

### Chapter 3. High Wycombe in the Press

*'Motivation, the will to design and produce beautiful furniture is, and will always be, an inherent feature of Wycombe life and its craftsmen' (Sparkes, 1986).*

National trade journals and local newspaper articles, including *The Cabinet Maker* and *The Bucks Free Press* are used throughout this chapter to offer an insight into what was occurring within the High Wycombe furniture industry at the time of the study. This chapter gives an account of the material sources that refer to High Wycombe and looks especially at the main changes in the industry. There is also extensive coverage of the High Wycombe furniture companies, E. Gomme (indeed there is extensive coverage of this one firm), Ercol and Parker Knoll. This chapter also reflects on the issues reported within these journals and newspapers relating to labour issues, the decline of the industry and reasons for the decline, design and production issues, and education in the furniture industry. Any commentary on the issues of Health and Safety and dust in the furniture industry can be found in Chapter 5.

This chapter addresses the following main aims of the research:

- To provide a better understanding of the changes in the furniture industry of High Wycombe during this time (1952-2002).
- To bring together the work written to date on the High Wycombe furniture industry.
- To identify the reasons behind the decline of the industry.
- To demonstrate High Wycombe's design influence on the UK furniture industry.

High Wycombe was regularly reported in *The Cabinet Maker* in the 1950s with a whole page always set aside for the news of the furniture industry from High Wycombe entitled *High Wycombe News*. Topical news subjects were discussed extensively throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including labour issues and the economic state of the industry.

### 3.1 Skilled Labour Shortage in High Wycombe

The issue of the lack of skilled labour was regularly highlighted in *The Cabinet Maker* as a major problem to the sustainability of the furniture industry in High Wycombe. This issue is by no means new, but it has never been given as a reason in secondary literature for the decline of the industry in High Wycombe:

The factories are full of orders, raw materials are in better supply than for a long time past, while even timber has ceased to cause a headache...there is only one cloud on the horizon, that ever present shortage of skilled labour (Anon., 1950c).

The two reported reasons for this shortage of labour in the 1950s were the acute housing shortage in the area and the pull of the labour force to light industries, especially the light engineering companies entering the labour market. In fact the issue of skilled labour was still being reported throughout the decade. In 1953 there is also reference to the number of people working in the furniture industry:

The problem of ensuring an adequate supply of skilled labour in the future has for some time been causing increasing concern in the local industry...The number of operatives employed in High Wycombe furniture industry has declined from something like 11,000 before the war to the present figure of 7,000 (Anon., 1953e).

The article again went on to reflect that the workforce was joining the engineering companies, and the fact that fathers were not encouraging their sons to join the industry because of short-time and low pay in the industry at that time. In *The Cabinet Maker* 1954, the figures for the industry were still being reiterated and the issues of skilled labour addressed, although the figure it gave for those that worked in the furniture industry before the Second World War as 10,000 and not 11,000 as reported in 1953:

Against the 10,000 people employed in the industry in the High Wycombe area in 1939 there are only 7,000 this year...there is a feeling among people that too many youngsters are going into the distributive and auxiliary trades, and that the productive industries are being starved of skilled workers' (Anon., 1954c).

Little changed with regard to skilled labour issues throughout the 1950s. As *The Cabinet Maker* 16 January 1954 reports, the demand for furniture is high, but this is parallel to the continued difficulties of lack of skilled labour and the difficulties this is having on the future sustainability of the industry:

...increased mechanisation and new methods in the furniture industry has enabled a substantial increase in production compared with pre-war days even with such a

decreased labour force, but the industry cannot afford to continue to lose ground to the newer industries in the area' (Anon., 1954d).

The article explained that recruiting youngsters to the furniture industry was becoming increasingly difficult and by way of encouragement, arrangements were made for schoolboys to visit the furniture factories, few of whom would have otherwise seen them. The same article confirms the importance of the High Wycombe factories in development and improving productivity since the Second World War. It refers to a British Productivity Council report which reviewed productivity in the furniture industry. Out of the twenty factories it looked at, five were from High Wycombe. They were; Birch Ltd, Castle Brothers, Dancer & Hearne Bros Ltd, Furniture Industries Ltd<sup>1</sup> and F. D. Welters Ltd. It reported that output at Birch had increased many times and that there was a general shortage of skilled labour for setting up furniture machinery and that the firm had to train men specifically for the job. Castle Bros had raised its productivity by introducing mechanical handling methods and new plant, and designing to standard carcasses and various components. The increase in productivity at Dancer & Hearne was due to the introduction of new mechanical equipment, new layouts and the application of production control. Furniture Industries had increased productivity with the introduction of a production planning department and F.D. Welters had improved its methods of costing, and handling materials. The issue of design and production is covered more extensively later in this chapter in section 9.4.

A report for the Timber and Plywood Annual in the 1950s was concurring with the industry and suggested that more youngsters were turning their attention to light engineering (Anon, 1952, p.137). In July of 1952, more than half the factories in High Wycombe were on short-time, these fluctuations in working conditions would have increased the uncertainty of youngsters entering into the furniture trade. One challenge that occurred in 1953 was 'to win those several hundred skilled and semi-skilled workers who drifted to other local industries during the months of short-time and uncertainty' (Anon, 1952, p.138).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Edward Tadros, (Ercol chairman and grandson of Lucian R Ercolani) there was a long period of crossover between Furniture Industries Ltd and Ercol Furniture Ltd. For various marketing and accounting reasons both company names were run together for a long time. Over many years Furniture Industries Ltd and Walter Skull Ltd "sold" their furniture to Ercol Furniture Ltd which was the sales and marketing organisation. It became Ercol only by the mid-1990s. Author Interview with Edward Tadros 12 June 2008.

The labour issue would continue to be reported and seemed to be linked directly to the availability of full-time working conditions in the area. High Wycombe reported a 'steady improvement in the labour situation in the High Wycombe area' (Anon., 1954g). The main reason for the problem was reported to be the fear of seasonal unemployment, which had not recently been an issue. In fact in September of that same year there was a trade boom reported in High Wycombe 'Wycombe indeed is as busy as it has ever been' (Anon., 1954h). The 1950s continued with no unemployment and negligible short-time in the Wycombe industry and with overflowing order books, production had been working limited only by the number of skilled labour and factory space available (Anon., 1955d). The boom was put down to the prosperity in British industry, the increase of house building and better transport links, and the effect of the popularity of the television. Wycombe had also paid some attention to the fact that the 'buying public now likes and wants light compact furniture of moderate contemporary line' (Anon., 1955d). But it also noted that many Wycombe firms were still producing the reproduction antique furniture associated with the town.

The demand for skilled labour was emphasised again in the Timber and Plywood Annual. There were vacancies for approximately one thousand furniture operatives in High Wycombe alone (Anon, 1955c). Many of the operatives were reported as not wanting to return to the industry for fear of a repetition of unemployment, reiterating the fact that it was fluctuations in available employment (boom and bust type pattern) in recent memory that led to difficulties in recruitment.

Unfortunately the pattern of lack of skilled labour seemed to repeat itself throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s and indeed was blamed as being an important factor for the closure of many Wycombe firms, as seen in this report in a 1965 *Cabinet Maker*:

Mr Fred Hands president of the High Wycombe and District Furniture Manufacturers Society indicated that it was 'through labour shortage we have lost one or two old-established firms in Wycombe. They just cannot exist' (Anon., 1965).

It was evident that High Wycombe was training apprentices in furniture skills with the factories themselves, as Figure 91 shows. A report in 1964 for *The Times* newspaper (Anon, 1964b, pp.51-52) recorded Frank Glenister, managing director,

stating that there was a lack of young executive recruits and a problem with apprentices, young men were reluctant to take up polishing and other ‘messy’ trades. The report went on to say that this lack of take-up could be down to the uncertain working conditions and hours.

Finding and keeping skilled craftsmen was one of the reasons attributed to the closure of Nicholls & Janes Ltd (Anon., 1968c).

In addition to the material from *The Cabinet Maker*, an interesting letter was found in a 1971 brochure from the High Wycombe Company E.M.F. Brown. The letter is from H. J. Mullet who had just completed 60 years at this factory:

What a pity to think that soon all the best handmade work will be unobtainable as no boys today are prepared to learn the handmade trade, in fact I have personally taught three lads and they have made first-class craftsman and then left to earn about three times as much on mass produced items, such a pity after all the trouble and time teaching them, so I say to all people who own the good handmade chairs, look after them and treasure them as I think they will soon be unobtainable (Mullet, 1971).

This letter reiterates the issue of employment in the furniture industry and keeping workers in the trade. It was a problem which was to continue as the developments in technology and machinery increased. The ‘craft skills’ that were taught from generation to generation were to become almost obsolete as products had to be manufactured quicker and more efficiently for the company to survive. Bill Tuffney, in an article in *The Bucks Free Press*, recalls working in the furniture industry for 65 years. Bill preferred working in the old days, when everything was done by hand. He said ‘mass production has ruined the furniture trade.’ He was horrified by the shoddy work which passed for furniture (Brookling, 1974).

Alarmingly, the issue of skilled labour shortages was still being reported on in the early 1970s, ‘shortage of skilled craftsmen in key posts is still handicapping production in some factories...Wycombe is the town with too many jobs and too few craftsmen’ (Anon., 1972). By 1988 the problem was acute in High Wycombe:

Skill shortages in the furniture industry are bad and look likely to get worse...The centre of the furniture industry High Wycombe is very short of skilled labour (Anon, 1988a).

One of the final articles relating to the issue of skill shortages seems to be in 1988, when *The Cabinet Maker* carried out a survey of the labour issues in the furniture industry in the UK, contacting regional association secretaries. The findings were similar to issues that had been identified during the previous 40 years:

Skill shortages in the furniture industry are bad and more likely to get worse. The centre of the furniture industry, High Wycombe, came out worst of the survey...Already pay in High Wycombe is well above the national rate - £180 per week, as opposed to £118 – but still local companies cannot get the right staff (Anon., 1988).

This section has shown that the employment issues across the High Wycombe furniture industry have been a significant factor in the decline of the industry and factory closures. This has not been reported at all in previous secondary literature and is therefore a new finding in identifying the reasons behind the decline of the industry. One report does illustrate the importance of training and the fact that a surviving Wycombe company ‘Greengate’, put such a high value on training reiterates its significance to the survival of the company. Peter Hearne, the owner is quoted as saying ‘we spend of lot of money on training. We train the individual to do the whole job rather than piece parts, although there are specialist sewers and cutters’ Anon. (1993b). The quality of Wycombe work was highlighted in an article in *The Bucks Free Press* on the carving work carried out by Frank Hudson.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that he was invited to Boston to run courses because ‘craftsmen of his calibre are few and far between’ (Anon, 1975c). But both of these sources could be said to be primary despite their late date and do not detract from the significance of these findings, which had not been picked up on by Mayes and Rattue. This concurs with David James<sup>3</sup> recollections of E.Gomme in Chapter 2, that Wycombe was getting too expensive and recruitment was getting difficult therefore the closure of upholstery work in Wycombe followed.

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Hudson’s image can be seen in Appendix M13. Frank Hudson founded the company Frank Hudson Furniture in 1947 and was highly regarded as a master-carver of his time. The company is still located in High Wycombe.

<sup>3</sup> HWFA interview with David James, 8 June 2007. David James worked at G-Plan, Glenisters, Ministry of Works and was an upholstery lecturer at High Wycombe college until he retired in 2004.

### 3.2 Decline of the Furniture Industry in High Wycombe

As seen in the previous section of this chapter, the 1950s started with good reports of the industry's order books for furniture. But as discussed, the industry showed a cyclical picture, with *The Cabinet Maker* in 1951 reporting that some Wycombe companies were 'feeling the effect of a sudden and drastic drop in the public demand for furniture' (Anon., 1951c). Later that year it reported the situation was 'not far short of alarming' (Anon., 1951a). With short-time recorded in 1952, and then a trade boom in 1954 and into 1955 the furniture industry in High Wycombe was indeed an unpredictable place to work.

High Wycombe was the only furniture-making town that was given regular and extensive coverage in *The Cabinet Maker*, and the highs and lows of the local industry were reported weekly. It was also reported that the perceived view of the UK furniture industry after the Second World War was summed up in an interview with an American buyer, that the UK 'have reproduction furniture, no doubt, and Utility, but not good enough neither in quality nor design' (Anon., 1950d). This was not a great incentive for an industry which was struggling to survive.

The closure of furniture factories was first reported in 1953, which fits in with the reported short-time hours in 1952. For the smaller factories this would not have been surprising, as these had come into existence with the need for production of Utility furniture and had no history of furniture making. But the larger factories closing in that year was alarming and *The Cabinet Maker* reiterated this:

We hope that we are approaching the end of these catastrophes - for catastrophes they are. The industry cannot afford to lose old friends, and the country still needs their products...Today it has a brighter future than ever (Anon., 1954f).

The reasons why the closures started is unclear in the reporting. Some suggest that the sons of the owners no longer wanted to take over the family business and they therefore just closed down and were not sold as a going concern, whilst others saw more advantages in other industries. The first mention in *The Cabinet Maker* over concerns of lower priced imports seemed to be in October 1956 in an article entitled, 'Wycombe concern about cut-price imports'. The imports were from Eastern Germany and the Iron Curtain countries. Lucian R. Ercolani was quoted as saying:

It was not fully appreciated that timber today cost ten times the pre-war price. The countries now exporting to Britain were obtaining their timber for probably one-third of the price the British manufacturers had to pay, and they were not paying wages at the same rate as here (Anon., 1956d).

The furniture companies were already thinking about other ways to sustain the industry. Allan Janes, secretary of the High Wycombe and District Furniture Manufacturers Society, said 'we in Wycombe have to keep the lead in design, production methods and salesmanship and in maintaining quality and value for money' (Anon., 1957b). The improvements in production methods were increasing at this time and the use of semi-skilled labour increased too.

The beginning of the 1960s saw the start of trading difficulties, with 168 redundancies announced at E. Gomme (Anon., 1961a). There was a huge necessity to meet the challenge of competition. At this time the High Wycombe furniture industry no longer had a page spread set aside for a '*High Wycombe Review*'. Instead it was included in the more general outlook of the national furniture industry. This seems to imply that High Wycombe was no longer the powerful furniture town it had been previously. *The Cabinet Maker* did though mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the High Wycombe Furniture Manufacturers Society with a '*High Wycombe Review*', a 30-page spread. It emphasised that many High Wycombe companies invested greatly in modernisation and faced the challenge of the 1970s with cautious optimism, well equipped to meet the age of automation. It included the images of many High Wycombe manufacturers, (Figures 92 and 93 highlight the modern factory layout of the day) that have not been published in other secondary material.

Reports continued that High Wycombe would have to work short-time in the future, as the 'cut-back in the office and other building programme, bringing a marked reduction in the number of big furnishing contracts' (Anon., 1966c). Short-time work in the High Wycombe area substantially increased into 1967 (Anon., 1967f).

The decline of the industry in High Wycombe was cemented when in September 1967 it was reported that for the first time in history that the numbers of workers employed in High Wycombe's 'staple' industry of furniture making had been overtaken by the number employed in the local engineering industries (8,900 in



furniture and 9,700 in engineering, two years previously it was 9,400 in furniture and 9150 in engineering) (Anon., 1967c). *The Cabinet Maker* in May 1967 predicted the decline of the industry:

If past trends continue we can expect the total number of firms to decline substantially. Over the period 1950-66 the number of firms producing domestic furniture declined by one half. The next fifteen years could see a similar further reduction (Anon., 1967b).

It should be noted here that High Wycombe was not alone in its decline. By 1969 Harris Lebus (studied by Kirkham) had left Tottenham signalling the decline of the Lea Valley furniture industry. This momentous closure was captured in the union reports of the following year:

The General Secretary reported that he had been advised by the Board of Harris Lebus that a final decision would be taken on the day of our Executive Meeting as to whether the Tottenham plant should be closed down or some other arrangement made. Since the Executive had been in session a report had been received that a decision had been taken to close down (NUFTO, 1970a).

The Lebus site was eventually acquired by the Greater London Council which was responsible for the demolition of the factory and the erection of a large housing estate on the cleared land (Lewis, 1999). The reasons were reported to range from cheap imports, to the changing pattern of retail sales, which began to move away from traditional high street furniture shops to the new superstores. Ironically several of these new furniture warehouses have now begun to occupy the space on industrial estates where furniture factories once stood (Lewis, 1999). As discussed earlier in this thesis, for the purpose of this study, images of furniture factories have been visually recorded prior to demolition due to the re-development of the High Wycombe area. (See Appendix F.)

The changes in the furniture industry at this time were also being reported in 'Design' magazine. 'Retailers of cheap, mass produced, self-assembly furniture have captured almost 70 percent of the UK furniture market, the furniture for sale at an MFI showroom is the kind of caricatures that would appeal to a Sindy or Barbie doll' (Brown, 1986). Brown reported that not much more than a decade ago furniture was invariably the biggest financial headache for home buyers after the cost of purchasing the bricks and mortar. But now companies such as MFI were selling very affordable furniture.

The national picture in the 1980s was one of gloom; John Prescott MP wrote in the FTAT that unemployment was worse in the 1980s than in the 1930s. He reported on the record unemployment and the over two million jobs lost in manufacturing alone since 1979 (Prescott, 1987). *The Bucks Free Press* reiterates this loss, looking back to the ‘Good Old Days’. Indeed the good old days would have been a ten hour day; working in poorly lit workshops and toiling at rough benches, with dust from hand used sand paper filling the air. There was no Health and Safety at Work Act then, no national labour agreement on pay and conditions, and only primitive fire precautions. But generations of hardworking undemanding craftsmen were bred whose skill in the fashioning of wood laid the foundation of Wycombe’s reputation as ‘England’s Furniture Town’ (Burrows, 1980).

This section has described the importance of the furniture industry in High Wycombe and its prominence in *The Cabinet Maker* and other journals during the post war period. The decline of the industry in High Wycombe was evident and *The Cabinet Maker* reports factory closures and redundancies, and blames cheap imports and labour rates as deciding factors.

### **3.3 Developments in the Furniture Industry**

The advancements in production and mechanisation being made in some of the High Wycombe furniture factories was being reported in the press, as well as the developments in advertising by some furniture companies. A report in the Timber and Plywood Annual, 1950, suggested that in spite of the development of important new centres of the furniture industry in many other parts of the country, High Wycombe kept abreast of the times and remained pre-eminently ‘The Furniture Town’ (Anon, 1950e, p.108). The furniture industry was reported as being smaller and more compact than before the war, but was now better organised and more completely productive than ever before.

In 1958 an article giving a review of the High Wycombe furniture industry confirms that High Wycombe ‘has adopted the modern methods of production and marketing, as well as keeping pace with design changes, without losing its traditional reputation for quality and craftsmanship’ (Anon., 1958b). It goes on to reaffirm that due to the arrival of the other industries described above ‘the furniture industry is no longer

such a dominating source of employment as it was in the pre-war days but it remains vitally important to the town' (Anon., 1958b). It goes on to map out the decline of numbers working in the industry and the declining furniture factories in High Wycombe:

There are at present 125 firms compared with around 200 in pre-war days and the number of operatives is down from 10,000 to 8,500. By far the biggest single firm in the Wycombe Society is E. Gomme Ltd...with over 1,500 employees (Anon., 1958b).

Interestingly, the review highlights the firms of E. Gomme's, Furniture Industries (Ercol) and Parker Knoll as enterprising companies, using national advertising. These three companies 'typify so much of the enterprise and adaptability to be found in Wycombe' (Anon., 1958b). The article reaffirms the fact that Parker Knoll 'pioneered national advertising in pre-war days' (Anon., 1958b), a first reference to this fact found in primary sources other than Parker Knoll's own literature. The article does though go on to say that 'there has been nothing in the furniture business to match the scale and spectacular success of G-Plan advertising by Gomme's.' (Anon., 1958b) The article praises the change from traditionally made furniture that the company was renowned for, to furniture that could be affordable piece by piece for those furnishing homes after the war. It indeed broke down the prejudices of most of the retail trade against this direct appeal by the manufacturer to the public. Ercol also carried out national advertising in its 'ERCOLion' name (seen in Figure 94 advertisement of Bergere and Windsor ranges of furniture). Nevertheless the article reaffirms 'the remarkable achievement in design represented by its presentation of a range of furniture in the modern idiom based on the traditional Windsor chair' (Anon., 1958b).

Parker Knoll was reported as using national advertising because of its pioneering work in the field of upholstery, and the fact that it indeed pioneered the use of adverts in the 1930s, with its 'Working Man' registered trade mark showing an animated figure of a man bouncing on a spring (discussed in Chapter 2, Figure 76). Indeed this patented springing influenced the upholstery trade across the world. The article describes the push away from the deep stuffing and bulky upholstery to the 'lighter type and more compact chair but which retained the essential features of comfort and ease' Parker Knoll attained. In fact it was reported in 1958 that High

Wycombe decided to start up again, since the pre-war, its 'Wycombe Month', in which furniture factories and retailers in High Wycombe opened its doors in the first week in September to the public and retailer, see Figure 95.

The above section demonstrates High Wycombe's strength in the furniture industry and its dominance in terms of pioneering the use of advertising. It gives clear examples of some High Wycombe companies being at the forefront of national advertising campaigns, and the positive effect this had on business.

### **3.4 Design & Exhibitions**

At the beginning of the 1950s *The Cabinet Maker* brought attention to the contribution High Wycombe furniture companies made to the Festival of Britain in 1951. (This was a subject discussed in some detail in the Literature Review.) The Wycombe-made chair seen in Figure 96 was accepted by the Council of Industrial Design to be shown at the Festival. It was described 'as designed on simple clean lines, of sound construction and gives a maximum degree of comfort' (Anon., 1951d). *The Cabinet Maker* went on to describe it as the ultimate development of the Windsor chair and provides an excellent illustration of the strides made by the Wycombe chair industry on which the prestige and importance of the town had been built.

Design issues continued to be reported and highlighted in *The Cabinet Maker*. In an article written in 1964, Eric Rose, secretary of the High Wycombe & District Furniture Manufacturers Society stated:

It is high time we ceased these stupid design-copying and price cutting excursions and all concentrated on producing well-designed, good quality furniture, so that the public will look specifically for Wycombe furniture (Anon., 1964e).

Good quality, beautifully produced, pieces of furniture were what Ercol Furniture Ltd were aspiring to. Lucian R. Ercolani showed passion, whether indeed he meant it, when he was reported to have said at the Association of Master Upholsterers in London, 'individuality in design and quality should always come before price...I, myself have never made furniture to make money, but I have made money to make furniture (Anon., 1964d). Indeed in an early review of an exhibition at Earls Court

*The Cabinet Maker* February 1955 reported that it thought this furniture (Figure 97) by Furniture Industries Ltd (Ercol) was ‘some of the loveliest furniture in the exhibition’ (Anon., 1955a).

The issue of design and particularly contemporary design was reported in the very early editions of *The Cabinet Maker* in the 1950s. *The Cabinet Maker* November 1950 edition reported on the conflicting opinions of the industry relating to contemporary design. David Joel had been designing contemporary furniture since the First World War, ‘when the younger generation began to rebel against their homes being an exact copy of the homes of their parents’ (Anon., 1950b). *The Cabinet Maker* reported that Joel’s opinion was that the old fashioned ‘Jacobean’ style of furniture was produced to hide a multitude of sins, as the dark, heavy staining covered poor workmanship. Joel went on to say that the superb furniture of that time was suited to the noble surroundings, and that the modern home required understated, clean contemporary designs. The public though were still buying ornate reproduction, and Joel tried to educate the public:

Cast away all furniture which is bespattered with blobs, let him go all contemporary, use his shop windows, let him display his contemporary furniture and advertise it and then let him see the result...contemporary design is not a gamble, it is a religion and in our present day economy and setting there is nothing to take its place. It is clean, honest and inexpensive (Anon., 1950b).

The argument against the development of contemporary design was that the public could not be forced to buy what they did not want to and that the figures backed this up. Discussions relating to the public’s attitude to Utility furniture in the Literature Review confirm these thoughts. *The Cabinet Maker* continued to discuss the issue of what the public wanted into 1951, with an article written by Angus Maude entitled ‘Furniture and the Public’. Maude discussed the English taste in furniture and highlighted the necessity for ‘quality’ to be an essential attribute to furniture buying; ‘is it properly made...make it plain and solid and make it well’ (Maude, 1951). Maude’s article set a challenge to the furniture trade: that it should continue using wood as the public appreciated the ‘pleasant qualities of wax polished wood, and its capabilities for mellowing with age’ (Maude, 1951). Many High Wycombe companies manufactured reproduction copies of furniture to various standards. Nicholls and Janes, a family furniture company in High Wycombe was one such firm

that produced high quality reproduction furniture. Nicholls and Janes used the newly written books on antique furniture to produce an antique that was incredibly genuine. He says that he used these books 'as it told the faker just what they were likely to look for and to take extra care with these points'. He justified this by saying they were actually 'public benefactors...think how far the genuine would have gone round and the jealousy aroused among those unable to obtain any' (Janes, 1951).

However many other High Wycombe furniture firms were leading the way in new designs. As discussed the Festival of Britain showcased some of these new designs, although the furniture was all unlabelled and therefore anonymous, this could be linked to the ironic fact that High Wycombe was worried about competitors copying their designs. High Wycombe found itself praised significantly because it organised its own 'exhibition' for the Festival of Britain, in the Town Hall in High Wycombe. Figure 98 shows an image of the exhibition committee and includes educators and businessmen from the town.

High Wycombe was described 'as the centre of the industry, for nowhere else was the making of furniture the staple occupation of a town, nor can any other district of comparable population be found which has so many furniture factories within its boundaries' (Anon., 1951e). The article went on to describe the factors that gave Wycombe goods their first-class reputation:

That Wycombe furniture is of the best has long gone without saying; equally so its manufacturers have always been noted for giving a square and honest deal; What however is valued the most by Wycombe furniture men, is the preservation of the family tradition, son following father into the industry (Anon., 1951e).

Furniture displayed at the High Wycombe festival included Utility, contemporary, and reproduction furniture, as well as upholstered and furniture for schools, offices, nurseries, royal and presidential palaces and ocean liners. Figures 99-101 show the anonymous furniture, although Figure 99 is clearly Ercol. The manufacture of these sideboards can be seen earlier in Figure 66. Other images from the exhibition can be found in Appendix L, Figures L1-L4. The furniture displayed at the High Wycombe festival demonstrates that the traditional reproduction furniture the town was renowned for was being manufactured, but that it was also designing and making more modern pieces.

The Council of Industrial Design Conference 1953 was reported on extensively in *The Cabinet Maker*. The furniture industry was having great difficulty recruiting practical designers. In the discussions on contemporary design it was still apparent that within both furniture retail and manufacturing there was still uncertainties about the future of contemporary design. S. W. Perring, a retailer, expressed concern that the public still wanted a traditional product because the design of contemporary furniture was not in their price range. Contemporary was a 'thing of the future' and he urged for better designers; 'if only we can have good design in the trade I think that the future of contemporary furniture is assured' (Anon., 1953a). At this time Gordon Russell described design as something that was not talked about before the war, but 'good design is an essential part of quality. It is essential to ensure that the article does its job well and makes the best use of scarce raw materials and labour...a really well designed article should give pleasure in use' (Russell, 1954).

Later the same year The Council of Industrial Design organised a conference relating to furniture design in Marlow, near High Wycombe. It was attended by furniture retailers from all over the UK, with visits to many High Wycombe companies including E. Gomme, Parker Knoll, Furniture Industries and William Birch (Anon., 1954i). It can perhaps be inferred that the Design Council was confident that High Wycombe was producing good quality, well designed pieces of furniture, for the renowned furniture town to be chosen to host such an event.

A report in *The Times Review of Industry and Technology* (Anon, 1966b, p.18) explained that the importance of design was seen as a priority in the furniture industry. It claimed that some of the smaller manufacturers, with the help of designers, seemed to have taken the lead in this and the common criticism that British furniture was old fashioned, dowdy, lacking style and unadventurous in design, particularly when compared with Scandinavian furniture, was no longer as true as it had been.

This section has demonstrated High Wycombe's ability to exhibit fine quality and well-designed pieces of furniture at the prestigious Festival of Britain. It also shows Wycombe's own drive and determination at organising its own Festival, to showcase both traditional and contemporary furniture pieces. A number of High Wycombe

companies were therefore producing furniture that was showcasing contemporary design and the town was reported at this time to be the ‘centre of the industry’. The dominance of Wycombe in the 1950s was apparent.

### 3.5 Threat of imports

As mentioned earlier in section 3.2, furniture imports from Eastern Germany and the Iron Curtain countries were given as a reason for factory closures in 1956. The lower cost of labour and materials was a concern for the industry. Thirty years later *The Cabinet Maker* reported ‘The Chinese are coming!’ The UK had been selected as a ‘test market’ for oriental furniture in Europe by a company who were already doing \$30m worth of business in the US’ (Anon., 1988b). Chinese imports were not seen as a threat to the furniture industry, only that they would penetrate the lower end of the market:

Small reproduction pieces, garden furniture, folding chairs, stools...are on their way to the UK agents...This does not mean that Britain will be flooded with furniture in the same way as Chinese slippers and knickers...The products coming over here are destined for the lower end of the market (Anon., 1988b).

The rise of IKEA was discussed in Chapter 1 and was the other main foreign competitor to be reported on in *The Cabinet Maker* at this time. The threat to UK retailers and manufacturers though seemed to be small at the outset. *The Cabinet Maker* reported on how the furniture retailers were not worried about the arrival of IKEA and how it had benefited their own profits, claiming it was ‘the biggest non-event of the century’ (Anon., 1988f). Both Habitat and MFI also rejected any suggestion that IKEA would hurt them. The MFI Assistant Managing Director commented; ‘There is a misconception about IKEA. They are not furniture retailers. A minority of their business is actually done in furniture’ (Anon., 1988f). Surprisingly, the only person reported as having worries was Birger Lund, IKEA’s Managing Director:

IKEA are getting used to the peculiarities of a British public which is rather unfamiliar with buying furniture, never mind modern furniture sold in the unique IKEA self-service way (Anon., 1988f).

It did not take long for the British public to warm to the IKEA way and *The Cabinet Maker* goes on to report a common response from consumers regarding IKEA; ‘if only a British Company had done it’ (Anon., 1988f). The IKEA flat pack policy and



bulky items delivered in less than a week was something new for the buying public, and as Figure 102 shows, the public flocked to store openings in their hundreds.

This section has shown that the furniture industry was not unduly worried about the threat of imports, or *The Cabinet Maker* reported very little about it if they were.

### **3.6 Commentary on Key Furniture Companies**

*The Cabinet Maker* and other press reports over the years captured many of the furniture designs of the larger furniture companies in High Wycombe including E. Gomme, Ercol and Parker Knoll. It is evident that E. Gomme and in particular its G-Plan range were worthy of extensive coverage. The following section chronologically captures the reporting of E. Gomme throughout the 1950s to the closure of its High Wycombe factory in 1992. Chapter 2 covered the history of the company and this section emphasises the importance of this company to British furniture design. Additional images can be found in Appendix L.

#### **3.6.1 E. Gomme (G-Plan)**

Leslie Gomme referred to the Utility scheme as a godsend to the furniture industry. He is quoted in the Design Journal of 1965 to putting the huge success of the G-Plan range down to the government controlled designs during the Second World War:

It opened our eyes to what could be done when a limited number of designs are produced in large quantities. When freedom of design was restored, there was an immediate return to the proliferation of designs of the pre-war era. Our profits dropped slightly and we realised that we were unable to utilise our factories efficiently because of the multiplicity of designs that the trade demanded. So we asked ourselves, Can we, by some new marketing technique, restore the mass-production efficiency of the Utility days? (Jay, 1965a, pp.50-51).

What E. Gomme did was to produce one range of furniture and launch an advertising campaign on what for the furniture industry was an unprecedented scale. *The Cabinet Maker* was hugely supportive of the first G-Plan range of furniture designed in 1953 by Vic Wilkins for E. Gomme. Many images were published of the Brandon range, and the popularity of this range of furniture is apparent as celebrities were keen to be associated with the brand (see Figure 103 and Appendix M, Figures M1-

M5). *The Cabinet Maker* also reported on the increased production at E. Gomme by publishing interior photographs of the factory which had not been previously seen in secondary sources (Figure 104 show the modern production facilities).

The first G-Plan showroom was opened in Hanover Square London in January 1957 (Figure 105). A number of room-sets were displayed and advice was given to the public on purchasing furniture. G-Plan furniture was indeed a brand of furniture that the public were buying and that the trade press were supporting.

*The Cabinet Maker* reported the growth of G-Plan in the late 1950s, which reflects the favourable reporting of E. Gomme in the 1950s in Chapter 2. New models were reviewed that were coming onto the market including this beautifully elegant dining chair (Figure 106). The respect *The Cabinet Maker* had for E. Gomme could be summed up at the time with this wonderful quote:

The phenomenal success of G-Plan furniture has long ceased to make us wonder and instead we marvel at the ingenuity and skill with which the manufacturers, E. Gomme Ltd succeed in maintaining interest in it and the high standard of quality and design which continue (Anon., 1959a).

Into the 1960s *The Cabinet Maker* continued to create excitement as G-Plan new models were launched, with the Limba<sup>4</sup> range. At this time things started to change for G-Plan as the public were not so desperate for furniture and became more selective (Heal and Hyman, 2007). The Limba range designed by Leslie Dandy did not excite the public as it did the trade press. E. Gomme thought it would improve its delivery times by manufacturing to stock and this proved to be a costly mistake.

The following year, 1961, *The Cabinet Maker* reported the formation of Gomme Holdings Ltd, which marketed G-Plan designs across Europe and further afield. G-Plan in 1961 accounted for 5 percent of the total of Britain's furniture export, the largest being to Sweden (Anon., 1961b).

The introduction of a Scandinavian look, the G-Plan Danish Designs (Figure 107, as also seen in Figure 57 in Chapter 2) were reported on in 1962, commissioned from

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<sup>4</sup> Limba Range - honey coloured Limba from Africa, This range was not a success for G-Plan and failed to sell. This apparently led to the trade catch-phrase 'lumbered with Limba' ref: Basil Hyman, Steven Braggs, page 78, *The G-Plan Revolution*, Booth-Clibborn 2007.

Danish designer Ib Kofod-Larsen. Larsen went on to design furniture throughout the 1960s for G-Plan but as discussed in the earlier chapter, not many of his designs went into full scale production. He did though, introduce teak as a successful timber. Leslie Dandy<sup>5</sup> recalls the designs of Larsen in an interview, stating that the ‘Danish design dining set by Ib Kofod-Larsen attracted much press attention. It was launched in 1962 but the scale was wrong for English homes.’ According to Dandy a few hundred sets were made, and it was the Brasilia range designed by Vic Wilkins, a sort of English take of the Danish style which really succeeded. In an interview by the author with Roger Bennett,<sup>6</sup> (a designer for G-Plan), he described his huge admiration for Larsen and for his ‘great’ designs. Bennett joined G-Plan as a designer at this very difficult time, ‘when it was really down’. Bennett, the designer of the Quadrille range (Figure 108 shows a much more traditional design), is recognised for saving G-Plan with a range of furniture the public liked.

*The Cabinet Maker* reported on the relocation of the upholstery department of E. Gomme to a disused cotton mill in Nelson, Lancashire (Figure 109, which shows assembly, cutting and packing departments). This is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, with references to redundancies at High Wycombe. Redundancies at G-Plan were reported in the NUFTO union minutes as far back as the 1960s. They reported that G-Plan employees found out about the redundancies through journals such as *The Cabinet Maker*. The union regretted the absence of guidance from the Head Office in regard to redundancy at E. Gomme’s ‘but the union informed them that they were only aware of redundancies after the event through trade press reports’ (NUFTO, 1960b).

The Fresco range was discussed in Chapter 2 as being the most successful range of teak G-Plan furniture in 1967. In the 1970s G-Plan decided to return to the more traditional designs. It introduced its mahogany ranges and used different timbers with a ‘traditional feel’ (seen in Figure 110). The article reflected the fact that trading had been difficult in the late 1970s and that it was likely to continue into the 1980s, but despite the grim trading conditions E. Gomme said ‘its new ranges could not have been welcomed more enthusiastically’ (Anon., 1980a). In fact a poll at this

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<sup>5</sup> Author interview with Leslie Dandy, 9 January 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with Roger Bennett, 10 June 2008.

time showed that G-Plan was recognised by more furniture buyers than any other brand in Britain (Anon., 1979c). It was reported in *Thames Valley Business* (Anon., 1980b) that G-Plan had taken ‘a brave stand’ by launching three new ranges and keeping prices at the previous year’s levels, as most local firms had introduced short-time working and redundancies.

The traditional approach to furniture design continued into the 1980s, and in 1982 *The Cabinet Maker* reported on several new additions to the existing G-Plan ranges as well as new models. An example is shown in Figure 111. As reported in Chapter 2, the middle of the 1980s really was the beginning of the end for G-Plan. Leslie Gomme stepped down from senior management and Leslie Dandy,<sup>7</sup> senior designer, retired. Dandy felt ‘it was time to leave when G-Plan bought a laminating machine from Germany which finished off the wood quickly, but with very little quality’. A management buyout and then being taken over by Christie Tyler<sup>8</sup> were all signs of G-Plan diminishing.

*The Bucks Free Press* reported in 1981 that it took up to two years to develop a piece of furniture at E. Gomme’s from the time the design team began work on the idea till it is shown to the public. It went on to say that ‘good furniture of today, using quality materials, will be the antiques of tomorrow’ (Waschauer, 1981). Derek Sanger, of the Furniture Manufacturers Society, believed the quality of the industry in High Wycombe made it very strong. But with 350 redundancies at G-Plan in Nelson and with the closure of the factory there, the 1980s were not looking good for the furniture industry.

In 1986 *The Cabinet Maker* reported the fact that E. Gomme had lost their way and that they ‘were caught short by the depths of the recession which came in the early 1980s’. The article suggested that its brand name was still one of the best known in the industry but ‘its image had become fuddy-duddy: middle of the road stuff that Mum and Dad had’ (Anon., 1986e). The trade was also negative in representing G-Plan as having ‘dreary design, discounting and prolonged delivery dates’ (Anon.,

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<sup>7</sup> HWFA interview with Leslie Dandy 9 January 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Christie-Tyler was founded in 1941 and is still one of the leading furniture companies in the UK.

1986e). Redundancies followed with slowing down of investment in machinery. G-Plan was continuing to hope that the future would improve:

Our design philosophy is to broaden our umbrella on price and style ...and to increase G-Plan's appeal to a younger age group...we want to recreate the impression that G-Plan is smart and fashionable as well as practicable (Anon., 1986e).

The company continued with recollections to the past and launched its 'Traditions' collection in 1988 (the name being at odds with the image it was trying to portray to the younger age group but in keeping with 1980s heritage style) see Figure 112.

The late 1980s and the 1990s did not get any brighter for G-Plan, and redundancy announcements were common. No longer was G-Plan getting the page or double page spread it had done in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1990 June issue of *The Cabinet Maker*, G-Plan sat alongside many other furniture manufacturers (Figure 113). *The Bucks Free Press* reported 'the end of an era in High Wycombe's furniture industry' in 1986, with news that the Gomme family was selling its 88 year old company (Anon., 1986b). Leslie Gomme and Geoffrey Gomme (his cousin) supported a £11.9 million management buy-out offer. The furniture industry tradition of sons, grandsons and great grandsons following in their ancestors footsteps was on the way out (Anon., 1986b). *The Bucks Free Press* also reported on the closure of Glenisters, after 151 years of furniture making in the town. The closure of Glenisters was 'the sign of a very ill wind for the industry' (Chatfield, 1990).

Wage cuts and more redundancies were reported in 1991 and in 1992 *The Cabinet Maker* reported the closure of the High Wycombe G-Plan company. Finally in 1992, *The Cabinet Maker* reported that The Symphony Group had bought the licence to use the G-Plan brand name for its kitchen and new fitted bedroom business, and in 1993 *The Cabinet Maker* reported that the right to make G-Plan cabinet ranges was sold to Woodberry Brothers & Haines in Somerset.

According to Dandy, 'in terms of product design the company had no direction, 'they lost their way when they started to follow the trend and the trade, we never

followed the trade, and we did our own thing'.<sup>9</sup> A report as far back as 1964 for *The Times* (Anon, 1964b, p.51) described this vulnerability of E.Gomme. They were so successful with the G-Plan range but unfortunately were unable to retain this success. G-Plan set trends so successfully that it was swamped by imitators and was competing with modern designs from its rivals.

### 3.6.2 Ercol

As with G-Plan furniture, Ercol was also being reported in *The Cabinet Maker* throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The company would regularly feature on the front cover. Figure 114 shows an example. Lucian R. Ercolani was thought of highly at *The Cabinet Maker* as he was chosen to design a commemorative 'ship's bell' (Appendix M, Figures M8-M10) in memory of the late Sir John Williams Bell, founder of the Cabinet Marker, seen here in Figure 115 at the ceremony. As well as designing and making furniture, Ercol were often reported as the appropriate company to design and make beautiful awards, such as this British Furniture Manufactures (BFM) sponsored trophy, Figure 116.

*The Cabinet Maker* incorporated many of Ercol's advertisements regularly, including these two examples from the 1970s. Figures 117 shows the development of the 4a Utility chair and the Windsor kitchen chair, and Figure 118 shows the Masters chair, also seen in Figure 24.

*The Cabinet Maker* reported on the issue of exporting furniture in the 1970s 'In Britain even 25 years ago there were basically few exports in furniture'. The article suggested that Scandinavia dominated the export field after the Second World War with distinctive styles and wide appeal. Barry Ercolani (second son of Lucian R. Ercolani) discusses the role of his company in the export of furniture suggesting they are 'one of the country's leaders' (Anon., 1976a). He says that it was only made possible by the revolution from the use of crates to the introduction of containers. At the time of the article the figure for furniture exports was £135 million, and Ercolani predicted that the successful companies in the future would be those who had the

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

correct balance between export and trade within the UK. Indeed Barry Ercolani went on to receive an OBE for his services to export in 1977 (Anon., 1977).

Ercol's British beech and elm timbers were used as an example of the requirements for timber in the furniture industry for an article in *The Times*, which was asking the question, 'will there be any timber to market in the foreseeable future? Second to building and construction, furniture was the second important area of timber use, although on a much smaller scale (Woodburn-Bamberger, 1974).

*The Cabinet Maker* in 1986 ran a feature on Ercol and discussed how the company was coping in the recession of the 1980s. The article described how Ercol invested in training, starting its own apprenticeship training scheme, and in new machinery at a time when most furniture companies were cutting back. 'If we go down, we'll go down with flying colours' Lucian Ercolani told the company at the time (Anon., 1986a). But Ercol continued to do well, ensuring that the 'family' company continued to sustain its skilled workforce and design appropriate pieces in a changing market; with more choices in upholstery covers, choices in colours of finishes, and slight changes to the traditional designs. For example; 'The Windsor chair is 3 inches wider than it used to be because we know that young people often use their dining chairs for lounge seating too' (Anon., 1986a).

*The Cabinet Maker* ran an article on The Duke and Duchess of Marlborough visiting Ercol to receive a Blenheim desk made from elm trees which once grew at their ancestral home, Blenheim Palace. *The Cabinet Maker* described Ercol as 'having the formula for preserving the past yet conserving the present in its blend of modern and traditional design' (Anon., 1986a).

When Ercol launched its Saville range of furniture in 1988, there was much enthusiasm from the public (Figure 119), unlike the G-Plan furniture which was being designed at the same time. *The Cabinet Maker* praised Ercol for steering away from traditional furniture design, as so many designers are doing (E.Gomme were reported as doing this) but 'pushing frontiers forward' (Anon., 1988d).

*The Cabinet Maker* reported that the Saville sideboard won the Guild Mark<sup>10</sup> No. 100, by the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers. The Cabinet Maker some five years later reported on the latest Guild Mark for Ercol, for its ‘Renaissance’ upholstery range (loose cushioned). According to an interview with Tom Dean,<sup>11</sup> former Managing Director of Ercol, because upholsterers were demanding more pay in the furniture industry Ercol decided not have upholstery at all, so all workers were paid equally, and designed loose cushions and sewing to replace upholstery. Figure 120 shows workers at the High Wycombe workshop assembling these chairs. This would coincide with David James recollections that the unions were demanding more money for upholsters at G-Plan and they therefore moved all upholstery to Nelson. The Windsor range along with the Renaissance upholstery became the mainstay products for the company during the early to mid-1990s (Grover and Tadros, 2007).

*The Bucks Free Press* consistently reported on Ercol through the decades and had included reports that celebrated the company’s milestones. They included both the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the company in 1990 (Perrin, 1990), and the feat of reaching 90 years old in 2010, in which the company uniquely celebrated with a thanksgiving service for past and current employees. Edward Tadros put the success of the company down to a number of factors; having a constant design programme, looking at the market and at styles, and constantly reviewing their designs and production. He was optimistic about the future, ‘convinced that there is a place to keep doing what we are doing’ (Anon., 2010).

### **3.6.3 Parker Knoll**

Parker Knoll was another company being extensively reported on at this time. A number of Guild Marks awarded to Parker Knoll were reported in the 1960s including the Meriden PK 769 armchair (Figure 121, which was also discussed in Chapter 2, Figure 83) and the glass fibre tub chair, the Tirano (Figures 122, and shown earlier in Chapter 2, Figure 84). In June 1963 *The Cabinet Maker* reported on

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<sup>10</sup> The furniture Makers Guild of the city of London, founded to further the fine craft of furniture making, awards ‘Guild Marks’ to individual pieces of furniture which it considers to attain an outstanding degree of excellence in design, function materials and craftsmanship (Anon, 1961e).

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with Tom Dean, 3 September 2009.



the new factory at Chipping Norton, discussed in Chapter 2. Figure 123 shows the production of the Novella settee and chairs with the new Novacore shell bases at the Chipping Norton factory, also seen earlier in Figure 85.

Reports continued in the 1960s with C. Jourdan, chairman of Parker Knoll declaring that they had the ability and the products to attract sales (Anon., 1966a). The takeover of Dancer & Hearne was reported in *The Times* newspaper, announcing that another offer from Yatton Furniture had been over-shadowed by an improved bid from Parker Knoll (Anon., 1967e). This optimism continued into the 1970s with *The Times* again reporting good news. Firstly, the major expansion of Parker Knoll's eight-acre site at Chipping Norton where £363,000 was spent on additional space at the upholstery factory (Anon., 1973b). Secondly the reporting of the promotion of Martin Jourdan, Managing Director of Parker Knoll, to Deputy Chairman of the Parker Knoll Group (Anon., 1975b). Finally it was reported that the Parker Knoll board were confident that it was well equipped to handle any problems and that both the furniture and textiles divisions were going well (Anon., 1976b).

The start of the 1990s was a bleak time for Parker Knoll, with reports of falling profits (Anon., 1993a). The bad news continued into January 1996 when *The Cabinet Maker* reported that Safeway supermarket had bought the Parker Knoll factory site in High Wycombe, and all furniture production would be moved to Chipping Norton (Anon., 1996a).

Despite the changes and redundancies at both Parker Knoll and G-Plan during the 1990s and the complete closure of the High Wycombe G-Plan factory, *The Cabinet Maker* reported that in 1998 they were still extensively recognised furniture trade names. 'Parker Knoll and G-Plan are the best known furniture brands, according to a survey by research company BMRB.' (70 percent of consumers were aware that Parker Knoll was a furniture company, 70 percent were aware of G-Plan, 44 percent recognised Stag<sup>12</sup> and 37 percent Ercol (Kidd, 1998). In fact nearly twenty years earlier when *The Cabinet Maker* reported on the publication of Ercolani's book '*A Furniture Maker*' it suggested that Ercol were one of the few names, along with G-

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<sup>12</sup> Stag were another British furniture firm at the time, The High Wycombe Furniture Archive hold the Stag company archives. (They were based in Long Eaton, Nottinghamshire).

Plan and Parker Knoll which struck a chord of recognition with the public' (Anon., 1975a).

This has illustrated the design strengths of the High Wycombe furniture trade, through the furniture brands of G-Plan, Ercol and Parker Knoll. *The Cabinet Maker* also reflects the decline of the industry, reporting the factory closures and redundancies of the 1990s. It is also apparent that the designs of G-Plan furniture in the 1980s and 1990s do not have the same modern feel as earlier ranges, with a more traditional approach emerging. Unlike G-Plan which declined at this period, Ercol continued designing modern pieces into the 1980s and 1990s, and were also leading the furniture industry in the export market. Parker Knoll was reported on less than the other two main High Wycombe companies, but the reports identified their strengths in developing new materials.

### **3.7 High Wycombe Furniture Education**

Furniture education was regularly reported in *The Cabinet Maker*, and covered the work carried out at the college in High Wycombe. The images below have not been published in any secondary Literature Reviewed for this research and so show the importance of furniture training in the High Wycombe area. Some of the students over the years became designers in the High Wycombe furniture companies.

Figures 124 and 125 shows apprentice boys in the cabinet making workshop at the High Wycombe Technical Institute, Easton Street. The quality of the pieces is evident, even with the low quality, black and white images.

*The Cabinet Maker*, when reporting on an exhibition at the Technical School in High Wycombe was critical about the traditional approach of most of the furniture produced at the college, and ascribes it to the fact that most Wycombe firms make traditional furniture. It goes on to describe Wycombe as 'one of the most important centres of the furniture industry in the country' (Anon., 1951f). This criticism may have been listened to, as many students went on to win design awards, and still do today. The first student to be commended for his designs was Donald Pedal, who went on to be chief designer at Ercol, see Figure 126 and the earlier image Figure 116.

The use of the new college building was reported with enthusiasm in 1954. It can be seen towering over the traditional furniture factory of Nichols and Janes (Figure 127), which ironically was later to be demolished for further college building work, seen in Figure 128. The college went on to educate a huge number of furniture makers, designers, managers and the like. Figures 129 and 130 show the fantastic workshops and studios that were available to students at that time.

The college was to eventually become, over fifty years later, the National School of Furniture, although this had been the vision at the outset. ‘It may come to be looked upon as the national furniture college, the need for which has been emphasised from time to time by educationalists in the industry’ (Anon., 1954b).

High Wycombe Technical College also hosted national and international furniture events. In September 1955 it welcomed North Carolina State College to discuss the issues of flow<sup>13</sup> and batch production. Professor Johnson from the North Carolina State College suggested ways in which Wycombe factories could improve with good management, help from research and educational institutes and good planning. If these were all carried out he cited:

The case of a small factory where forty employees were reduced to twenty without loss of output...the most efficient factory in the United States, he said, had only fifty employees in the whole place (Anon., 1955b).

Towards the late 1950s student work from High Wycombe included pieces from Roger Bennett, (Figure 131 and Appendix for more images). It also included the rocking chair (Figure 132) designed by Gordon Gray in the 1960s; Gray went on to work for Forward and Donnelly, a High Wycombe furniture company. Students continued to win design awards and *The Cabinet Maker* continued to showcase student work from High Wycombe into the 1990s (Figure 133).

The importance of the furniture industry and the link to furniture training in the area was discussed in Chapter 2, explaining that Ercolani taught at the college and set examination questions. This link is also evidenced in *The Cabinet Maker*, showing

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<sup>13</sup> Flow line production would produce the type of furniture manufacture where the material begins moving through the factory and continues to move until the article of furniture is complete, with never more than a few minutes stoppage.

Lucian Ercolani (son of Lucian R. Ercolani) receiving the first honorary doctorate in Design in 1992, (Figure 134). The Design Archives in Brighton also hold images of High Wycombe student work, which highlights the importance the College, had to design education in the furniture industry. High Wycombe College trained therefore many furniture designers who went on to design for High Wycombe furniture companies, such as Gordon Gray, Richard Young and Roger Bennett.

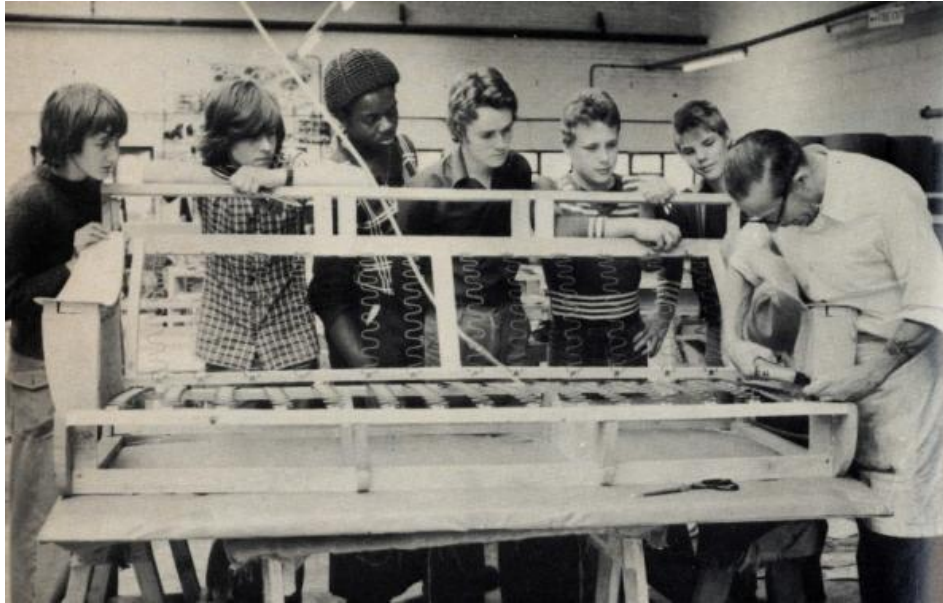


Figure 91 High Wycombe apprentices training in upholstery at John Hawkins & Co High Wycombe, 1978



Figure 92 The mill in E.Gomme Ltd, 1968



Figure 93 Strongbow Reproduction cabinet furniture at William Bartlett High Wycombe, 1968



Figure 94 Ercolani advertising for Ercol, 1959



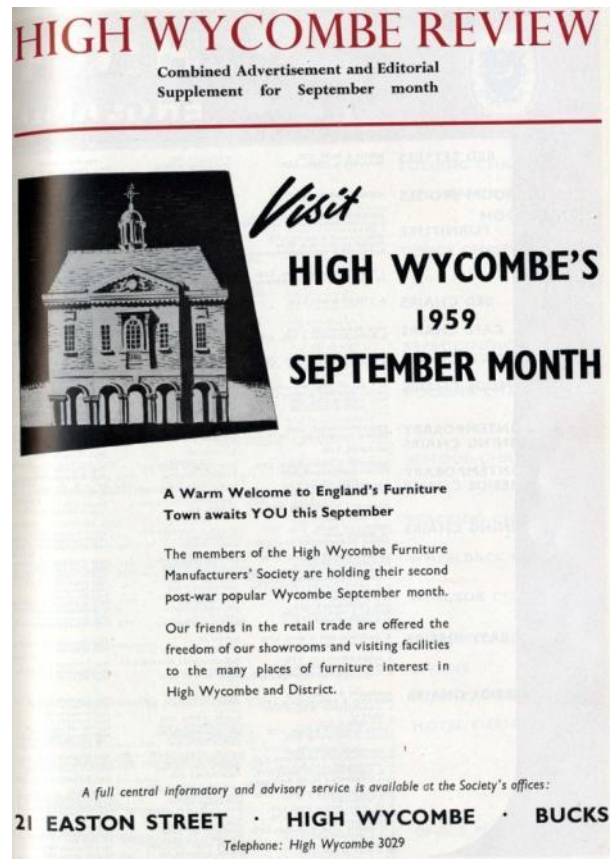


Figure 95 High Wycombe Month Review, 1959



Figure 96 A Bristow & Townsend (a High Wycombe company) chair to be shown at the Festival of Britain, 1951



Figure 97 Furniture Industries Ltd, 1955



Figure 98 An image of The Festival Exhibition Committee (left to right) H.J. Cutler, H.R. Janes, J.B.Heath, E.M. Clinch, Max Goodearl, N. C. Beale, 1951





Figure 99 Furniture displayed at the 'Festival' held at High Wycombe, 1951, Contemporary dining set (These sideboards are being produced in Figure 66)

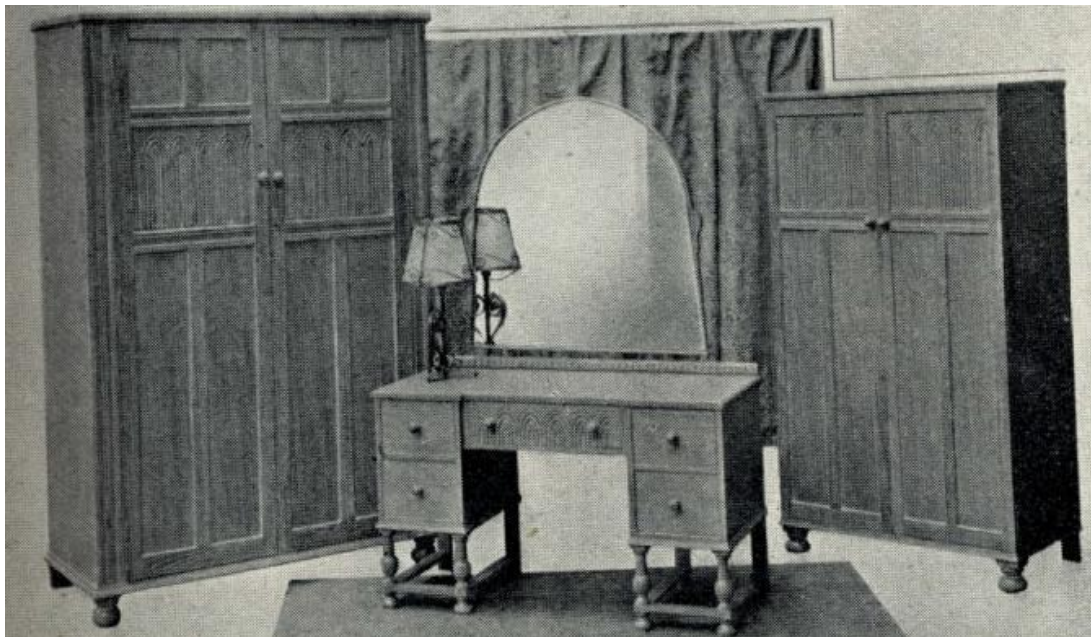


Figure 100 Furniture displayed at the 'Festival' held at High Wycombe, 1951, A typical Wycombe product, oak bedroom suite



Figure 101 Furniture displayed at the 'Festival' held at High Wycombe, 1951, Modern unit furniture



Figure 102 New IKEA store in Brent Park, 1988





Figure 103 Bernard Braden, TV star, in G-Plan setting at Bentalls Ltd of Kingston, 1954



Figure 104 Left: The caterpillar cramp which produces eight panels an hour compared with 26 by the new gluer. Right: Radio Frequency (RF) edge gluer at the High Wycombe works of E. Gomme Ltd, 1954



Figure 105 Squarely built settee in E. Gomme's Hanover Square showroom, 1957

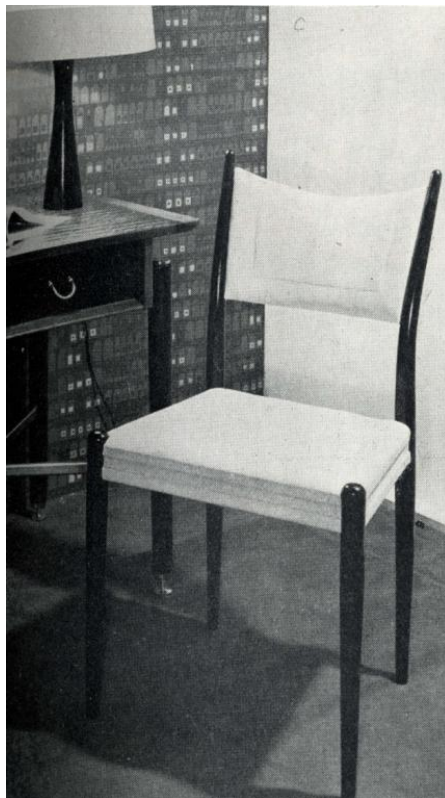


Figure 106 Slim, elegant dining chair, 1958



Figure 107 G-Plan Danish Sideboard, 1962



Figure 108 G-Plan Dressing table from the Quadrille range<sup>14</sup> 1964

<sup>14</sup> Quadrille bedroom furniture was made in teak with rosewood handles.





Figure 109 Assembly department E. Gomme Nelson, 1963



Figure 110 Arcadia display cabinet,<sup>15</sup> 1974



Figure 111 Loretta Group,<sup>16</sup> consisting of Goodwood show wood two seater and Knole three seater sofa, 1982

<sup>15</sup> The Arcadia range of G-Plan furniture was designed by Leslie Dandy.

<sup>16</sup> The Loretta Group of Armchair (8171), 3 Seater Sofa (8173), 2 Seater Sofa (8172), is based on the American style - simple, comfortable and with the traditional country house look. It has reversible back and seat cushions, scroll arms and a traditional skirt.





Figure 112 New 'look' from G-Plan from the Traditions collection, 1988

**NEW PRODUCTS**

**THE LATEST PRODUCTS FOR THE FURNITURE AND FURNISHINGS MARKETS**

**On reflection**  
This season G Plan's new ideas for the bedroom include the Ashdown link dressing unit. With six drawers and twin swivel table tops, it is practical as well as stylish, and with triple mirrors it's a must for the vanity conscious.  
**MARKET:** Retail.  
**PRICE:** £298, trade.  
**DELIVERY:** Six-eight weeks, from September.  
For details circle 118

**Stylish on the flat**  
Flat pack is moving upmarket and this style of colourful table and chair set from Keter (UK) is now making the rule, not the exception. Ideal for the dining room, kitchen or conservatory it is made from synthetic resin and comes in white, red or black. Goes under the name of Veronica.  
**MARKET:** Retail.  
**PRICE:** Full set £270, extra chairs £20 each, retail.  
**DELIVERY:** Three-four weeks.  
For details circle 119

**Minty's contract**  
Minty Design, fresh from its successful MBO, launches the Cantavale bedroom chair for the contract market. Aimed to be cost effective and practical it has factory removable covers to save costs on re-upholstering. Available in two sizes and a variety of fabrics.  
**MARKET:** Contract.  
**PRICE:** Large £382-£384, small £258-£260, depending on fabric.  
**DELIVERY:** Six-eight weeks.  
For details circle 120

**Country style**  
Kitchen manufacturer Callerton launches into the bedroom furniture market with its Zetland Country Furniture range. Hand finished classic English country designs with deep belled panels, detailed arches and profiled glass it can be free standing or made to fit. Comprehensive range from bedside cabinets to dressing tables and wardrobes.  
**MARKET:** Retail and contract.  
**PRICE:** As pictured, £2,500 retail.  
**DELIVERY:** Three-four weeks.  
For details circle 121

10 **CABINET MAKER** • 8 JUNE 1990

Figure 113 *The Cabinet Maker* latest products including G-Plan, 1990





Figure 114 Front page of *The Cabinet Maker* advertising Ercol furniture, Left: 1954 Right: 1964



Figure 115 Ercolani (second from the left) sitting next to Anthony Heal (third from the left) at the ceremony, 1965

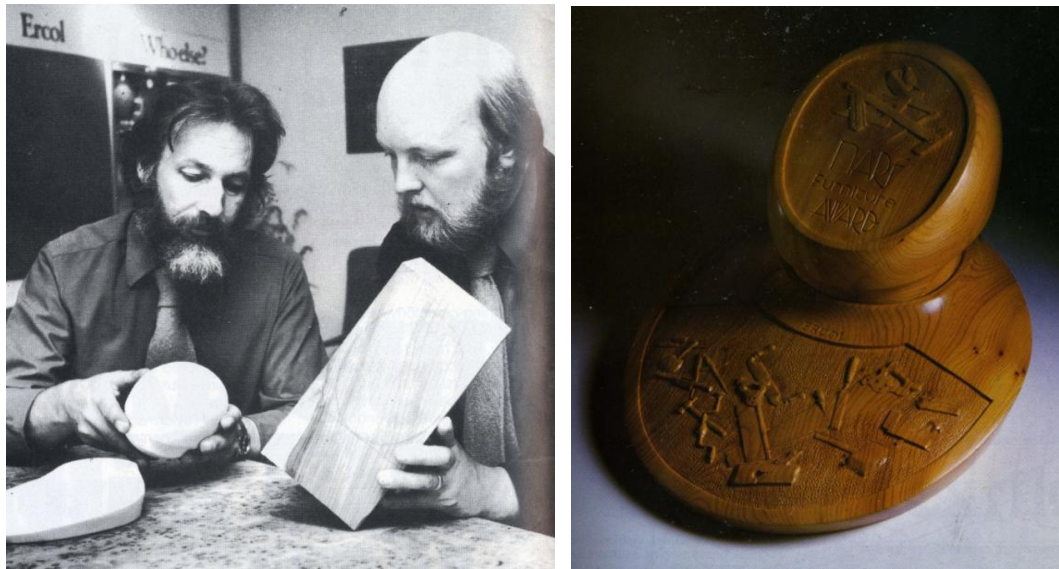


Figure 116 Left: Don Pedal left and Michael Pengelly right, from Ercol's design team working on a new trophy for BFM Furniture Exhibition sponsored by NARF seen on the right, 1979

238 *Supplement - Cabinet Maker and Retail Furniture* - 20 January 1970

**1948**  
**the pioneer**  
**400** (The original 4A, a chair in a million that sells in millions)

**1960**  
**the 1st development**  
**391** (Matching the 400 in steady continuous demand)

**1970**  
**another winner is added**  
**608** (A new opportunity for additional high volume sales)

**ERCOL** a massive record of success\$ and development

These three outstanding Ercol designs prove that with craftsman's constructional methods and high speed production techniques there is an ever growing pool of demand for simple furniture made to impeccable standards yet closer to earth in price. The new 608 chair is a development of the 391 design more generously sized and with a high back for added support and comfort. Keep all three models on show where their quality can be seen, handled and appreciated.

ERCOL FURNITURE LTD. HIGH WYCOMBE, BEDS.

Figure 117 Ercol Advertisement, 1970

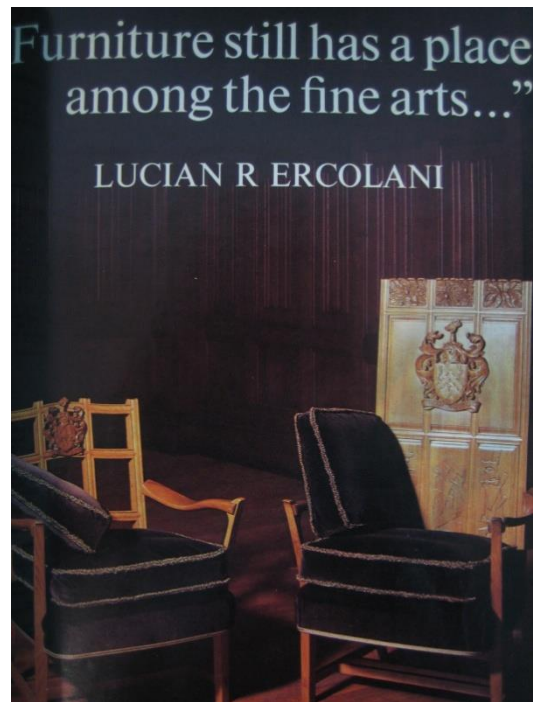


Figure 118 Ercol Advertisement 1973

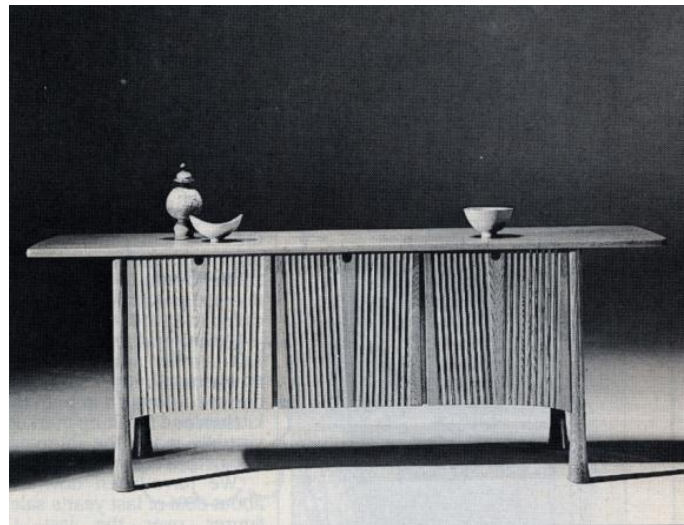


Figure 119 Saville Range<sup>17</sup> of Ercol furniture Right: Ercol Saville sideboard, 1990

<sup>17</sup> Ercol Chief Designer, Don Pedel designed the Saville range of dining furniture in 1988. Some of the later Saville models were designed by Mike Pengelly.





Figure 120 Ercol Renaissance range in the Ercol making shop, 1995



Figure 121 Parker-Knoll armchair by its own designers<sup>18</sup> 1960

<sup>18</sup> Many designers in the furniture industry remain anonymous.



Figure 122 Glass-fibre tub chair by Parker-Knoll Ltd German designer Rolff Grunow, 1961

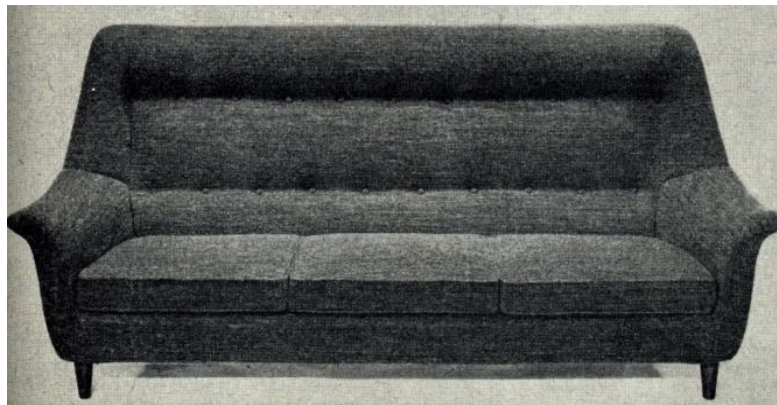
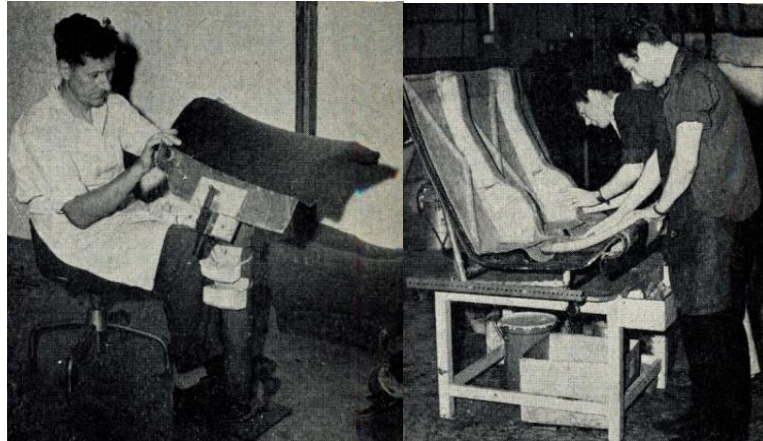


Figure 123 Novella settee and chairs in production, 1963





Figure 124 High Wycombe Technical Institute students at work in the cabinet making shop, 1950

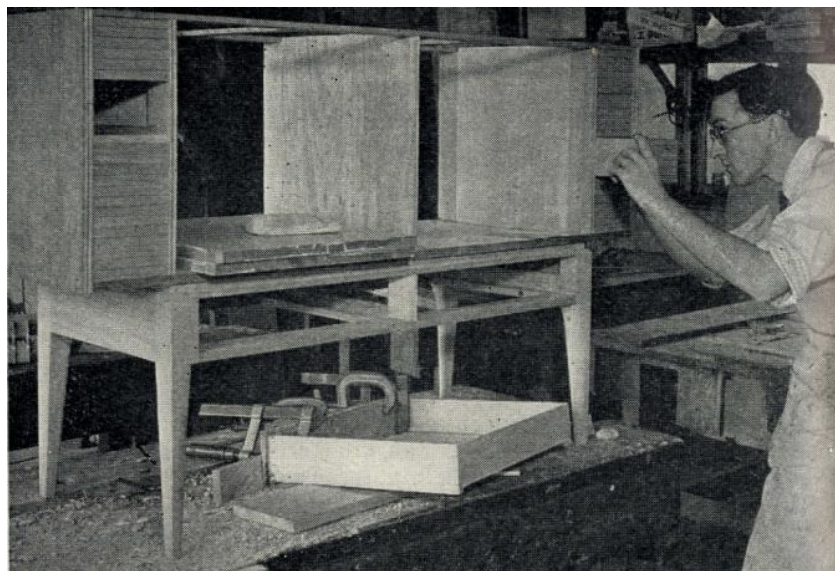


Figure 125 Student Richard Young<sup>19</sup> making a contemporary sideboard, 1951

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Young went on to become a designer at E. Gomme, and worked alongside Les Dandy. He was also the main designer at Merrow, and became Managing Director at G-Plan in the 1990s.

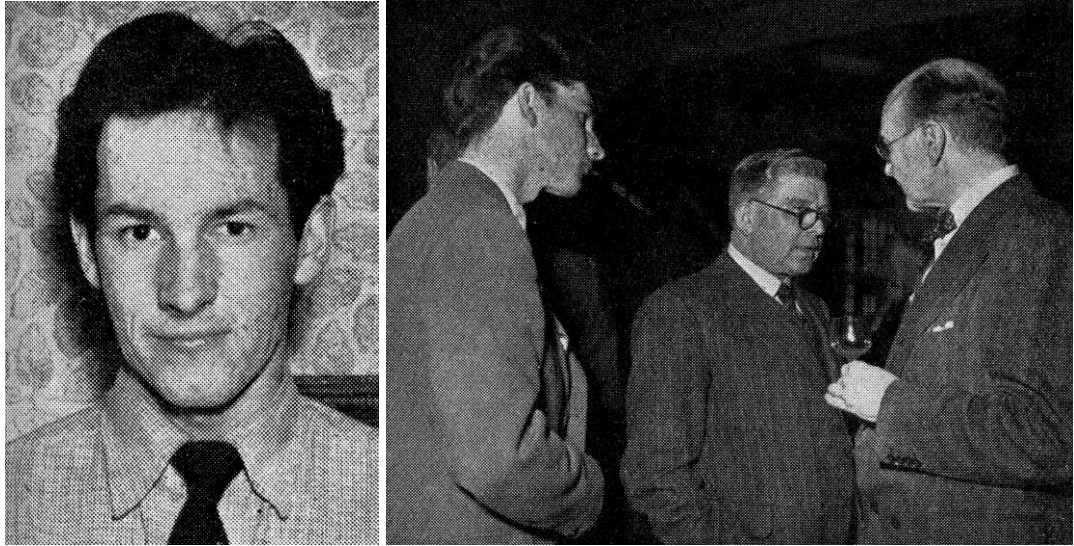


Figure 126 Left: Donald Pedal, reported in *The Cabinet Maker* received a winning furniture design bursary by the furniture Development Council. Right: D Priest, medal winning Wycombe student, H.J. Cutler of the Wycombe College of Further Education and J. C. Pritchard director of the Furniture Development Council, 1953



Figure 127 Nichols & Janes factory built in 1810 for Thomas Widginton before its demolition, with the new college in the background, 1958





Figure 128 High Wycombe College of Further Education showing at extreme left, latest extension nearing completion, 1959

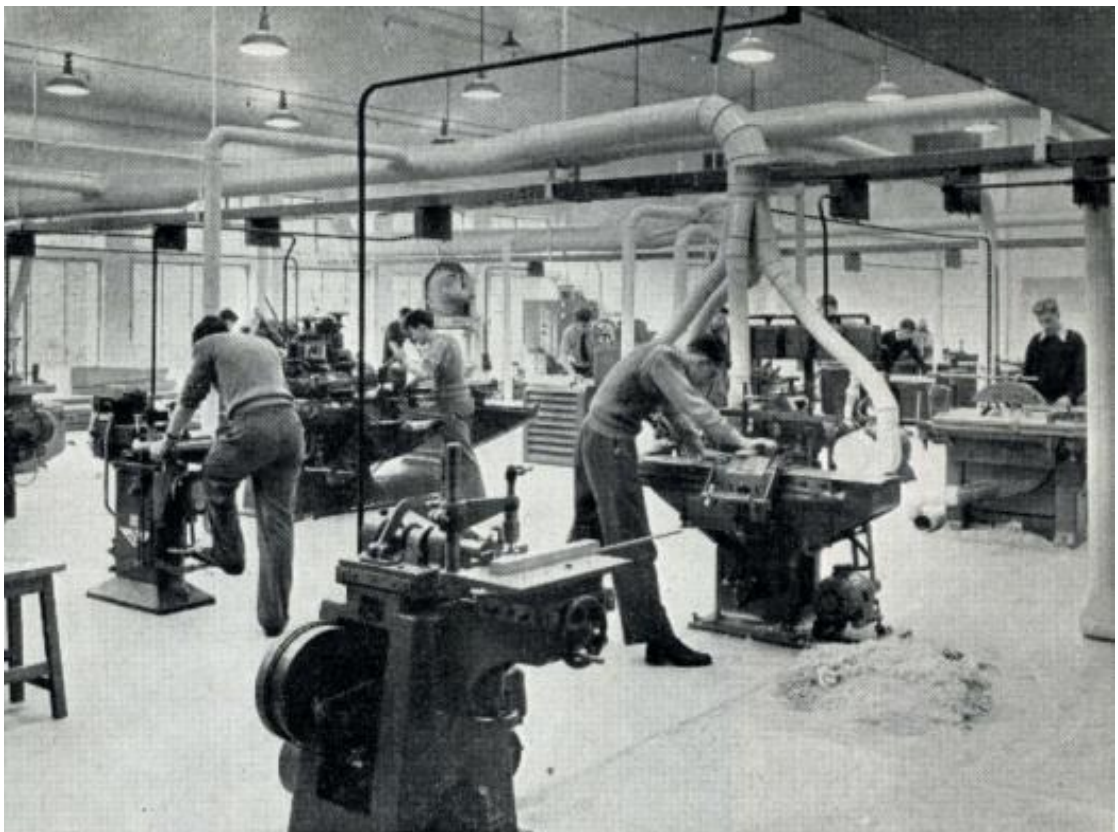


Figure 129 Fully equipped machine shop in the new college, 1954



Figure 130 Left: Fully equipped workshop in the new college Right: Drawing and design studio, 1954

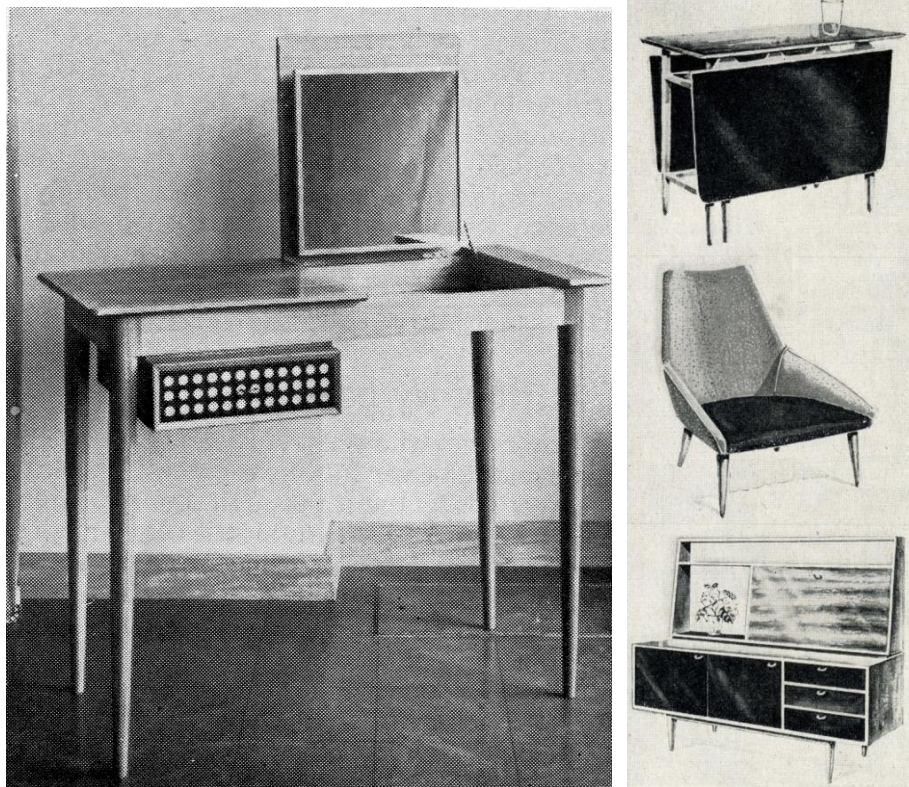


Figure 131 Left: Dressing table by Roger Bennett, student work at HW Right: Roger Bennett's designs of High Wycombe College of Further Education, winner of a 1956 bursary from the Royal Society of Arts, 1956





Figure 132 High Wycombe chairs: student's work points to maintenance of towns tradition – Gordon Gray's rocking chair had special mention, 1961

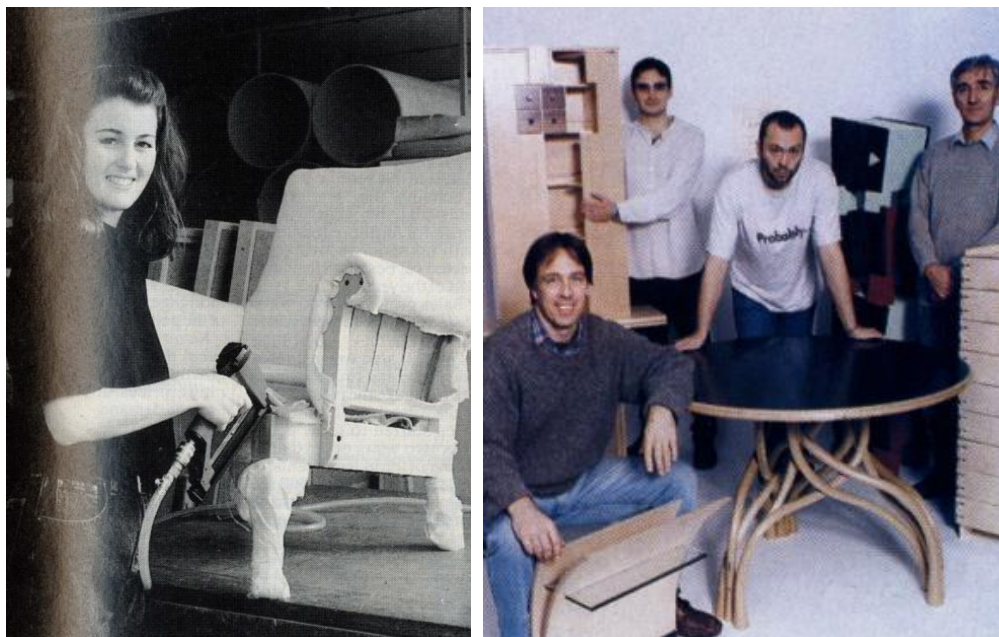


Figure 133 Left: 'Only female student discovers wood flair' Sharon Rooke (now Sharon Grover) is the only female student on the Furniture Production degree at Buckinghamshire College, 1992. Right: Buckinghamshire College of Brunel University, winner of the best stand at 'Sit 95', 1995

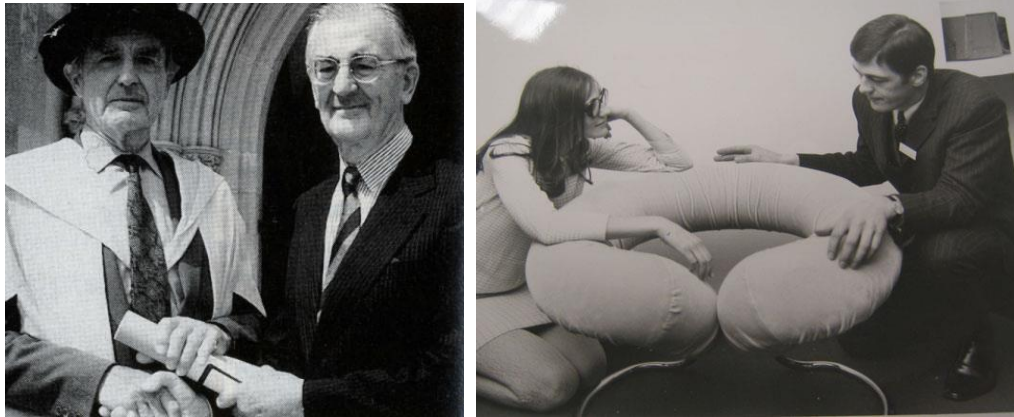


Figure 134 Left: Lucian Ercolani, Ercol chairman left, is awarded Buckinghamshire College's first honorary doctorate in design by Owen Harris, chairman of the college's governors. (a dedicated governor of the college, close involvement of the college and his family's long association with the college), 1992, Right: An exhibition of prototype furniture at the Design Centre, designed by Graham Freeman, High Wycombe Technology of Technology and Art, 1967