First G-Plan Range

Illustrated in the following pages is the Brandon, first G-Plan range to appear in the shops. It is made in selected, seasoned oak in two shades—light and nut-brown.

When you have studied this booklet, ask at your local shop to see G-Plan furniture. The salesman will be delighted to show it to you, and you will enjoy choosing the pieces that best suit your own individual needs.

## THE BRANDON RANGE



**B026 Compact gentleman's tallboy** provides ample room for clothes, yet takes up the minimum of space. It has an adjustable sliding mirror, and compartment for watches, dress studs, etc. The cupboard door has a special touch catch—simple pressure on the upper right-hand corner opens the door! Width 2' 10", depth 1' 6", height 3' 10".



**B034 Dressing table** with velvet-lined jewel tray and adjustable mirror, 17" wide by 23" high, mounted with an oak grip. Width 2' 6", depth 1' 6", height 2' 24".



**B031 Five-drawer chest**, made from sturdy, hard-wearing oak, provides ample drawer space for any lady's or gentleman's clothing. Width 2' 6", depth 1' 6", height 3' 3".

Figure 55 Brandon range of G-Plan furniture, 1954

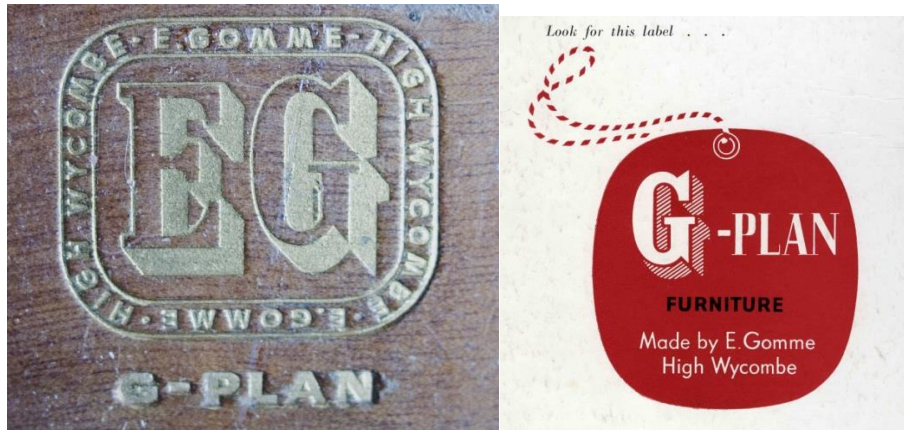


Figure 56 Left: G-Plan embossed gold mark Right: G-Plan label late 1950s



Figure 57 Black and white photograph of G-Plan New Danish sideboard model no. 4021, made in teak with rosewood handles.<sup>17</sup> Designed by Ib Kofod-Larsen, 1962

<sup>17</sup> New Danish Designs by G-Plan. The 5' 6" Sideboard (4021). This sideboard is beautifully styled in teak with square handles in rosewood. The centre section of the sideboard comprises five drawers, including a felt lined cutlery drawer, and the shelves in the cupboard sections on either side are adjustable.  
Measurements: Overall length 66", Depth 19", Height 30". Price £52. 10.0.



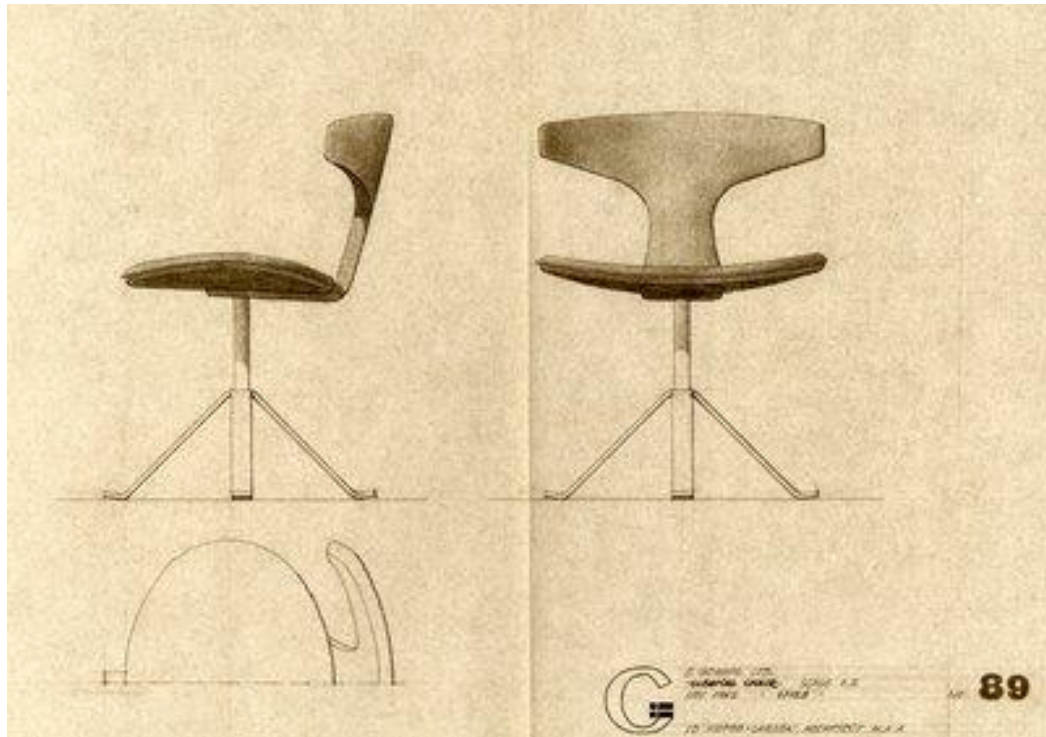


Figure 58 G-Plan: Ib Kofod-Larsen Technical Drawing 89, c.1960s



Figure 59 Left: Fresco Sideboard (4078) in teak veneers, 1977. ref: GRB05 designed by Victor Bramwell Wilkins. Right: Photograph showing a group setting of Fresco furniture -Teak Side Table (8048), Dining Table (4385), Dining Chair (4535), Sideboard (4071), c1967 designed by Victor Bramwell Wilkins



Figure 60 Exterior of the derelict G-Plan factory in Spring Gardens, High Wycombe. The building in the centre housed the Assembly Shop on the ground floor and Polishing Shop on the first floor, 1993



Figure 61 Lucian Randolph Ercolani, with his wife Eva May Ercolani and sons, Mr Barry Ercolani (left) and Mr Lucian Ercolani (right) when he attended Buckingham Palace to receive his O.B.E. 1964



Figure 62 The Musical Cabinet had to be sold to pay for the materials that made it, and was only reunited with Ercolani in the 1950s by his Salvation Army friends. Photograph taken by the author 11 December 2007 at Ercol

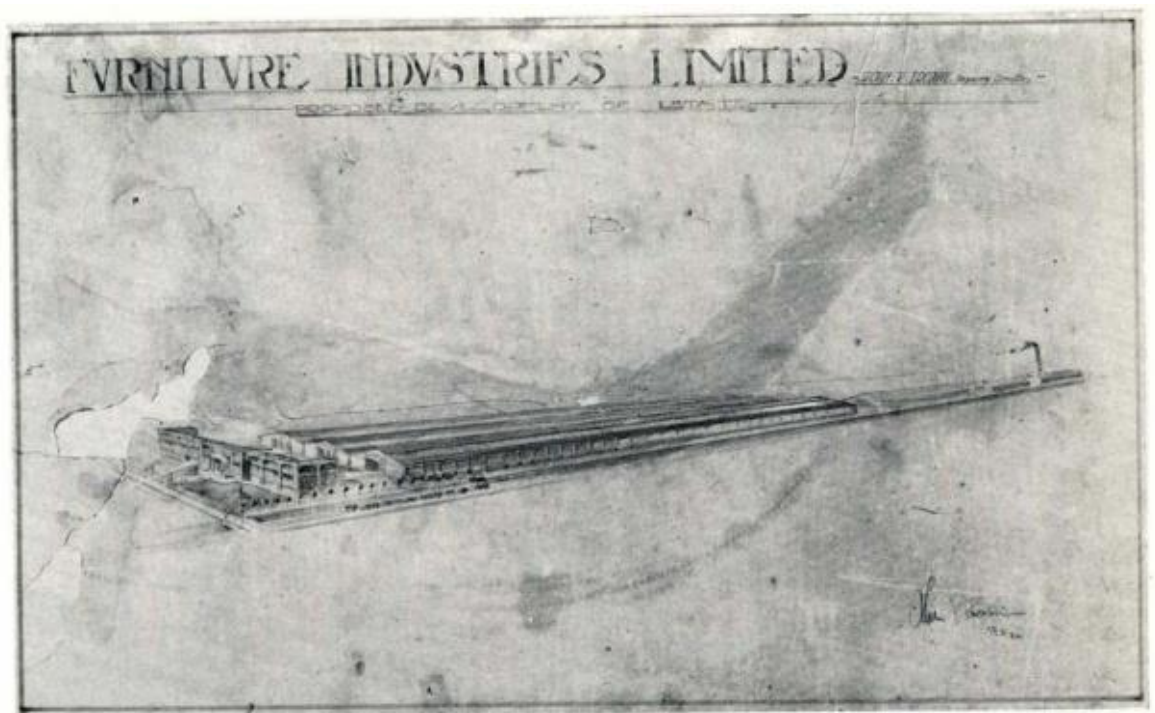


Figure 63 Original drawing by Ercolani of the proposed Furniture Industries factory; image captured by the author 11 December 2007 at Ercol





Figure 64 Photographs showing Ercol's traditional style of furniture 1920-1939



Courtesy of High Wycombe Furniture Archive

Figure 65 Utility Windsor kitchen chair Ercol manufactured model no. 4a,<sup>18</sup> image from the HWeFA, c. 1946

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<sup>18</sup> This was the only Utility model to be made only in High Wycombe.



Figure 66 High Speed production line at the works of Messrs Furniture Industries Ltd (which was later to be named Ercol). Sideboards in process of assembly on their own separate line, 1952



Courtesy of High Wycombe Furniture Archive



Figure 67 Top Left: Ercol love seat, Top Right: Ercol stacking chair, Bottom Left: Ercol Butterfly chair, Bottom Right: Ercol stool, images from the HWeFA, c. 1950s



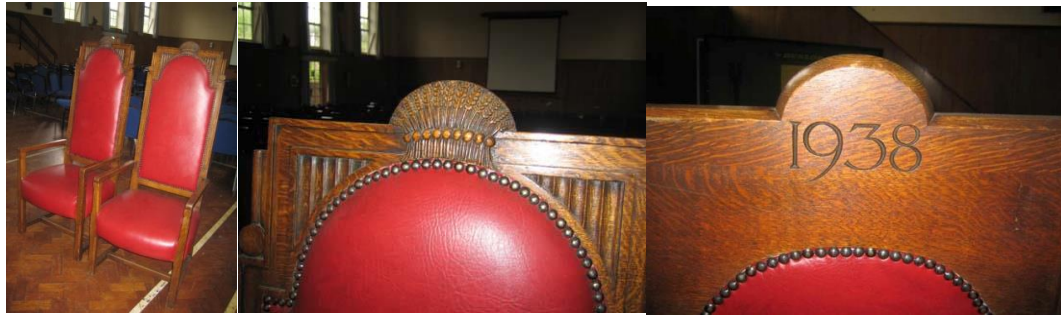


Figure 68 Photographs taken by the author 30 May 2008, Designed and manufactured furniture for Durham Agricultural College, 1938. This is referenced in 'A Furniture Maker' by Ercolani



Figure 69 Diseased Elm Felling, 20th September 1943: Diseased elm trees in the Long Walk at Windsor Castle being sawed into pieces having been felled. Planted by Charles II the two and a half mile long area is being cleared for replanting

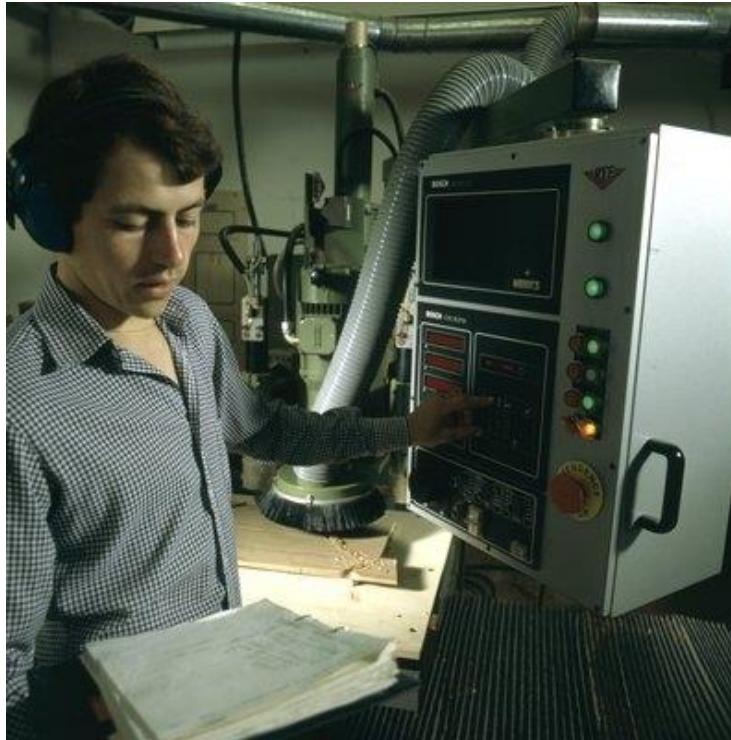


Figure 70 Ercol employee operating the control panel of a CNC machine, c. 1980s



Figure 71 Photograph of the new Ercol premises, 2002



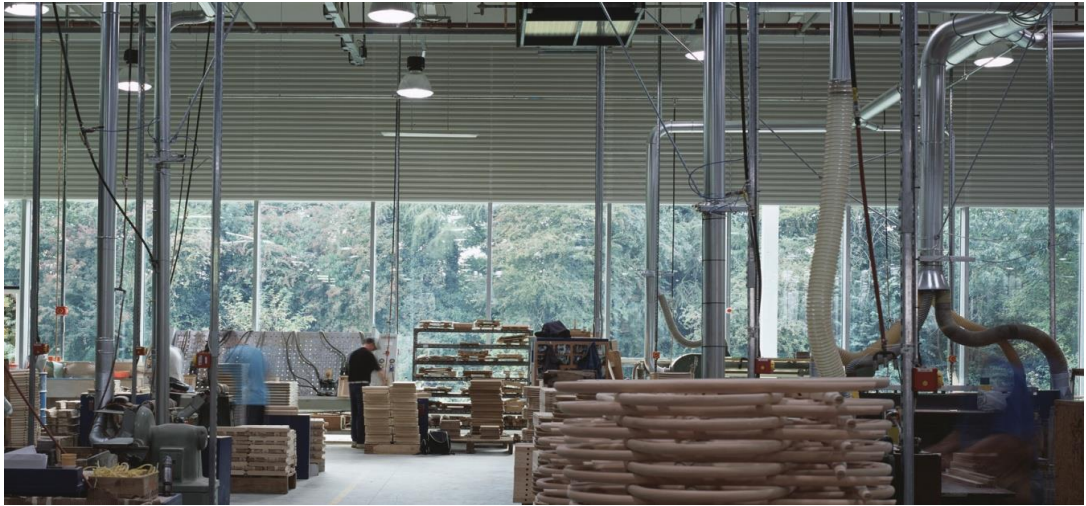


Figure 72 Photograph showing internal image of Ercol Factory, 2002



Figure 73 Ercol products being made in Eastern European factory, c. 2000



Figure 74 Parker's Hepplewhite style chairs in the Aquitania reading room, c. 1913



Figure 75 British Industries Fair Sales Literature, 1931

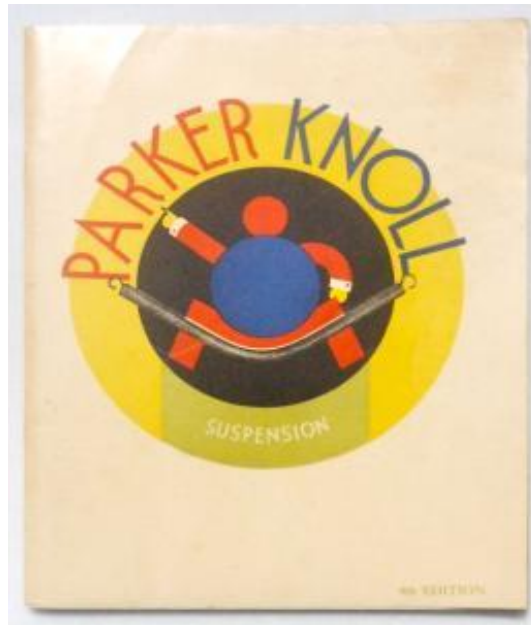


Figure 76 Catalogue cover, Parker Knoll Archive, held at London Metropolitan University, c. 1932



Figure 77 HM King Edward VIII at the BBC sitting in a PK 115, 1935





Figure 78 An interior view, showing manufacture of aircraft parts during the Second World War at Parker Knoll and Sons Ltd, Bellfield Rd, High Wycombe. June 1945

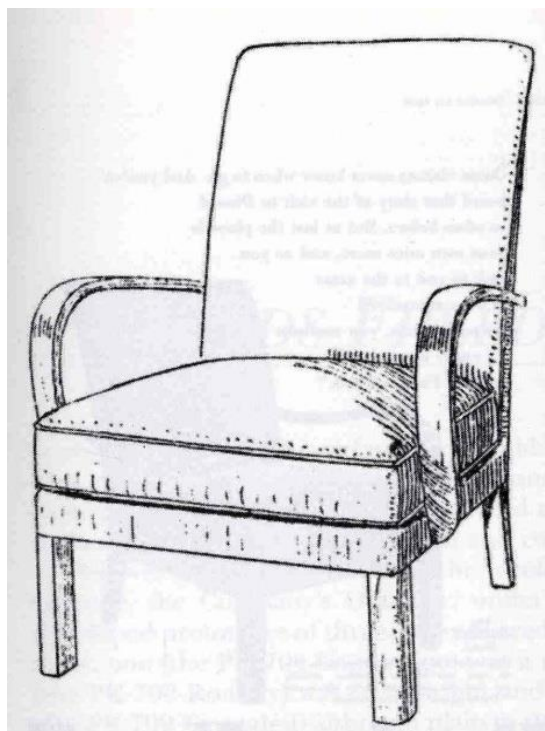
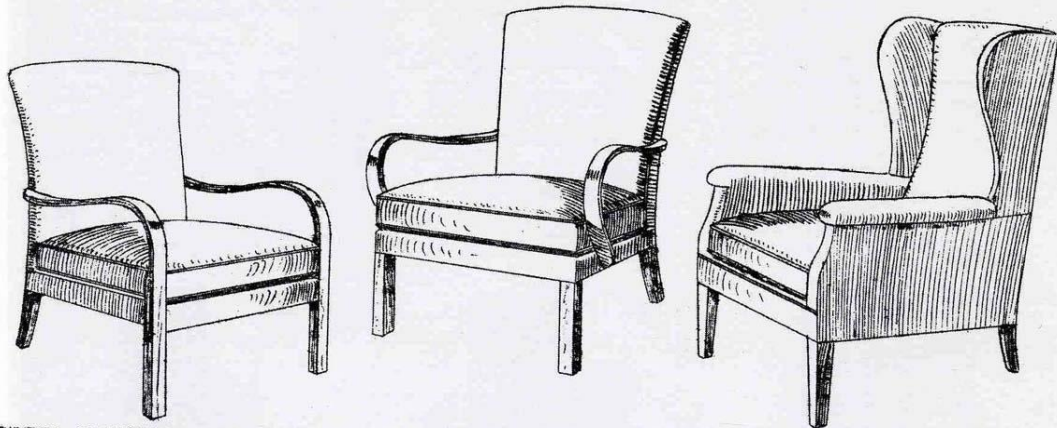


Figure 79 The Famous PK 1450 chair, never photographed for advertisements, 1948

**PARKER-KNOLL**  
REGD TRADE MARK

November 29th 1948.



PK:704. PARKER-KNOLL CHAIR.  
(Utility) in B. Tap.  
RETAIL £7. 13. 6d.  
Circ.G.187.

PK:708. PARKER-KNOLL CHAIR.  
(Utility) in B. Tap.  
RETAIL £8. 8. 0.

PK:709. PARKER-KNOLL CHAIR.  
(Utility) in A. Tap.  
RETAIL £16. 16. 0.  
Prices subject to confirmation.

Figure 80 28 November 1949 broadsheet circulated, when design controls were relaxed

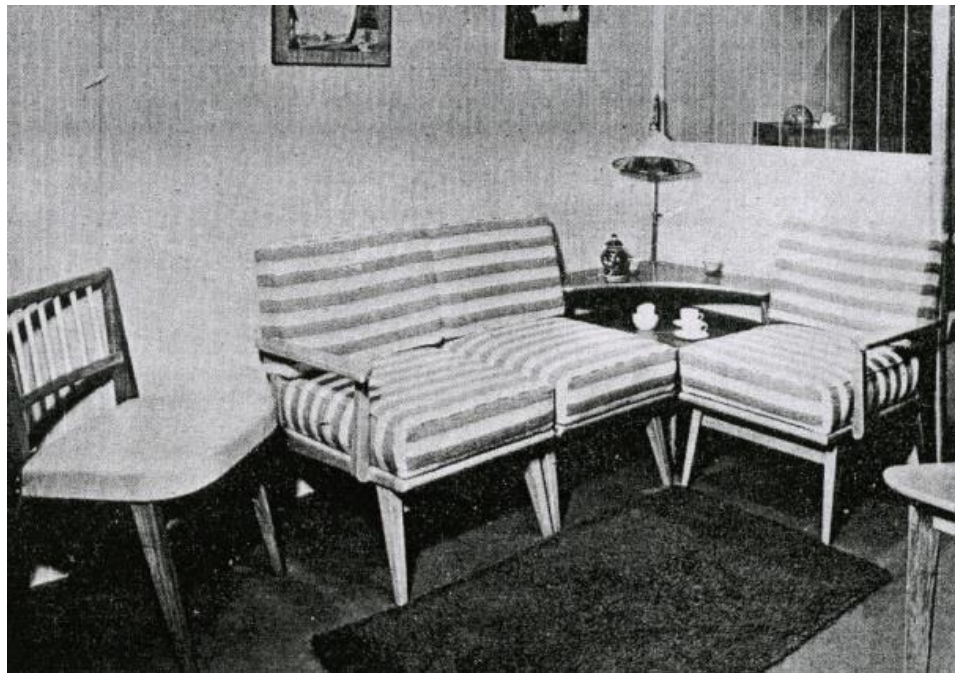


Figure 81 Goodearl Bros., Ltd. Sectional seating with latex foam seat and back cushions, designed by E. L. Clinch M.S.I.A. c. 1950s



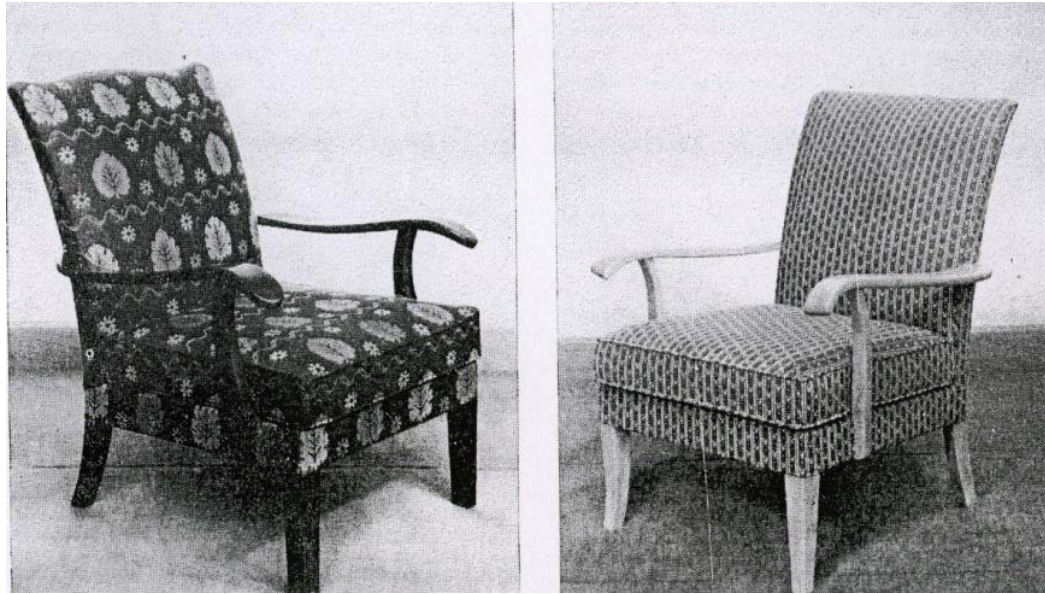


Figure 82 Two examples of Parker Knoll chairs fitted with 'Parkertex' latex foam interior seat cushions, c. 1950s

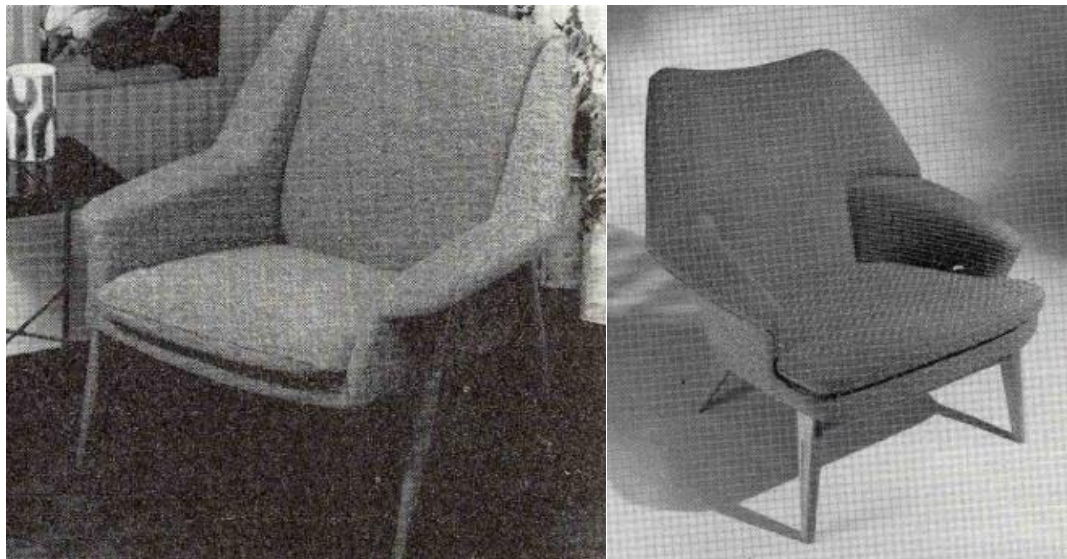


Figure 83 Left: design by Walter Knoll was introduced in 1957 as the Menton PK768 and was accompanied by a Robin Howland design, Right: PK769 Meriden





Figure 84 The Tirano, PK939, c. 1960

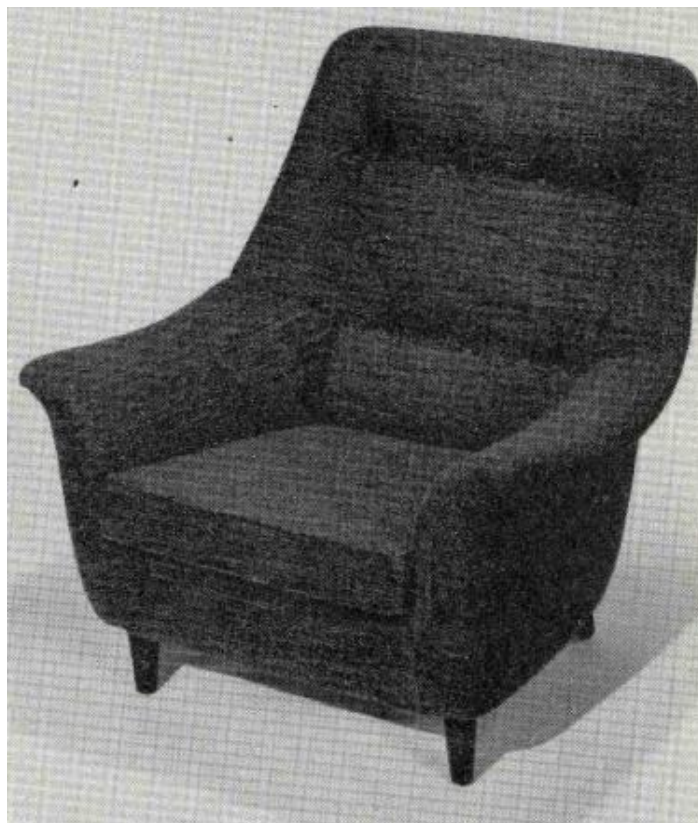


Figure 85 The Novella (seen in production on page 268, figure 207) c. 1960s



Figure 86 Parker Knoll Recliner N30, c. 1966



Figure 87 Dancer & Hearne assembly shop at Penn Street near High Wycombe, 1966





Figure 88 High Wycombe. January 1996 showing Parker Knoll factory prior to the company moving to Chipping Norton



Figure 89 Demolition of Parker Knoll Chipping Norton, c.2004



Figure 90 Photo taken by the author of the site previously Parker Knoll in Chipping Norton, 2008