

1. The Context

1.1 Aesthetic and Design Background

The work of Sir Ambrose Heal as a retailer and furniture designer, between the years 1895 and 1939, was woven into a tapestry of changing trends in furniture and architecture that reflected the society of the time. Before the First World War that society was a society in turmoil driven by an accelerating pace of change:

Beneath a social surface that remained glossily intact huge social movements strained and heaved: the old rural way of life sank and disappeared; the industrial working class assumed menacing political shape; Irish nationalism lunged like a knife at the jugular of the Crown, Army, Land and Empire; the Empire itself teetered; and the suffragettes called into question the basic assumptions of a patriarchal society. But it was also a period of astonishing artistic exuberance.⁴⁷

After the traumatic events of the First World War the old social orders were changed forever despite inter-war governments pursuing the politics of what Mellers and Hildyard termed *stagnation under a frightened and nostalgic elite*. However, fortunately for Heal's,

It was neither the working class nor the upper class which profited most from the inter-war years, but rather the middle class, who spent their increased financial resources on a private housing boom, aided by cheap mortgages, and on private education, cars and consumer goods.⁴⁸

AH developed his own distinctive style as a designer but he was inevitably influenced by what was happening around him to a greater or lesser extent. In order to appreciate his position it is necessary to have an overview of the aesthetic currents that were flowing at the time.

Charles Jencks in his book *Modern Movements in Architecture* argues against the tendency of historians to simplify and create *some conceptual order out of the overwhelming complexity of detail* by seeking to impose a single line of historical

⁴⁷ Boris Ford R., (ed.), *Early 20th Century Britain* - Mellers, W., & Hildyard, R. *The Cultural and Social Setting*, Cambridge Univ Press, 1992, p 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp 29, 30.

development. He uses Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* as an example of how argument and example can be aligned to produce a historical perspective of *the style of the century*, making it appear that there is only *one inevitable line of development*.⁴⁹ Jencks on the other hand recognises that there are a multitude of traditions in play at any one time. He likens these movements to the evolution of biological species:

*Like animal species, the architectural traditions wax and wane in relation to each other, when one triumphs...another might succumb in 'the struggle for existence'. However, unlike animal species, architectural movements never become altogether extinct. There is always the chance of a revival of forms and ideas even if they are renewed somewhat differently. And furthermore, opposed to natural evolution, architects tend to jump from one species to another, inter-breeding with whatever they like and producing fertile offspring. In fact, as one would guess, the best architects are the least classifiable,... the ones that produce a fusion of multivalent interests and forms.*⁵⁰

The applicability of this theory to furniture as well as architecture is self-evident. It is all the more relevant because of the close links in design evolution between the two arts and the fact that much significant furniture has been designed by architects.

However, for the purpose of this thesis, whilst accepting that there were many influences that might have impinged on A.H.'s work, it is only proposed to deal with those that can be seen to have had a very direct impact.

1.1.1. Mid-Victorian Design

As has been recorded by many historians, the mid-Victorian period was something of a nadir in terms of design. Walter Crane, for example, writing of the 1851 Exhibition, lamented:

⁴⁹ Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, Penguin, 2nd edition, 1985, pp 11, 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p 29.

*The last stage of decomposition had been reached, and a period of, perhaps, unexampled hideousness in furniture, dress and decoration set in.*⁵¹

The two major stylistic characteristics of early Victorian furniture, according to Elizabeth Aslin in her book *19th Century English Furniture*, were carving and curves. She quotes R. Redgrave who wrote:

*The designer has constructed ornament and forgotten use altogether and the result is shown in a heap of massive, rich and useless furniture, sideboards that will display nothing but the skill of the carver.*⁵²

As Kenneth Ames explains, this may arguably have stemmed from a deliberate choice to stress man's domination of nature at a point in time when imagery was more important than function.⁵³

However, on curves for example Aslin quotes from Charles Eastlake:

*The backs of sideboards are curved in the most senseless and extravagant manner; the legs of cabinets are curved and in consequence become structurally weak; drawing room tables are curved in every direction – perpendicularly and horizontally and are therefore inconvenient to sit at and are always rickety.*⁵⁴

Another writer, much later, also noted the prominence of a

*...ubiquitous heavy handed curve which almost gives the wood the appearance of having been squeezed from a tube.*⁵⁵

However there were in the second half of the century movements to 'improve' the situation and it was this rebellion against what is now thought of as typically Victorian that directly influenced the work of A.H.. The first development was the Gothic Revival. In terms of published designs, those of Charles L. Eastlake (*Hints on Household Taste*) and Bruce Talbert (*Gothic Forms Applied to Furniture*) were influential. The addition of a fashion for Japanese shapes and medieval influences led

⁵¹ Walter Crane, *The English Revival in Decorative Art*, Morris to Whistler, G. Bell & Sons, London, 1911, quoted by Mary Greensted, *Anthology of the Arts & Crafts Movement*, Lund Humphries, Aldershot, 2005, p 4.

⁵² Elizabeth Aslin, *Nineteenth Century English Furniture*, Faber & Faber, 1967, p 31.

⁵³ Kenneth Ames, *Death in the Dining Room*, Temple Univ Press, 1992.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Aslin, *Nineteenth Century English Furniture*, p 47.

⁵⁵ Peter Floud, *The early Victorian Period*, Connoisseur Period Guides pp 35-50. Quoted by Pauline Agius, *British Furniture 1880-1915*, Antique Collectors Club, 1978, p 20.

to the Aesthetic Movement and the upsurge of so-called Art Furniture Manufacturers in the 1870s. Pauline Agius points out that one can find here the beginnings of design elements that were later to become familiar through the work of Arts and Crafts designers:

*The new men: Mackmurdo, Gimson, Voysey, Walton, Mackintosh, Ellwood, Baillie Scott and others, have been seen as isolated pillars of inspiration suddenly bursting in with enlightenment but, in fact, they came in on the tide of that already well established crusade for more honest rational furniture.*⁵⁶

Eastlake for example showed chests of drawers with projecting plank sides and revealed construction with inset 'butterflies' to hold boards together. Characteristics of the Talbertian 1870s progressive revolution were straight lines, long strap hinges, ring handles, architecturally inspired ornaments, revealed construction showing dovetails and tenons, and unstained oiled oak. All of these were to be found in Arts and Crafts furniture of the 1890s.

The rather puritanical, stripped bare and what we now think of as minimalist approach to interiors that came to be associated with the Cotswold Arts & Crafts furniture makers, was already being recommended by Godwin in the 1870s. Reg Winfield records how,

*To further assist this healthy regime Godwin declared the bedroom should not be carpeted, its curtains should be washable...that while wardrobes and drawers might be oiled or polished, washstands and dressing tables ought to be made of plain light woods such as deal, birch or ash and should be left bare so that they might be scrubbed...*⁵⁷

In architecture the great debate was between those who favoured Classicism against those who argued that the Gothic style was the perfect medium for England's buildings. Naturally there were many other sources of inspiration at play but as Alastair Service suggests,

By 1890 the most famous of the great Victorian Gothic architects were either dead or nearing the end of their careers... The Gothic style continued to

⁵⁶ Pauline Agius, *British Furniture 1880-1915*, Antique Collectors Club, 1978, p 87.

⁵⁷ Dr Reg Winfield, *'A Tendency to Grace – The Furniture and Interiors of EW Godwin'* BCUC, unpublished PhD thesis, 1998, p 92.

*dominate church architecture, but in all other fields a variety of freely mixed styles followed the 'Queen Anne' manner that had grown out of and rebelled against Gothicism in the 1870s.*⁵⁸

This development was critical to the whole of the design world and had particular impact on furniture design.

1.1.2. Arts & Crafts

Although A.H. was apprenticed in 1890 to Plucknett, a high quality Art Furniture maker equipped with a steam-powered workshop in Warwick,⁵⁹ it was the Arts and Crafts Movement, and its opposition to the worst aspects of Victorian industrialisation, that was crucial in forming his work as a designer and as a retailer. For this reason it is important to consider in some detail how and why this movement grew. Fundamentally it was a humanist movement concerned more with how things were made than with a particular aesthetic but driven by young, committed architects, it was all about reforming and unifying all the arts.

Mary Greensted's recent *Anthology of The Arts & Crafts Movement*, neatly traces the growth of the Movement through the writings of its leading members.⁶⁰ Although the movement emerged in concrete form in the 1880s, with the formation of the Art Workers' Guild in 1884 and the setting up of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888, its roots can be traced back to the writings of John Ruskin (1819-1900) and the work of the architect A.W.N. Pugin (1812-1852). But it was William Morris (1834-1896) who took up and championed Ruskin's ideas and who, for example, founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877 and was to become a leading member of the Art Workers' Guild and the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society.

⁵⁸ Alastair Service, *'Edwardian Architecture'* Thames & Hudson, 1977, p 8.

⁵⁹ Melanie Hall, *'James Plucknett of Warwick and Leamington Spa'* Furniture History Society Journal, 1996, p 159.

⁶⁰ Mary Greensted (ed), *An Anthology of the Arts & Crafts Movement*, Lund Humphries, 2005.

Another useful recent source of information about the movement is *International Arts and Crafts*, edited by Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry, published to coincide with the Victoria & Albert Museum's major exhibition of the same name.⁶¹ It concentrates particularly on the spread of Arts and Crafts ideals from Britain, out around the world. However to find detailed references to the influence of Pugin and Ruskin one has to turn to Gillian Naylor's seminal work, *The Arts & Crafts Movement, a study of its sources, ideals and influence on design theory*, published in 1971. She points out that Pugin first addressed integrity of design in his *True Principles of Christian Architecture* as early as 1841:

*The two great rules for design are these: First, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or "propriety"; second, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building.*⁶²

1.1.2.1 Ruskin

Retrospectively Pugin's importance was recognised⁶³ but at the time the greater influence was Ruskin's writings, which, according to Naylor,

*...contain ideas that were to become fundamental to Arts and Crafts theory...honesty of expression, material and workmanship. Also both he and William Morris passionately believed that beauty was necessary to man's survival as food, shelter and a living wage.*⁶⁴

Ruskin's success was built on his ability to interpret art and architecture for his contemporaries. George P. Landow in *Victorian Thinkers* describes him as a 'word

⁶¹ Livingstone, K. and Parry, L. (ed), *International Arts & Crafts*, V&A Publications, 2005.

⁶² Gillian Naylor, *The Arts & Crafts Movement, a study of its sources, ideals and influence on design theory*, Studio Vista, 1971, p 14 quoting from A.W.N. Pugin, *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, 1841.

⁶³ J D Sedding, "Art and Handicraft" wrote: *we should have had no Morris, no Street, no Burges, no Shaw, no Webb, no Bodley, no Rossetti, no Burne-Jones, no Crane, but for Pugin*, p 144.

⁶⁴ Gillian Naylor, 'The Arts & Crafts Movement', pp 26, 27. This is from Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Ambrose Heal had several of Ruskin's books in his library but this one does not seem to have been among them.

painter', providing fresh ways of seeing the world:

*Drawing upon the rhetoric and techniques of the Victorian preacher, Wordsworthian concepts of the poet, and Neoclassical theories of painting and the beautiful, Ruskin offered his Victorian audience convincing arguments for the essential earnestness, the relevance and the moral importance of the visual arts.*⁶⁵

1.1.2.2 Morris

William Morris by contrast was a man of action whose words were all the more convincing because he practiced what he preached. He set up a furnishing firm, that later became Morris & Co, with workshops that used

*...long-forgotten or recently abandoned methods of manufacture, such as natural dyeing and hand block-printing, but also ... grander historical techniques, such as tapestry weaving. All of this was in the context of Ruskin's view that happy workers produced beautiful work, he (Morris) attempted to increase their enjoyment (and productivity) by ensuring not only that they took pride in their work by being fully involved and taking responsibility for all stages of production but also that they had a pleasant working environment.*⁶⁶

Morris was a larger than life character of enormous energy and ability. As a creator of two-dimensional patterns for textiles, carpets, wallpapers or stained glass, he was brilliant, but the few attempts that he made at furniture design were not in the same class. His significance, therefore, lies in the movement that he inspired and the designs of the following generation who had absorbed his teachings and sought to put them into practice. Fiona MacCartney, in her biography of Morris, summed up this multi-faceted man as follows:

Morris was one of the best-known and most prolific Victorian poets. He was

⁶⁵ George P Landow, *Victorian Thinkers - Ruskin*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 185.

⁶⁶ Linda Parry & Karen Livingstone, *International Arts & Craft*, V&A Publications, 2005, pp 15, 16.

the greatest artist-craftsman of his period. He ran a successful decorating and manufacturing business and he kept a high profile London retail shop. Morris was also a passionate social reformer, an early environmentalist, an educationalist and would-be feminist; at the age of fifty he crossed the 'river of fire' to become a revolutionary socialist. There is something almost suspect in this sheer range of activity. ...He wanted to integrate the city with the country, the present with the past, the public and the personal moralities. ...Even to his contemporaries Morris seemed peculiar. Victorian memoirs overflow with references to his 'rum and indescribable deportment', his 'tempestuous and exacting company', his disconcerting habit of pacing up and down like a caged lion.⁶⁷

A.H. could claim that he was directly influenced by Morris as he *just over-lapped with Morris at the A&C Society when ... first elected.*⁶⁸ So it is worth considering the philosophy of life that this remarkable character propounded and the example he set to his acolytes. As Gillian Naylor points out:

Morris's contribution is outstanding, not only because he was a poet and knew how to manipulate words but because he was a practitioner and all his theories carry the conviction of personal involvement in the process he is describing...The cardinal principle upon which his theory rested centred around his conviction that the designer (or architect) must have personal knowledge of the potentials and limitations of the materials he is working with if he is to produce work of any validity, and such understanding of the process of design must be learned at first hand.

She then carries on to quote Morris on how to treat raw materials:

Never forget the material you are working with, and try always to use it for doing what it can do best: if you feel hampered by the material in which you are working, instead of being helped by it, you have so far not learned your business, any more than a would-be poet has, who complains of the hardship of writing in measure or rhyme. The special limitations of the material should be

⁶⁷ Fiona MacCartney, 'William Morris', Faber & Faber, 1994, introduction p vii.

⁶⁸ Ambrose Heal letter to Charles Bramley 16.10.1952, preserved at Cheltenham Art Gallery, Burrough Collection.

*a pleasure to you, not a hindrance.*⁶⁹

Morris believed that

*...nothing can be a work of art which is not useful; that is to say, which does not minister to the body when well under command of the mind, or which does not amuse, soothe or elevate the mind in a healthy state.*⁷⁰

Morris also said: *I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.* But perhaps the best-known saying, which A.H. adopted to guide him throughout his career, was Morris's 'Golden Rule': *Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.*⁷¹

Although Morris was not a great furniture designer his ideas about furniture were as influential as anything else he said and A.H. can be seen to have taken most of the following to heart:

So I say our furniture should be good citizen's furniture, solid and well made in workmanship, and in design should have nothing about it that is not easily defensible, no monstrosities or extravagances, not even of beauty, lest we weary of it...also I think that, except for very movable objects like chairs, it should not be so very light as to be nearly imponderable; it should be made of timber rather than walking sticks. Moreover I must needs think of furniture as of two kinds: one part of it being chairs, dining and working tables, and the like, the necessary work-a-day furniture in short, which should be of course well made and well proportioned, but simple to the last degree; nay, if it were rough I should like it the better...

But besides this kind of furniture, there is the other kind of what I should call state-furniture, which I think is proper even for a citizen; I mean sideboards, cabinets, and the like, which we have quite as much for beauty's sake as for use; we need not spare ornament on these, but may make them as elegant and elaborate as we can with carving, inlaying, or painting; these are the blossoms

⁶⁹ Gillian Naylor, *The Arts & Crafts Movement*, pp 103-104. The quotation from Morris is from 'Arts & Crafts Essays' Longman Green & Co, 1899. A. H. possessed a copy of this edition of the book. Author's archive.

⁷⁰ William Morris, 'William Morris by himself' (G. Naylor Ed.) N.Y., 1988, p 205.

⁷¹ William Morris, *The Beauty of Life*, lecture delivered before Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, 19.02.1880. see, www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works

*of the art of furniture, as picture tapestry is of the art of weaving...*⁷²

The influence of Morris on his contemporaries and on succeeding generations was hugely significant, generating ripple effects through society that are still felt to this day. His name will reoccur throughout these pages and also under the examination of retail developments.

1.1.2.3 Sedding

Another influential personality contemporary with William Morris and one of his admirers, was John D. Sedding, (1838-1891) an architect responsible for training both Ernest Gimson and Ernest Barnsley. However, Gillian Naylor highlights the fact that he had a different attitude towards the use of machinery:

*Like Morris, Sedding insists that it is not the machines that are at fault but the men who direct them; he is more emphatic than Morris, however, in stressing that future programmes of reform must be directed towards factory production, and that any system that ignores this basic fact was doomed to failure...He went on to elaborate a craft/machine aesthetic which comes close to the theories that the German Werkbund and the Design & Industries Association were to elaborate some twenty years later.*⁷³

In a lecture delivered in January 1890 to the Whitechapel Guild of Crafts, entitled *The Handicrafts in Old Days*, Sedding said:

Was I not right, too, to caution you beforehand, not to let your admiration for the handicrafts, as practised in the old days, put you out of heart with the handicrafts as practised nowadays? Let us master the magic of old design – imitate the excellences, aim at the range of old handicraft, I said, but let us not imagine that all good work must necessarily come from conformity to the same

⁷² William Morris, *The Lesser Arts of Life*, in Mary Morris (ed.) *The Collected Works of William Morris* Vol xxii, London 1914, p 261, quoted in Annette Carruthers and Mary Greensted, *Good Citizen's Furniture*, Lund Humphries, 1994, p 9.

⁷³ Gillian Naylor, *The Arts & Crafts Movement*, p 164.

conditions. We are living in a new world...

He continued with an attack on the so-called “Applied Arts”:

We hear, to my mind, vastly too much of the “Applied Arts,” which is a new-fangled term, covering a new-fangled class of art-workmanship, to suit the gentlemen-draughtsmen turned out of the Kensington Schools. To hear people chatter at art congresses you would suppose that the architect should resign the art-side of his work, to make a place for the new race of “ornamentalists” turned out of “School of Art” Schools, who have “got no work to do,” because they will not do the work that awaits them at the looms and benches of our factories, where their presence might prove a veritable godsend. This chatter about the “Applied Arts,” I say, is not good; it encourages the fatal notion that art is a thing to be “applied” – that it is a dispensable commodity, not an integral part of all work, of all manufacture whatsoever.

Surely this would have struck a chord with A.H. who had learnt his skills at the bench. But Sedding also wanted to see sensible design with ‘character’:

If then, we are to expect to benefit current or future art by our efforts at self-improvement, we must not stop at mere ornament. If we want to produce a nice chest of drawers – say - we must begin at the bare boards, and not at the surface ornament. Nay, perhaps the most valuable lesson of all, to learn, is that it is not prettiness that endues a thing with highest charm, but character. A striking proof of this is Mr Madox Brown’s delightful deal “Workman’s chest of drawers and glass,” at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition the other day – quite a plain thing with only a jolly, depressed carved shell above the glass and chamfered to the edges of the drawers – made in deal and stained green - that is all! It was just a commonplace thing handled imaginatively, and it gave me as much pleasure as anything in the exhibition. It made me feel that it takes a big man to do a simple thing: for the big artist takes broad views, he gives use its proportionate place, he knows the virtue of restraint, and he has character to impart.

Sedding has been quoted here fairly extensively because A.H. possessed a copy (now in the possession of the author) of the book *Art and Handicraft*, in which Sedding's lectures were published in 1893, and there are indications that he read and marked certain passages. Perhaps it was this passage that inspired him to produce the green-painted, chamfered and picked out in red, "Cottager's Chest" which was the first item he displayed at an Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society show in 1899.⁷⁴ (Fig. 2-196)

1.1.2.4 The Art-Workers' Guild & The Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society

Sedding was one of the founding members of the Art-Workers' Guild, established in 1884 as a meeting point for architects and others involved in the arts, with the aim of encouraging *the Unity of Art*. Walter Crane tried to sum up the Guild as follows:

*The Guild is a true fellowship of the Arts, men of all crafts meeting on a common ground. None is greater or less than another. Let us hand on the lamp of good traditions, not only of design and workmanship, but also of good fellowship.*⁷⁵

Selwyn Image, who was a Master of the Guild, described *the central idea, the vivifying principle* of the Art-Workers Guild as *the idea, the principle, of the Unity, the Interdependence, the Solidarity of all the Arts.*⁷⁶

However Sedding wanted not just *sympathetic social intercourse* but *some united effort at practical work.*⁷⁷ Despite this, as Karen Livingstone has noted,

the Art-Workers' Guild was reluctant to undertake a more public role or to organise public exhibitions, and it continued to maintain an essentially private stance...Membership of the Guild (which was by election) soon came to be seen as a kind of professional accreditation, and commissions for work, as well

⁷⁴ John D Sedding, "Art and Handicraft", Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1893, lecture "The Handicrafts in the Old Days" pp 50-81.

⁷⁵ Walter Crane, quoted by HJL Masse, 'The Art-Workers' Guild 1884-1934', AWG, 1935, p 2.

⁷⁶ Selwyn Image, *Address Delivered...on twenty-fifth anniversary of the Guild's foundation*, Art Workers' Guild, 1909.

⁷⁷ John D Sedding, as above, p 1.

*as collaborative projects between members, were forthcoming as a result.*⁷⁸

The desire for a means to show work to a wider public was answered by the creation in 1886 of the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society which organised regular selling displays of members' work. These two bodies, the AWG and the A&CES, provided the link between a large number of independent artists. A.H. was later to be elected to both.⁷⁹

1.1.2.5 The 1890s

If the 1880s saw the foundation of the Arts & Crafts Movement, the 1890s, the decade in which A.H. served his apprenticeship and came back down to London to join the family firm in 1893, was a decade when a number of significant and influential events took place to establish the movement in practical terms. For example C R Ashbee had started The Guild of Handicraft in 1888, but it was in 1890 that it expanded and moved to bigger premises in the Whitechapel and also opened a retail showroom in the West End. This attempt to put into practice the new Socialist ideas about work and the arts has been well recorded by Alan Crawford and Fiona MacCarthy.⁸⁰ It was as much about education and creating an idealistic egalitarian community for ordinary workers, as it was about making furniture or jewellery. There were close links between the Guild of Handicraft and A.H.⁸¹

In architecture

*...it was clear that members of the Art Workers Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society were developing a simplified and non-copyist architecture that did not at the same time, ignore tradition.*⁸²

⁷⁸ Karen Livingstone, 'International Arts & Crafts', V&A Publications, p 48.

⁷⁹ Ambrose Heal first exhibited at A&CES exhibition in 1899 but he claimed his membership overlapped with that of William Morris who died in 1896. He was elected a full member of AWG in 1911 having been a member of the Junior AWG before that exhibiting at the latter's 1905 exhibition.

⁸⁰ Alan Crawford, 'C R Ashbee', Yale University Press, 1985. also Fiona MacCarthy, 'The Simple Life', Lund Humphries, 1981.

⁸¹ See Oliver Heal, 'Ambrose Heal & Edwardian Architecture' unpublished, BCUC HACS dissertation, 2004.

⁸² Alastair Service, 'Edwardian Architecture', p 12.

Central to these developments was the search for a truly English style much of it based on a study of vernacular architectural traditions. Unsurprisingly many of the same architects applied the same ideas to furniture design.

1.1.2.6 Kenton & Co

One experiment in unorthodox furniture production that may well have inspired the young Heal, was the creation of Kenton & Co., in Bloomsbury, in 1890. Set up by a group of architects, employing five professional cabinet makers, its aim was:

*...to supply furniture of good design and the best workmanship and to undertake decorative work generally...Each piece of furniture will be signed by the designer, and it is hoped that in this way,...something of the recognition already allowed to works of sculpture and painting may be extended to individual pieces of furniture.*⁸³

Much of the furniture produced by Kenton and Co was remarkably simple and elegant for the period. Although Kenton & Co was short lived, it is relevant because among the leading members were Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley who subsequently moved to the Cotswolds to work there. It is significant because of its philosophy of raising furniture manufacturing from a merely utilitarian function to putting it on a level with the so-called Fine Arts.

1.1.2.7 The Cotswold School: Gimson & the Barnsleys

When Gimson and Barnsley, together with Barnsley's brother Ernest, set up workshops to make furniture in the Cotswolds in 1893, their furniture became less sophisticated aesthetically. There was a deliberate attempt to absorb local traditions and materials into their work. In addition to this they no longer had access to professional cabinet makers to carry out their work for them but were doing most of it themselves. According to Mary Greensted they

relied almost entirely on locally obtainable woods; oak, ash, elm, deal and

⁸³ Mary Greensted (Ed.), 'An Anthology of the Arts & Crafts Movement', Lund Humphries, 2005, p 32.

*various fruitwoods...The solidity and good construction of their furniture was a feature which was almost universally noted, if not always favourably. From the outset, their belief that honesty of construction went hand in hand with the deliberate use of open joinery was fundamental to their designs, so that wooden pins, mortice-and-tenon joints and dovetails on which their sound and solid structures were based were visible, and were even exploited for their decorative effects.*⁸⁴

This idea of honesty of construction was one that A.H. adopted although he never embraced the massive, ‘over-engineered’ appearance of much of Sidney Barnsley’s furniture. Despite having been trained by Sedding, Gimson and the Barnsleys turned their back on the use of machinery, using only traditional hand tools to make their furniture apart from being equipped with a circular saw.⁸⁵ At the same period A.H. was setting up his own workshop and, by contrast, announcing in his catalogue:

*We have erected in our Cabinet Factory a plant of the most improved type, driven by powerful electric motors, which is an example, in its way, of all that is most modern in cabinet making machinery...*⁸⁶

However, as will be discussed later this “modern machinery” was not much more comprehensive and the difference is mainly a question of attitude.

1.1.2.8 W.R. Lethaby

William Morris died in 1896 and, although A.H. was younger than all of the next generation of Arts and Crafts leaders, he established close contacts with several influential members. He recalled in a speech many years later, how he was *thrown in with a set of young Grays Inn architects and through them...met those fervent spirits Lethaby, Selwyn Image, Voysey and others at the Art Workers Guild.*⁸⁷

A.H.’s link to the ‘young Grays Inn architects’ was his vibrant and talented cousin, Cecil Brewer (1871-1918) who played a crucial role in influencing his work as a

⁸⁴ Mary Greensted, ‘Gimson and the Barnsleys’, Lund Humphries, 1980, p 83.

⁸⁵ Mary Greensted, *Gimson & the Barnsleys*, p. 166.

⁸⁶ Heal & Son, *Simple Bedroom Furniture* catalogue, 1899, p 2.

⁸⁷ Sir Ambrose Heal, handwritten notes for speech to RDI, 30.07.1953. Author’s archive.

young designer, as will be demonstrated later.⁸⁸ Selwyn Image (1849-1930) had been part of the Century Guild (an early artists' cooperative organisation set up in 1882) but was still active at the beginning of the First World War, becoming a founder member of the Design and Industries Association. CFA Voysey (1857-1941), was not just a great architect, whose work greatly influenced Brewer but he was also a designer of furniture and two-dimensional patterns for carpets and wallpapers (Heal & Son sold exclusive versions of some of his designs).⁸⁹ However it is usually WR Lethaby (1857-1931) who is credited with carrying forward the teachings of William Morris with regards to the Arts and Crafts. After ten years working for the architect Norman Shaw, Lethaby set up his own office in 1890. He too was one of the founders of Kenton & Co, and a close friend of Ernest Gimson. As a member of S.P.A.B. he became part of the group that would sup together after the weekly meetings, discussing common interests with William Morris, Philip Webb and Emery Walker, so perhaps Lethaby was better equipped than anyone to act as an apostle for the great man.

Lethaby made his own contributions to architecture through the publication of his study of ancient buildings and mysticism, entitled *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* and subsequently through studies of Byzantine and Hellenic art. Throughout his life he was a prolific writer but perhaps even greater was his contribution as an educator. In 1896 he was appointed, by the Technical Education Board as joint Principal of the newly founded Central School of Arts and Crafts in Regent Street, London. He insisted on appointing practising craftsmen as instructors and dispensed with the tradition of holding examinations and issuing diplomas. A.R.N. Roberts wrote of him:

Lethaby himself was a teacher of great gifts. A slender, delicate-looking man of no commanding presence or resonant voice, he yet possessed a quietly impressive personality and the ability to convey both his own enthusiasm to students and to awake a wholehearted response from them. His domed forehead suggested his intellectual power and the aptness of his comments his

⁸⁸ For information on Cecil C Brewer see; Jim Golland, *The Fives Court*, J&M Verden, 2000. Adrian Forty, *Mary Ward Settlement*, Architects Journal, August 1989. RIBA Journal 1918.

⁸⁹ For information on CFA Voysey, see; Wendy Hitchmough, *CFA Voysey*, Phaidon, 1995. Peter Davey, *Arts & Crafts Architecture*, Phaidon, 1995. Also Heal & Son Press Cuttings book, AAD.

*interest in the individual student.*⁹⁰

Lethaby also became the first Professor of Design at the Royal College of Art in South Kensington, in 1900. When the Design and Industries Association was set up in 1915, Lethaby was an early, valuable member who helped greatly in its promotion. He was therefore definitely not stuck in a medievalist or Arts & Crafts position, but provided a bridge between nineteenth and twentieth century approaches to design. As John Gloag has remarked, there was a change from

The contemptuous indifference to everything connected with machine production which had accompanied the first rapturous enthusiasms of the craft revival in the eighteen-sixties and seventies.

By 1913 Lethaby was writing:

*Although a machine made thing can never be a work of art in the proper sense, there is no reason why it should not be good in a secondary order – shapely, smooth, strong, well fitting, useful; in fact, like a machine itself. Machine work should show quite frankly that it is the child of the machine; it is the pretence and subterfuge of most machine made things which makes them disgusting*⁹¹

As early as 1901, Lethaby was drawing attention to the need for industry to employ good designers. In a speech to students of Birmingham School of Art he said:

...there is the tremendously important question of the relation of the great industrial producers to the Art Schools and to all matters of design. I must sorrowfully confess that this question of the serious beauty of the products is too often neglected, ignored, or traversed...Enterprise on the designing side of trade seems to be nearly extinct...who has ever heard of a competent designer being called in to guide manufacture...?

...after all, design is properly only common sense acting with expert knowledge and a sense of fitness and finish. Beauty is most certainly attained in doing

⁹⁰ A.R.N. Roberts, *William Richard Lethaby, 1857-1931*, LCC, 1957, p 31.

⁹¹ John Gloag, *The English Tradition in Design*, King Penguin, 1947, p 29, quoting from W.R. Lethaby, *Art & Workmanship*, The Imprint, Jan 1913.

*necessary work with precision, elegance, and good feeling.*⁹²

The human input in work was vital for Lethaby as was art in everyday things. He wrote:

*Every work of art shows that it was made by a human being for a human being. Art is the humanity put into workmanship, the rest is slavery...A work of art is a well made thing, that is all...Art is not a special sauce applied to ordinary cooking; it is the cooking itself if it is good. Most simply and generally art may be thought of as THE WELL-DOING OF WHAT NEEDS DOING.*⁹³

1.1.3 The Design and Industries Association

The Design and Industries Association, commonly known as the DIA (for which A.H. designed the emblem), (Fig. 1-3), was founded in 1915.⁹⁴

It symbolises here the next stage in the evolution of design in the early years of the twentieth century, however it is particularly relevant as A.H. was one of the small team who recognised the need for such an organisation, lobbied government on the subject and then set it up. It may be reasonably assumed, therefore, that the DIA's approach to the subject of design reflected accurately A.H.'s position at that period.

Between 1900 and the First World War, A.H.'s own design style matured and became recognisably distinct. It was essentially based on English traditions but he, like most designers at the time, was influenced by developments in continental Europe.

⁹² W.R. Lethaby, *The Study and Practice of Artistic Crafts*, John Hogg, 1901, pp 18-20.

⁹³ W.R. Lethaby, 'Art & Workmanship', Design & Industries Committee, 1915, reprint of article first published in 'The Imprint', Jan. 1913.

⁹⁴ Memo to *Fourposter News*, from A.S. Heal, 26.06.1980. *AH was active in the early years of the DIA and amongst the contributions that he made was the design of the Association's emblem. It was simple, clear and comprehensible, the initials DIA combined in Greek capitals. It was revived in 1980.*

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Fig. 1-3. The logo of the DIA combining the initials in Greek letters within a circle designed by Ambrose Heal.

The first influence was the reaction against the perceived excesses of Art Nouveau displayed at the 1900 Paris Exhibition. Before 1900, Arts and Crafts furniture can be seen to incorporate a certain fluidity of movement - there are still a few curves around. After 1900 these effectively vanish and the simple box shape dominates. This simplicity was reinforced by the growth of the Garden City movement that sought to build inexpensive housing and, naturally enough, sought relatively cheap, simple furniture for the interiors.

However, in more positive terms in the years before the First World War, British design leaders came to look towards Germany as the example of the way to reconcile the needs of Art and Industry. German design reformers had also been inspired by the British Arts and Crafts Movement but had taken a more forward-looking approach in setting up the *Deutscher Werkbund*, in 1907, to encourage *the application of art to industry*.⁹⁵ Herman Muthesius, one of the founders who had spent years studying the English scene, persuaded his contemporaries that what was required was a *Zeitstil* to produce products that were appropriate to the time:

*...he condemned his compatriots' efforts to inspire an art-industry, mainly on the grounds that they looked to the past, rather than to the present or to the future for their inspiration, and were thus failing to produce designs that would meet contemporary needs...*⁹⁶

The organisation accepted that *the engineer could make as valid a contribution to a contemporary design aesthetic as the artist/craftsman* and included in its publications pictures of cars, locomotives and liners, etc., thus endorsing the idea that *form follows function*.

As Pat Kirkham has recorded in her book on Harry Peach, there were also in England growing concerns about the standard of design of commercial products long before the First World War. A short-lived Design Club was set up for example which by

⁹⁵ Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* p 185, quoting *The Studio Year Book* 1914.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

January 1909, had about 100 members including A.H. A few years later

Heal and others such as the designer and metal worker Harold Stabler, and the lithographer, Ernest Jackson, considered the Arts and Crafts Movement too elitist and unresponsive to the needs of the commercial world. The financial failure of the 1912 Arts and Crafts Exhibition confirmed their worst fears and they attempted to reform the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. In 1913 Heal, Stabler and Hamilton Temple Smith, proposed cutting ‘the artiness out of our craft education’ and concentrating on ‘the sounder essentials demanded – or which ought to have been demanded – by commerce’. The dismissal of their recommendations in May 1914 indicates the conservatism of what had once been the most lively and progressive design movement in Europe... Stabler began to gather together a group of like-minded people to discuss the problems with a view to forming a new body. Heal introduced Peach to Stabler.⁹⁷

The influence of the Germany’s *Deutsche Werkbund* was such that, from its foundation in 1907 to just before the First World War in 1914, it had grown to such importance that it could sponsor a major exhibition in Cologne. This exhibition, which included Gropius’ model factory and Bruno Taut’s glass house, was visited by a number of leading English designers, including A.H., and it was as a result of this that they lobbied even more strongly for the creation of an equivalent organisation for England. The outbreak of the War may have helped to convince the Board of Trade that something needed to be done as in March 1915 an ‘Exhibition of German and Austrian articles typifying successful design’ was held in Goldsmiths’ Hall, London. The *Acting Committee* of Cecil Brewer, Ambrose Heal, Ernest Jackson, J.H. Mason, Harry Peach, Hamilton Smith and Harold Stabler had been invited *to submit a collection of enemy products* and the exhibition was held under the auspices of the Board of Trade. As Nikolaus Pevsner records, the pamphlet issued at the time of the exhibition points out how

The need for the employment of machinery has been thoroughly appreciated. ...The founders of the modern movement in Germany succeeded not by ‘redundancy of ornament’ but by ‘appropriateness, technical perfection and

⁹⁷ Pat Kirkham, *Harry Peach*, Design Council, 1986, p 47. AH’s friendship with Peach was evidently well established before this. His photograph album from 1913 includes a picture he took of Peach and his children on holiday at Hutton-le-Hole, Yorkshire. (Author’s collection)

*honest workmanship.*⁹⁸

Shortly afterwards the DIA was founded and presented itself as *A New Body with New Aims*. The aims of the Association included the following statements:

This Association aims at the development of British Industries through the cooperation of the Manufacturer, the Designer, and the Distributor...Sound design is not only an essential to technical excellence, but furthermore it tends towards economy of production: the first necessity of sound design is FITNESS FOR USE.

Modern industrial methods, and the great possibilities inherent in the machine, demand the best artistic no less than the best mechanical and scientific abilities.

The main methods for achieving these aims were to be through exhibitions, publishing, forming trade groups and by involving Schools of Art and Technical Institutes. The evangelical nature of the task was emphasised by the stirring phrases:

Every manufacturer owes a duty to his trade: to improve the quality of the work under his control.

*Every worker owes a duty to his craft: to improve the quality of his own workmanship.*⁹⁹

It is interesting to see that a good number of familiar ‘arts & crafts’ names were among the very first members; W.A.S. Benson, Graily Hewitt, Charles Holden, Selwyn Image, W.R.Lethaby, Robert Lorimer, Alfred and Louise Powell, F.W. Troup, Robert S Weir. There were others who were to be better known after the War such as; Minnie McLeish, Prudence Maufe, Frank Pick, Charles Richter, Percy Wells. The retailers who signed up from the beginning included; Boots, Debenhams & Freebody, C.H. St. John Hornby (WH Smith), Marshall & Snelgrove, Gordon Selfridge, and H.F. Tomalin (Dr Jaeger’s). It is clear from that first list of members that the founders believed one of the most important groups to be influenced were the young as it is littered with the names of Heads of Colleges recruited to the cause.

⁹⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, *History of the DIA*, DIA Yearbook 1964-5, p 34.

⁹⁹ *Design and Industries Association* pamphlet, August 1915, p 5.

Although it remained a fairly small body ¹⁰⁰, as Fiona MacCarthy notes,...*it managed to be relatively influential because it was well organised and sensible and practical in its campaigns.* The products made by members of the organisation, despite their German inspiration, were very British. Fiona MacCarthy summed it up:

*The feeling of the time is very even, very gentle. Compared with the stylistic idiosyncrasies of Arts and Crafts design, the recurring images of DIA design are altogether steady and predictable. The Heal's weathered oak sideboards, the Dryad cane chairs, the early morning tea-sets by Carter, Stabler, Adams: such perennial favourites of the design cognoscenti of the period have such an understated homeliness, a pleasant kind of primness, very much related to the (DIA approved) reconstituted Georgian buildings of the era.*¹⁰¹

Pevsner remarks how, in the 1922 DIA Yearbook, the furniture illustrated; *is either (and mostly) in the Gimson tradition (eg by Peter Waals and later Gordon Russell) or approaching Georgian (eg by Heals and also by Charles Holden).* In fact it appears there was, even amongst this committed group of pro-machine designers, a serious resistance to the *Bauhaus style* that lasted through the 1920s. Minnie McLeish wrote a report on the special section on good design displayed at the 1927 Leipzig Fair in which she said: *We do not understand this modern movement in design and do not like it.* Harry Peach on the other hand was broadly in favour of the new developments and made sure leading members of the DIA were kept abreast of developments. There was, however, a broader degree of acceptance when Serge Chermayeff mounted his exhibition of modern furniture at Warings in 1928 which was reported in the DIA Journal as being *by far the best thing yet done in this country.*¹⁰²

1.1.4 Modernism & Art Deco

As has been seen, the arrival of the Modern Movement in Britain was not automatically welcomed with open arms. Although the design leaders had moved

¹⁰⁰ Pevsner gives membership figures of 583 in 1917, 602 in 1928, 820 in 1930.

¹⁰¹ Fiona MacCarthy, *'British Design since 1880'*, Lund Humphries, 1982, p85.

¹⁰² Nikolaus Pevsner, *History of the DIA*, p 42.

from downright distrust of machinery in the 1880s, to Lethaby's, rather grudging, acceptance in 1913 that a machine aesthetic 'could be quite nice' (to paraphrase) and, from there, moved on to the DIA's determination to 'impose niceness' upon it, there was still a reluctance to embrace the Bauhaus' total enthusiasm for the machine aesthetic that was spreading through Europe in the 1920s.

Christopher Wilk has usefully defined Modernism as

*...an espousal of the new and, often, an equally vociferous rejection of history and tradition, a utopian desire to create a better world, to reinvent the world from scratch: an almost messianic belief in the power and potential of the machine and industrial technology; a rejection of applied ornament and decoration; an embrace of abstraction and a belief in the unity of the arts...*¹⁰³

Alan Powers borrows Michael T Saler's term 'Medieval Modernism' - coined to describe Frank Pick's ideology at London Underground - to illustrate the continuation of the values of the Arts and Crafts Movement through the twenties. The products of industry were accepted but

*... modern design should act to achieve social cohesion, offering the public symbols of continuity and effort. For this purpose classicism was too Mediterranean and too much associated with imperial power, while Art Deco was too frivolous...*¹⁰⁴

Powers suggests that:

In more recent times the terminological difference between Art Deco and Modernism has become less clear, with the recognition of a middle spectrum where they overlap...It is at least an entertaining speculation that British intellectuals accepted Modernism not because they liked it but because it was sufficiently uncomfortable and self-righteous for them to feel at home with it, whereas Art Deco was evidently not a style for serious thinkers.

He quotes Paul Nash observing in 1932: *Whether it is possible to 'Go Modern' and still 'Be British' is a question vexing quite a few people today.*¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Christopher Wilk, *Designing a New World 1914-1939*, V&A Publications, 2006, p 14.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Powers, *The Modern Movement in Britain*, Merrell, 2005, p 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, quoted from Week-end Review, 12 March 1932, p 322.

Benton and Benton confirm that Art Deco, the style that emerged from the 1925 Paris Exhibition, was for a long time, thought to be unworthy of serious consideration.¹⁰⁶ They quote David Gebhard's discussion of the complementary relationship between Art Deco and Modernism:

*During the decades of the 1940s through the 1960s no aspect of architecture was held more in disdain than that of the Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s. Art Deco, the popularised modern of those decades, was either ignored by our major architects and writers, or it was dismissed as an unfortunate, obviously misguided effort: the sooner forgotten the better. Those who exposed [sic] high art modernism during the thirty years from 1940 to 1970 condemned the Art Deco for preserving too many architectural values, for being too concerned with decorative arts and popular symbolism, and for being too compromising in its acceptance of the imagery of high art modern architecture of the twenties and thirties. All of these accusations against the Art Deco were true – the difference today is that we are inclined to feel that all of these qualities which were looked on so disdainfully were, in fact, assets, not defects.*¹⁰⁷

The Modernists had claimed for themselves what they saw as the moral high ground from which they looked down with disdain on anything tainted by history and impurity of style. Walter Gropius, setting out *The Theory and Organisation of the Bauhaus*, wrote in 1923:

Architecture during the last few generations has become weakly sentimental, esthetic [sic] and decorative. Its chief concern has been with ornamentation... This kind of architecture we disown. We want to create a clear, organic architecture, whose inner logic will be radiant and naked, unencumbered by lying facades and trickeries; ...an architecture whose function is clearly recognisable in the relation of its forms.

With the increasing firmness and density of modern materials – steel, concrete, glass – and with the new boldness of engineering, the ponderousness of the old method of building is giving way to a new lightness and airiness. A new

¹⁰⁶ It should be noted that the use of the term 'Art Deco' to describe the design style usually associated with the 1925 Paris Exhibition was not coined until much later and is not contemporary.

¹⁰⁷ Charlotte & Tim Benton, Ghislaine Wood, 'Art Deco', V&A Publications, 2003, p 19, quoting from David Gebhard, 'Tulsa Art Deco', Tulsa, 1980, p 17.

*esthetic of the Horizontal is beginning to develop which endeavours to counteract the effect of gravity. At the same time the symmetrical relationship of parts of the building and their orientation toward a central axis is being replaced by a new conception of equilibrium which transmutes this dead symmetry of similar parts into an asymmetrical but rhythmical balance. The spirit of the new architecture wants to overcome inertia, to balance contrasts.*¹⁰⁸

In the same year Le Corbusier published his book *Vers une Architecture*, in which he famously declared *a house is a machine for living in*.¹⁰⁹ The idea that the machine aesthetic was the only solution to twentieth century living slowly gained favour amongst the European avant-garde. As Charles Jencks explains, the machine became a symbol for a whole way of life: Paul Valéry could see the spirituality and mental discipline underlying the machine. One could say that

- *A book is a machine for reading.*
- *A painting is a machine for moving us.*
- *A house is a machine for living in..*
- *A theatre is a machine for acting.*
- *An idea is a machine for making art.*

...they [the architects] could see the machine in political terms: as a destroyer of class and national boundary and creator of a democratic, collective brotherhood.

Disturbingly, architects came to see themselves as superior holders of knowledge with a duty to impose the aesthetic of the machine on the world. Jencks notes:

...another Viennese who has also written a manifesto on 'Absolute Architecture', Walter Pichler, takes this even further, with machines themselves becoming the new elite. "Architecture is an embodiment of the power and longings of a few men...it never serves. It crushes those who cannot

¹⁰⁸ Walter Gropius, 'Bauhaus 1919-1928,' *The Theory and Organisation of the Bauhaus*, MOMA, 1938, reprinted Secker & Warburg 1975, 1984, p 27. Translated from *Idee und Aufbau des Staatlichen Bauhauses Weimar*, Bauhausverlag, Munchen, 1923.

¹⁰⁹ Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture*, first published 1923, translated as *Towards a New Architecture*, 1927 by Frederick Etchells, reprinted Architectural Press, 1999, p 95.

*bear it”.*¹¹⁰

One is left with the feeling that there was a sense of drift, a lack of certainty of direction, in design terms in Britain during the late twenties. As usual, we were slow to embrace new influences coming from the Continent. Art Deco was not serious enough and Modernism was too radical. Even in 1936, Randal Phillips, in a book illustrating *Houses for Moderate Means*, wrote in his introduction:

At the present time a modified “battle of the styles” is in progress. This has arisen over what is called “the modern style,” which has come to us from France and other parts of the Continent. The “modern” style has its merits, and it has come to stay, I think. But we shall probably witness a considerable change in it. Some elements of grace and suavity will surely redeem its starkness. Its begetters were actuated with the desire to create something essentially of our own day. The clean lines of the aeroplane, the functionalism of the motor-car, the machine inspired them...Tradition was discarded, the stock-in-trade of design cast overboard.

He cautions against the flat roof on practical grounds but also suggests it is un-English. In discussing more traditional forms of house he warns against trying to scale up a cottage to make a house just by enlarging the windows and continues:

*We are on much surer ground when we take a late Georgian House as an example to emulate; for that came into being with a sense of orderliness and formality which accords well with our own time.*¹¹¹

Eventually, in the words of Alan Powers, *Modernism was the winning game*, and it was the area in which the most interesting creative work of the period was done. But it took a long time to win through and he suggests that part of the reason was that there was simply a lack of demand for originality in the immediate post-World War One period. He poses the question:

Why didn’t more of the originators of the Arts and Crafts movement provide an alternative to the prevailing classical revival of the period 1905 to 1930 and

¹¹⁰ Charles Jencks, *Modern Movments in Architecture*, Penguin, 1985, pp 32, 34, 55.

¹¹¹ R. Randal Phillips, *Houses for Moderate Means*, Country Life, 1936, pp 8, 9.

develop a continuity between their work and Modernism, as Frank Lloyd Wright, who was no younger than Lutyens, did in the United States?

...Only Charles Holden ended up with a foot strongly placed in both the Arts and Crafts and Modernist camps, but even he went through a period of producing dull work in between, indicating that there were no opportunities in the years 1910-25 to do much else.¹¹²

Stephen Hayward in *Good Design is Largely a Matter of Common Sense*, has sought to analyse Heal's strategy during the inter-war period and concluded that commercially an 'unadulterated' version of the good design discourse was untenable:

...good design lost its Utopian pretensions...It became a taste culture that offered a paradoxical mixture of 'tradition and modernity', aesthetic exclusivity underpinned by craftsmanship...In a bid to preserve its distinctiveness Heal's would continually redefine the modern. Stylistic change was presented in terms of the shifting Zeitgeist...Yet the modernity of Heal's was never merely fashionable or 'blatant'...It was underpinned by time honoured principles of good taste and craftsmanship. This explains the recurrence of invented traditions: the use of an eighteenth century four-poster bed as a logo for a company founded in 1810; the description of Ambrose Heal as a latter day Thomas Chippendale in an exhibition of 1930...

Heal's skilful manipulation of moral and aesthetic principles for the purpose of forging a brand identity, questions whether an 'unadulterated' version of the good design discourse could ever have played a significant role in commodity culture.¹¹³

¹¹² Alan Powers, *The Modern Movement in Britain*, p 12.

¹¹³ Stephen Hayward, *Good Design is Largely a Matter of Common Sense; Questioning the meaning and ownership of Twentieth Century Orthodoxy*, *Journal of Design History*, Vol II, No 3, 1998, p 227.

1.1.5 Summary

These then were the major design influences in action during the formative years and during the working life of A.H. It is hoped to be able to show, as a result of the research carried out, how these trends influenced him over the years. The Arts and Crafts Movement inspired him when he was young and he remained faithful to its ideals from then on. Taking its principles forward and applying them to twentieth century conditions was the work of the Design and Industries Association. A.H. was so deeply and intimately involved with its creation and propagation that as a mature designer (and as a business man) his approach to design was that of the DIA: there was a complete overlap of identity and purpose. The development of Modernism would appear not to have appealed to him immediately as he was a designer brought up to respect history and particularly English precedents. However he was still a man of his times and it will be possible to see how his work continued to evolve and incorporate stylistic elements that perhaps owe more to Art Deco and the ‘moderne’ than strict Modernism. In view of the fact that later generations would finally reject the austerity of Modernism, it seems a matter for regret that the traditions of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the DIA were not carried forward through the thirties to evolve an English-Modern style, appropriate to the times, which was not shorn of all historical, visual cultural references. Perhaps A.H.’s work provides some clues as to the direction this might have taken before the idea was picked up in the somewhat extraordinary circumstances of the Utility Furniture scheme in Wartime and immediate Post-War Britain.

1.2 Retail is Detail

“Retail is detail” was one of the favourite expressions of Sir Jan Lewando (1909-2004), one time non-executive director of Heal’s and previously director of Marks & Spencer and chairman of Carrington Viyella. It sums up neatly the fact that retail success only comes about through successfully blending a complex cocktail of merchandising, marketing and administrative skills, mixed with impeccable timing. Shopkeepers talk of the need to have the right goods, in the right place, at the right time, and at the right price, in order to be able to satisfy customers’ needs. However it is more than just a mechanical process but one that requires much creative input into making consumption a satisfyingly seductive cultural experience.

It is one of the objectives of this study to examine how the Heal organisation stirred its own potent cocktail under the direction of Sir Ambrose Heal. However, before dissecting those particular ingredients it is necessary to look at retail developments generally during a period of enormous and rapid change, the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Changes in the retail scene not only mirror social changes but they can also affect society as well in turn.

To put these changes into perspective it is proposed to sketch in the broad historical movements that led to the nineteenth century retailing phenomenon of the department stores. Then the development of the specialist shopkeepers will be traced before looking at the social implications of all these developments and finally at the Tottenham Court Road area itself.

1.2.1 Historical Background

One can trace the growth of the retail trade in London by following the growth of London itself. The links between traders and the society which they serve are so intricately and intimately interwoven that they rise and fall together. As new areas

become fashionable, so new traders spring up to cater to them – as new traders open up, so an area becomes fashionable.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the City of London was a walled-city that contained the shops that it required to survive. The very words to describe town-dwellers – *burgher* (in English), *bourgeois* (in French), *bürger* (in German), *borghese* (in Italian) - all come from the same stem, the stronghold around which they (mainly traders and craftsmen) originally gathered for protection and which led to the growth of the towns themselves. A maze of very narrow streets housed the different trades, often clustered together by specialities that in turn gave rise to London street names such as Cornhill, Poultry, Haymarket, etc.

As Alison Adburgham in her book *Shopping in Style* points out, *The shopkeeper's place of business was also his home, and as often as not he was the craftsman who made the things he sold*. His wife, children and apprentices would all be housed at the back or above the workshop.

With only one bridge across the Thames until 1750, when Westminster Bridge was constructed, London naturally followed the North bank of the river. As late as 1825, when short-stage coaches first started, they were servicing what were still outlying villages such as Kensington, Hampstead and Highgate, far outside the city walls.

Adburgham describes London's growth as follows:

*By the end of the eighteenth century, London had changed its shape. A century previously the built up area followed a narrow banana shape from Wapping to Westminster bounded on the south by the Thames and the north by Holborn and the Oxford Road. By 1800 the shape was roughly square as a result of the Bloomsbury and Camden developments north of Holborn and the Portman and Harley-Cavendish estates north of Oxford Street. The northern boundary of the metropolis was now the New Road from Paddington to the City. Edgware Road, Park Lane and Grosvenor Place made the western boundary, with toll-gates at Tyburn and Hyde Park Corner.*¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style, London from the Restoration to Edwardian Elegance*, Thames & Hudson, 1979, p 74.

Slowly the old city boundaries had been expanded to absorb these areas. Covent Garden became the first fashionable suburb after 1630, followed by Bloomsbury, St James's, and the aristocratic enclave of Mayfair. Soho became fashionable by the end of the seventeenth century. As Clive Edwards explains, the furniture makers and dealers followed these movements:

*By the mid-seventeenth century, the fashionable furniture trade, once established close to St Paul's Churchyard migrated from there down Fleet Street and into the Strand. By the end of the century, a further relocation occurred towards Long Acre and Covent Garden.*¹¹⁵

This area around Covent Garden and St Martin's Lane housed the workshops of such famous cabinet makers as Chippendale, Cobb and Vile during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Claire Walsh has demonstrated that, contrary to the perception put forward by traditional retail historians of shopping in the eighteenth century being neither pleasant nor convenient, retailers at the time did, in fact, devote much effort to window display and in-store presentation. Shopping was already a highly developed cultural activity in the eighteenth century and Walsh illustrates (partly using trade cards from the Heal Collection at the British Museum) how attractive many shops were. She points out also that

It is important to establish that the top class London shops in the eighteenth century were not workshops into which a counter had been placed. From inventories it is clear that the retail shop and the workshops of up-market retailers were always distinct and separate areas.

All the attributes that the good retailer of later centuries would require were already well defined and could be conveyed to the potential customer through shop layout: *financial security, artistic sensitivity, sound judgement, trustworthiness...*¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Clive Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes, A history of the retailing and consumption of domestic furnishings*, Ashgate, 2005, p 30.

¹¹⁶ Claire Walsh, *Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London*, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1995, pp 157-175.

1.2.2 Department Stores

It was the nineteenth century that witnessed the most phenomenal growth of cities everywhere, not just London with which Heal's is indelibly associated. The population of London grew from less than a million in 1800 to more than seven million just over a century later.¹¹⁷ Whilst across the Channel, the population of Paris went from half a million to two and a half million over the same period.¹¹⁸ Between 1801 and 1901 the population of England and Wales as a whole grew from 9 million to 32 million, but even more remarkable is the fact that over the same period the percentage of the population classed as 'urban' rose from 25% to 75%.¹¹⁹ Traditional structures of retail distribution were bound to change. Powered by the industrial revolution, the explosion of the population in the cities led to the arrival on the scene of the epitome of retail development, the department store.

Adburgham records the development of what was effectively the first department store in 1796 when Harding Howell & Co took over Schomberg House in Pall Mall, London. The fact it did not survive may have more to do with changes to Pall Mall as a shopping street than being ahead of their time with the concept of a retail outlet that had separate departments for fabrics, haberdashery, millinery and dresses, furs and furniture.¹²⁰

The idea took off in a big way in the second half of the nineteenth century with, for example, The Marble Palace in New York, The Louvre and Bon Marché in Paris, Whiteleys and Derry & Toms in London, to mention just a few. By then the ingredients were there to make this concept not just workable but so successful that it symbolises in many ways city life in the Victorian era. The growth of population in the capital cities was combined with economic growth that provided the newly emerging upper-middle classes with the wherewithal to buy goods beyond just day-

¹¹⁷ Hugh Barty-King, *Maples, Fine Furnishers*, Quiller Press, 1992, p 3, gives the following figures; 1801 – 900,000: 1840 – 2,225,000 : 1910 – 7,250,000.

¹¹⁸ Michael B Miller, *The Bon Marché*, Princeton University Press, 1981, p 35, says population grew "from 547,000 to a little over a million" by the middle of the century. "Population of the Paris region passed 2.5 million by the turn of the century."

¹¹⁹ Johnson, Whyman, Wykes, *A Short Economic and Social History of 20th Century Britain*, Allen & Unwin, 1967.

¹²⁰ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, p 82.

to-day necessities. At the same time the Industrial Revolution enabled goods to be manufactured in quantity so that the natural means of conveying mass produced goods to the mass of consumers became that wonder of mass distribution, the department store. But the concept of the department store was not just a functional tool. It worked so well because it was so much more than this. It was a theatre for selling dreams.

Miller, author of *The Bon Marché*, defines the department store concept as offering customers low, fixed prices as the result of the decision to apply low mark-ups that were, in turn, made economically viable through bulk buying and selling for cash only. Customers had free entry and returns were accepted in shops that gathered together in one place all kinds of diverse items that had previously only been available through a multitude of individual specialist traders.¹²¹ Before this, prices had been haggled over and were therefore kept deliberately vague and tradesmen were obliged to extend very long credit to their socially superior clientele.¹²²

These were the rather bald economic and practical differences that set department stores apart yet these differences alone were not sufficient in themselves to explain their enormous success. There had to be drama as well. This has best been captured by those who have looked at the scene in Paris.

To understand something of the phenomenon, as Miller points out, it is useful to look at the work of Emile Zola (1840-1902), who was sufficiently inspired to set his novel, published in 1883 and entitled *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in a hypothetical Parisian department store modelled on the Bon Marché. He vividly conjures up the impact these emporia must have had on a public that had never seen such an abundance of colour, texture or choice: Denise, the young woman from Valognes coming to Paris for the first time, is literally stopped in her tracks by the wonder of the window displays.¹²³ Later, through the character of Mouret, the owner of the

¹²¹ Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché*, see p 30.

¹²² Thomas Chippendale's customer Sir Edward Knatchbull wrote in 1769: *As I receive my rents once a year, so I pay my Tradesmen's Bills once a year wch is not reckoned very bad pay as ye world goes.* Cited by H. Avray Tipping in *Country Life*, 12.04.1924, p 583.

¹²³ Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, first published 1883, Librairie Generale Francaise, 1998 paperback edition, Classiques de Poche, p 45.

store, Au Bonheur des Dames, he recounts the excitement of running this great show and portrays his women customers as completely seduced by the profuse delights he has to offer.¹²⁴ Zola, who carried out research at the Bon Marché department store to obtain accurate background information for his story, includes a mass of detail about the wonderful and varied fabrics on sale. In addition he is able to show what working conditions were like and how the stores operated, from his privileged position as a contemporary eye-witness. Everything is considered, from the psychology of the owner who moves selling departments around so that his customers will get lost and spend more time and money in his store, to the problems of the female customers who are quite unable to resist the products on offer and are reduced to stealing to satisfy their desires.

Michael B Miller undertook a comprehensive study of the Bon Marché department store, covering the period 1869 to 1920, (sub-titled *Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store*) that looked at the internal and external social interactions of the store. He paints a vivid picture of what it was like that must be consistent with department stores of the same period in London:

...mass marketing demanded a wizardry that could stir unrealized appetites, provoke overpowering urges, create new states of mind. Selling consumption was a matter of seduction and showmanship, and in these Boucicaut (the owner) excelled.

Dazzling and sensuous the Bon Marché became a permanent fair, an institution, a fantasy world, a spectacle of extraordinary proportions...going to the store became an event and an adventure.

As Miller notes, the whole Bon Marché building had been especially designed by the architect L.A. Boileau, with the engineer Gustave Eiffel, to maximise the monumental and dramatic effects through immense galleries and grand staircases.

...part opera, part theatre, part museum, Boucicaut's eclectic extravaganza did

¹²⁴ Ibid, pp 116-137.

not disappoint those who came for a show.

*...when crowds and passions were most intense, goods and décor blended into one another to dazzle the senses and to make of the store a great fair and fantasy land of colors, sensations and dreams*¹²⁵

Similarly in London, stores tended to grow organically, rebuilding and expanding over the years so that much of what we traditionally view as the physical incarnation of the great stores is in fact the culmination of those developments that occurred during the Edwardian period (e.g. Harrods, Bourne & Hollingsworth). Even Marshall & Snelgrove, who built a vast French chateau-style building on Oxford Street as early as 1876, that ten years later employed 2000 workers, had already made a fortune for its founder by 1859. However, according to Adburgham, the first purpose-built department store in London was The Bon Marché in Brixton of 1876, which had no connection to its Parisian counterpart except in name. Another, purpose-built as an ultra modern store, with fifty different departments *all carpeted in best Axminster, with central passenger lift, Lamson pneumatic tubing and accommodation for 400 assistants* was John Barnes on the Finchley Road in 1900. But all of these were overshadowed by the arrival in London's Oxford Street in 1909 of the American, Gordon Selfridge. Determined to show the British what retailing was all about, he constructed a vast neo-classical building that was intended to be a centre at which women could spend their days – writing, reading, eating, resting and of course, shopping.¹²⁶ Selfridge is perhaps the best example of how being a shopkeeper is closely related to being a showman; for example, in one year he managed to run up an £80,000 bill for entertaining celebrities at lavish parties.¹²⁷

One of the ingredients which entrepreneurs like Selfridge had to get right was positioning. Certain streets were frequented by the so-called 'carriage trade' whilst others, such as Oxford Street, were not. Selfridges, despite its external grandeur, was aiming at a mass middle market of newly emancipated women and did not attract the traditional carriage trade. On the other hand Regent Street and Bond Street were

¹²⁵ Michael Miller, *The Bon Marche*, p 167.

¹²⁶ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, pp 154, 148, 166, and 168.

¹²⁷ Vernon Ely, *Fifty Years Hard*, The Linen and Woollen Drapers & Cottage Homes, 1967, p 47, this figure appeared in the accounts for 1926. This would be equivalent to over £3million today (www.thisismoney.co.uk)

more up-market, and even here there was a distinction between Old Bond Street and New Bond Street. Alison Adburgham quotes Frederick Willis who wrote in *A Book of London Yesterdays*:

*Shopkeepers in Old Bond Street were not tradesmen but critics, connoisseurs, and authorities on the goods they dealt in.*¹²⁸

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed a completely unprecedented growth of enormous stores, some of which, such as Harrods and Selfridges, survive to this day. They affected the way people lived and reshaped the retail trade as a whole.

1.2.3 Specialist Retailers

According to Alison Adburgham, *another development during the last three decades of the nineteenth century was the emergence of shops catering for individual tastes and enthusiasms of specific groups of people.*¹²⁹ She cites as examples Libertys and Lillywhites (the sports goods store) but gives no explanation for why this came about. One has to conclude that there were elements of society that enjoyed the experience of the new excitement of West End shopping but wanted something different from the indiscriminate mass of merchandise proposed by the department stores. However it also seems probable that this was just an updating of well established retail practices. Claire Walsh has researched eighteenth century retail design and established that the creation of an identity through specialisation and design was well established a hundred years earlier.¹³⁰

As its 'specialisation' was essentially aesthetic, it is worth looking at the example of Liberty, whose history has been recorded in another book by Alison Adburgham.

¹²⁸ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, p 176.

¹²⁹ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, p 156.

¹³⁰ Claire Walsh, *Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London*, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (1995), p. 174.

1.2.3.1 Liberty

Arthur Liberty worked for Farmer & Rogers, the Great Shawl & Cloak Emporium in Regent Street, where he built up a very successful Oriental Warehouse until it was the most profitable part of the firm. It was frequented by artists such as Whistler and Ellen Terry who became friends of Liberty's, so that when he left to set up his own shop in 1875 he already had quite a following. He had a vision of female fashion taking on the flowing, soft languid draperies worn by women in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Edward W Godwin, the architect, wrote a long article in *The Architect* the following year describing the shop and its customers effectively giving it good free publicity (perhaps it is no surprise that he should later be taken on as consultant to their Costume Department).¹³¹ Liberty's skill as a merchant enabled him to maximise his trade by firstly following the trend for Japanese and Oriental goods until, in Adburgham's words:

*By the final decade of the century...Aestheticism had taken on a green-carnation artificiality, an intellectual dandyism, a world weary cynicism.*¹³²

Subsequently Liberty became associated with Art Nouveau in all its permutations to such an extent that in Italy the style is still referred to as '*stile Liberty*'. What set Liberty apart from the perceived excesses of French and Belgian Art Nouveau was the incorporation of celtic motifs, but even with this addition, Art Nouveau was a fairly short-lived design movement, so it is remarkable the extent to which it has become part of the Liberty image.

1902 was the year in which Sir Arthur Liberty acquired his 3000-acre estate in the Chilterns and from then on he spent quite a lot of time concentrating on being Lord of the Manor. One cannot help concluding that this was also the beginning of the period when Liberty's became less than a leading player thus confirming that Art Nouveau was the high point in its story. Sir Arthur Liberty remained at the helm until 1914, at which point he had 1000 employees in London and branches in Paris and Birmingham. After his death and the First World War the board of directors provided no direction or initiative about merchandising and, in Alison Adburgham's memorable phrase, *Liberty's continued to trudge through the twenties looking*

¹³¹ Reg Winfield, *A Tendency to Grace, The Furniture and Interiors of E.W. Godwin*, BCUC, PhD Thesis 1998, p 147.

¹³² Alison Adburgham, *Liberty's, A Biography of a Shop*, Allen & Unwin, 1975, p 68.

backwards, as the construction of their mock-Tudor building in Great Marlborough Street, London, illustrates so graphically.¹³³

1.2.3.2 Morris & Co

In a small but very influential way, Liberty was pre-dated by William Morris. Morris set up his firm, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., initially from his home in Red Lion Square in 1861. As Fiona MacCarthy records:

*In the history of shopkeeping in London at a time of the relentless rise of the department store, Red Lion Square evidently had the charm of the erratic. Another later customer, who asked for softer colours, was shown the door by Morris who said, "There is plenty of mud out there."*¹³⁴

MacCarthy describes the niche in the market that Morris appropriated and expanded:

*Morris and his partners were both forming and supplying the taste of the discriminating middle classes for special household products, above the general level of the market. A whole movement in specialist retailing began with what Rossetti had christened 'The Great Shop'...Morris and his partners were remarkably successful in alighting upon what became the cult objects of the period...No other London decorating firm could compete with such a range of products either made in its own workshops or produced to its strict specifications by outside suppliers. At Morris & Co, as at Heal & Son later, the great selling point was the sense of a personal artistic control.*¹³⁵

In 1877 Morris & Co. (as the firm had by then become) leased a shop at No 264 (later 449) Oxford Street, on the corner of North Audley Street, making it more conventional from an operating point of view but also contributing to its prominence and success. Morris was thus able to add to the more aristocratic clientele he had had in the 1870s, customers who were rich industrialists and provincial entrepreneurs in

¹³³ Ibid, pp 103-104. Another example of a lack of creative leadership is provided by the directors who took over the running of Bon Marché after the death of the founders, M et Mme Boucicaut. M. Miller, *Bon Marché*, p 135, wrote: *As individuals, the directors appear to have led successful but uncolourful lives...They were not men to inspire passionate or dramatic biographies...Most were simply career bureaucrats, organization men who made it to the top.*

¹³⁴ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, Faber & Faber, 1994, p 184.

¹³⁵ Ibid pp 185, 409.

the 1880s.

There were, of course, other less successful attempts at retailing ‘design products’ such as Christopher Dresser’s Art Furnishers’ Alliance in Bond Street, which opened in 1881 and closed in 1883, and C.R. Ashbee’s Guild Of Handicraft showroom that shut down in 1906, thus illustrating that shopkeeping is not always straightforward.¹³⁶

Using the stories of Liberty and Morris as examples we can see three things that are confirmed by the history of other retailers. Firstly there was an opportunity for original, out of the ordinary, quality merchandise to be sold. Secondly there were fortunes to be made in retailing at this period (at least for Liberty and others with real retail talent). Thirdly, success is frequently linked to one man’s flair and ability. This leads one neatly on to consider the shopkeeper’s role in society.

1.2.4 Shopkeepers, Shopworkers and Society

The trader’s role has always been a significant but problematic one. Even in medieval times they were crucial to the economy as a means of getting goods, services and even diffusing information to the places they were required. But because of this need for mobility traders were difficult to control under traditional hierarchical structures: nevertheless they were tolerated because of their necessity.¹³⁷

By the early eighteenth century tradesmen still did not rank very highly in the social scale and Daniel Defoe in his book *‘The Complete English Trademan’* remarks that despite this, *even ministers of state, privy councillors, members of parliament and persons of all ranks in government, find it for their purpose to converse with tradesmen.* He then lists a number *who advanced to honours above their ordinary rank* as a demonstration of their value to society, but they were evidently pretty

¹³⁶ Michael Whiteway (Ed.), *Christopher Dresser, A Design Revolution*, V&A Publications, 2004, pp 41-43.

¹³⁷ Donald Mathew, *Medieval Europe*, Phaidon, 1983.

exceptional and rather frowned upon socially.¹³⁸

The role of the furniture supplier was perhaps particularly delicate. As the decorating and furnishing of interiors came to communicate more and more about the status and taste of the inhabitants, so these customers required the advice and guidance of the furniture retailer in making the appropriate fashionable choices. As Clive Edwards puts it, the retailers were *arbiters of taste* but at the same time as fulfilling this position as personal advisor and consultant they remained suppliers of a service and therefore servants.¹³⁹

Defoe's warning to young tradesmen is as valid today as it was in 1726:

*This is an age of gallantry and gaiety... It is an age of drunkenness and extravagance, and thousands ruin themselves by that; it is an age of luxurious and expensive living, and thousands more undo themselves by that; but, among all our vices, nothing ruins a tradesman so effectually as the neglect of his business...*¹⁴⁰

By the late nineteenth century, it was evident that men who did not neglect their businesses but who had persistence, courage and vision, could make their fortunes as retailers. Having made their fortunes, they may have felt justified in resting on their laurels and adopting the role of landed gentry, but it is certain this was not good for their stores. The example of Sir Arthur Liberty (who became Lord of the Manor at The Lee with his own coat of arms) has already been cited but one could also mention William Edgar (whose daughter was *triumphantly married to a baronet*), James Marshall, (who had a 1000-acre farm at Mill Hill), John Barker (who bred Syrian sheep and polo ponies in 300 acres at Bishops Stortford)¹⁴¹ and Sir Blundell Maple (who was made a baronet, became a Member of Parliament and had two 800-acre estates that became the *largest horse breeding establishment in Britain*).¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Cited in Clive Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes*, p.39

¹³⁹ Clive Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁰ cited in Clive Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes*, p 39.

¹⁴¹ Information taken from Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*.

¹⁴² Hugh Barty-King, *Maples-Fine Furnishers*, Quiller Press, 1992, p 24.

By contrast the situation of the shopworkers was far from being as glamorous because women in the drapery trade at the end of the nineteenth century worked up to ninety hours per week for an average wage of 10 shillings. Even this meager pay was often reduced by the imposition of fines for all sorts of petty offences such as failing to make a sale.¹⁴³ The tradition of housing apprentices with the family above the shop had metamorphosed, with the growth of the department stores as large employers, into big dormitories for staff. William Whiteley, for example, according to Adburgham was:

a hard mean master...on Sundays rooms had to be vacated all day...meals which were taken in communal dining rooms in the basement were not served on the Sabbath.

Another hard man was John Lewis who as late as 1920 was faced with a strike of four-fifths of his five hundred staff

*for more pay, for permission to leave the shop during meal breaks, and for more democracy in living-in arrangements. 'If I see them on their hands and knees I shall not take them back' John Lewis declared. It was a time of high unemployment and the strikers' jobs were easily filled.*¹⁴⁴

Not all employers were such despots. The classic example must be John Lewis's own son Spedan Lewis whose democratic ideas, introduced first at Peter Jones, were eventually to lead to the creation of the John Lewis Partnership where the owners of the business are the employees themselves. However in the nineteenth century the class structure was still too rigid to permit such a thing. As Michael Miller explains, the centre of life was the family and the working of this unit was enlarged to embrace vast numbers of employees under a paternalistic umbrella. The Boucicauts (the managing family of the Bon Marché department store in Paris) restructured and re-oriented *old household values to correspond to the style and goals of their rationalized work system*. Behaviour codes were strictly enforced but there was the possibility of career advancement which equally encouraged *subservience to the regulations of the house. To rise meant to display obedience and loyalty as much as talent*.¹⁴⁵ The Boucicauts also set up welfare and retirement funds for their staff. They created a sense of identity and shared pride in the organisation as though all

¹⁴³ Alan Bott & Irene Clephane, *Our Mothers*, Victor Gollancz, 1932, p 89.

¹⁴⁴ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, pp 146, 179.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché*, pp 83, 99.

were members of one big family.

Arthur Liberty similarly ran his business in a paternalistic manner, setting up a staff library of five thousand books and allowing the staff dining room to be run by a democratically elected manager.¹⁴⁶

Without customers none of the wealth of the owners, nor the thousands of jobs of their employees would have existed. Understandably the stores worked hard to retain a loyal customer base. But over the period of the nineteenth century, with the growth of the big stores, there was a discernible shift in the relationship. In the days before the stores, tradesmen were at the mercy of their aristocratic clientele and had to negotiate prices with them and then wait for months or even years before getting paid. The growth of the market and acceptance of fixed prices gave strength to the retailers. Alison Adburgham cites the case of Howell & James (retailers of silks, china, glass, jewellery and furnishings in Lower Regent Street):

...who in 1849 precipitated the collapse of Lady Blessington's glittering but equivocal ménage at Gore House. This they did by putting in an execution for a debt of some thousands of pounds that Lady Blessington had incurred when furnishing Gore House, thirteen years earlier.

The growth of the mass market was aided by the growth of the railways and bus services which enabled masses of people to get to the cities where the great stores were growing. By the 1890s the Bon Marché in Paris was receiving between 15,000 and 18,000 customers each day and the millions of catalogues printed and distributed were showing people how to dress, how to furnish their homes, how to spend their spare time.

Michael Miller quotes Emile Zola who noted that

...the department store tends to replace the church. It marches to the religion of the cash desk, of beauty, of coquetry, and fashion...women go there to pass the hours as they used to go to church; an occupation, a place of enthusiasm where they go to struggle between their passion for clothes and the thrift of

¹⁴⁶ Alison Adburgham, *Liberty's*, p 99.

*their husbands; in the end all the drama of life with the hereafter of beauty.*¹⁴⁷

In London the class structures and traditional distinctions continued to influence shopping patterns into the twentieth century. There remained those who would never set foot in a department store but had their 'own' little milliners, dressmakers and tailors to whom they would turn. Then there were the up-market stores such as Peter Robinson and Debenham & Freebody who looked after the Duchesses that arrived in their carriages. Harrods organised concerts to attract clients (as Bon Marche did in Paris) and at Liberty's assistants were expected to know their account customers by sight: *...it was forbidden, when a customer requested his or her purchase to be delivered, to ask the name and address.*¹⁴⁸

Allison Adburgham quotes an evocative passage from Osbert Lancaster's book *All Done from Memory* in which he wrote:

*It is difficult nowadays to realise how very personal was then the relationship even in London, between shop-keeper and customer, and the enormous importance, comparable almost to that attained by rival churches, which late Victorian and Edwardian ladies attached to certain stores. All my female relatives had their own favourites...and their arrival was greeted by frenzied bowing on the part of frock-coated shopwalkers.*¹⁴⁹

One of those who contributed to blowing away these traditions was the American retailer Gordon Selfridge. According to his biographer he was scornful of the snobbish view, common amongst British drapers, that *it was better to do an exclusive trade than a big trade.*¹⁵⁰ He was aiming for the general trade not the carriage trade, by presenting his store with as much glamour, theatre, and showmanship as possible to attract the masses.

One interesting subtle development that occurred during the latter part of the nineteenth century concerned the role of the furnishing retailer or interior decorator. His delicate function as part personal advisor, part servant has already been

¹⁴⁷ Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché*, quoted from Emile Zola, p 177.

¹⁴⁸ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, p 164.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p 178, quoting from Osbert Lancaster, *All Done from Memory*, John Murray, 1953.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p 168, quoting from Reginald Pound, *Selfridge – A Biography*, Heinemann, 1960.

mentioned. Harvey and Press record how

...in John Ruskin the decorative arts found their greatest champion. In 'The Two Paths', published in 1859 he instructs readers to 'get rid of any idea of decorative art being a degraded or separate kind of art'.¹⁵¹

It was William Morris who put Ruskin's ideas into practice having been convinced by him of the crucial role the decorative arts had to play in bringing beauty to everyday life. But Ruskin also provided Morris with a whole ethical framework for his business:

The first thing demanded of businessmen by Ruskin was that they should recognise the true social purpose of business. Individual gain, or profit, should never be a goal in itself; rather the businessman has the vital function of supplying the public with goods of the highest quality and utility, and at prices which fairly reflect the cost of production.

...Ruskin's vision of the socially responsible businessman, as one who put purpose before profit and education before convenience, was accepted as an ideal by William Morris: he set for himself the very highest standards in design and manufacture.¹⁵²

This attitude to business was to permeate, from Morris, through the Arts and Crafts Movement, and certainly A.H. was inspired to run his business in a manner which put aesthetics before profit.

1.2.5 Tottenham Court Road & the Furniture Trade

Having looked at the development of the retail scene generally and that of central London in particular it is time to look at the Tottenham Court Road area in which the Heal business developed from its founding in 1810. As is clear from the way trade developed over the centuries, the road North to Camden was one of the last areas, of what is now central London, to be developed. (Fig. 1-4)

¹⁵¹ Charles Harvey & Jon Press, *William Morris, Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain*, Manchester University Press, 1991, p 31.

¹⁵² Ibid, pp 150, 151.

One might assume simply from its position alone in a sort of no-man's-land between the West End, the City and the smarter suburbs to the North, that it could never be a road of smart shops and by and large this was true. However, when Bloomsbury was first developed early in the 19th century it was a fashionable residential area and Shoolbreds were able to open a drapers shop in nearby Tottenham Court Road in 1817. By the middle of the century Shoolbreds had developed into an up-market department store, boarding five hundred employees, with a reputation for very high-class goods.¹⁵³ Even though Bloomsbury became unfashionable later in the century, Shoolbreds carried on trading until 1931 having introduced a furniture department in 1873.¹⁵⁴ By then Tottenham Court Road was such an important trading centre for furniture that Shoolbreds inevitably had to join in. They produced catalogues that demonstrate how this part of their business grew – in 1874 it comprised thirty-eight pages, in 1876 it had grown to eighty-four pages and by 1889 there were over four hundred pages of all sorts of furniture. They set up cabinet-making factories nearby in Midford Place.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, p 106. De Falbe says that in the 1880s they employed between 500 and 1000 assistants, and from the 1891 census gives the information that 227 employees were living in.

¹⁵⁴ Hugh Barty-King, *Maples – Fine Furnishers*, Quiller Press, 1992.

¹⁵⁵ Sophia de Falbe, *James Shoolbred & Co, Late Victorian Department Store Furniture*, Royal College of Art, MA Thesis, 1985, p 72.



Fig. 1-4. Bloomsbury about 1740 from John Rocque's Plan of London (Jeffries Davis). The East side of Tottenham Ct. Rd. is still open countryside. The only building on that side is Capper's Farm house which later formed part of Heal's premises. Note Timber Yard opposite Windmill Street (marked with arrow).

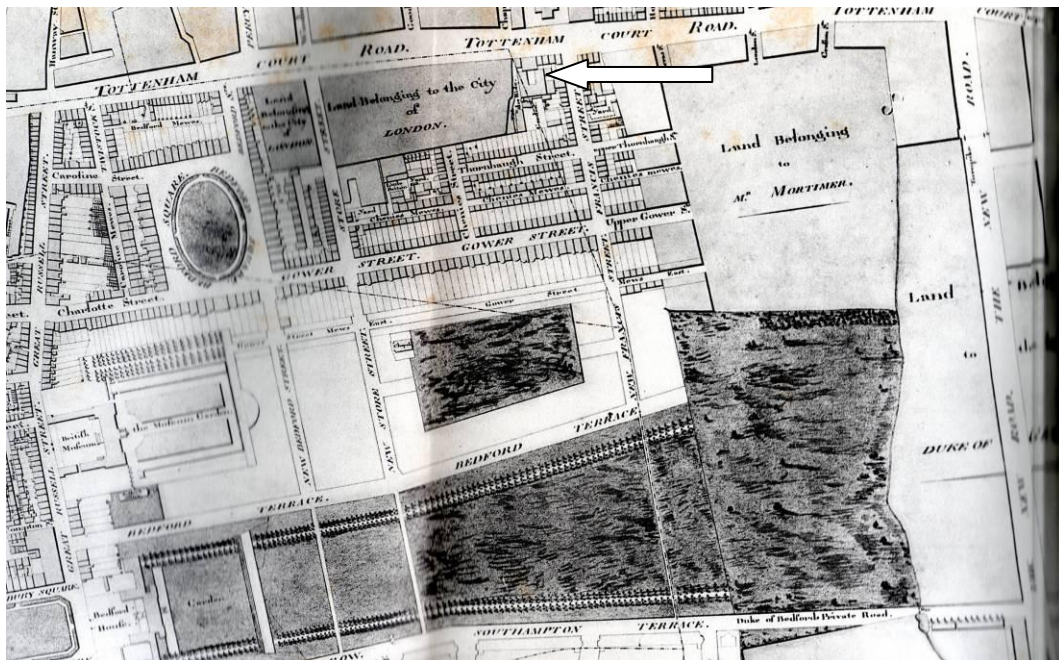


Fig. 1-5. Bloomsbury in 1795 from the Duke of Bedford's survey of his estate (Jeffries Davis). This shows the development of Gower Street and surrounding areas. Heal's premises were eventually sited near the corner of Tottenham Ct. Rd. and Francis St (marked with arrow).

1.2.5.1 Maples

The story of Maples is interesting as once again it illustrates how the drive of one man (or rather father and son) could build up a large retail business around a specialist field like furniture and furnishing. Founded in 1841, right next door to Shoolbreds at the top end of Tottenham Court Road, John Maple had expanded to occupy three shops ten years later. By 1885 the business covered a site that had previously had 200 houses on it.

Hugh Barty-King, who wrote the history of Maples, paints a picture of John Maple starting out from nothing, determined to succeed, even standing on the pavement outside his premises trying to entice the passers-by to step in. His success can be measured by the fact that by 1870 he had bought himself a country estate in Surrey and his son, Blundell Maple, built the business up even further so that he was able to buy two larger estates, become a Member of Parliament and be made a baronet. The shop became so big and highly respected that it was able to attract prestigious clients such as Prince Teck and his wife Princess Mary Adelaide (who were then furnishing White Lodge, Richmond Park) and later the Crown Princess of Greece and the Duke of York. However there were a lot of other clients besides Royalty - in 1891 for example it was said they had done business with *nearly 34,000 different families*.

Maples was structured much like a department store with different departments for different items of furniture and furnishings, even an art gallery for paintings. But Maple limited itself to items for the home and did not stray into fashion as a full-blown draper's department store would have done. Lodgings were provided for junior staff as was usual at the period and this continued into the 1930s. During the late Victorian period many stores developed their own workshops to provide the necessary services to their customers but Maples seem to have taken this policy of vertical integration to extremes. Not only did they have their own factories, employing 1295 people, making cabinet furniture, upholstery, carpet planning, decorating, bedsteads and mattresses but they even set up their own timber yard importing timber from overseas for their own use but also selling to other

manufacturers.¹⁵⁶

Barty-King describes Sir Blundell Maple as *genial, hail and hearty, bon viveur and showman...He made no claims to have an eye for good design or good taste, only as a business man, for what sold.*¹⁵⁷ The most distinctive thing about Maples was its size. Maple's political philosophy was described as *his inflexible faith in the government of the masses by Gentlemen*, and no doubt he ran his business in a similar fashion.¹⁵⁸

1.2.5.2 Fitzrovia & Bloomsbury.

If Shoolbreds and Maples became what would today be termed the anchor stores, the heavyweights of Tottenham Court Road in Victoria's reign, the street and the smaller streets branching off it had been a centre for furniture makers since long before their arrival. Even as early as 1740, when all the land to the North was still agricultural, there was a timber yard on the corner of Tottenham Ct Rd and what is now Store Street.¹⁵⁹

During the latter half of the eighteenth century the street became the base for such distinguished cabinet makers as Christopher Fuhrlöhg (a Swede who came to London to work for Linnell after working in Holland and France and set up his own workshop at 24 Tottenham Ct Rd in 1765, supplying the Prince of Wales), Pierre Langlois (a French cabinet maker who established himself at 39 Tottenham Ct Rd and made furniture for the Duke of Bedford and Walpole during the same period) and Mathias Lock, carver and designer of furniture, who was installed near Ye Swan

¹⁵⁶ Hugh Barty-King, *Maples – Fine Furnishers*, Quiller Press, 1992.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p 23.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p 41, quoting from *Vanity Fair*.

¹⁵⁹ E Jeffries Davis, *University of London The Bloomsbury Site*, University College, 1933, plate 1 reproduction of part of John Rocque's *Plan of London*, begun 1737. She quotes Strype, who described Great Russell street in 1720 as: *inhabited by the nobility and gentry, especially the North side....this place is esteemed...the most healthful of any in London*. See p 7. Gower Street and Bedford Square were developed towards the end of 18th century but around 1800 the fields to the North were waste land *the resort of depraved wretches, whose amusements consisted chiefly in fighting pitched battles and disorderly sports* (E Jeffries Davis quoting from an unnamed contemporary writer). However by 1828 development had been continued and the University of London was founded on a site just to the North of the 'Heal's block', see p 10.

in Tottenham Court Road with his partner Copland in 1752.¹⁶⁰

More and more furniture makers were attracted to the area in the nineteenth century, as rents in Covent Garden rose, so that from then on and through the first half of the twentieth century Fitzrovia was full of workshops trading or competing with each other. Tallis's *London Street Views* of 1838/40 show, in Tottenham Court Road, Charlotte St, Goodge St, Mortimer St, Howland St and Rathbone Place, eleven upholsterers, six cabinet makers, five furniture dealers, five gilder/carvers, four pianoforte makers, three turners, two bedding manufacturers (including Heal & Son), and one each, a chair maker, varnish maker, and mahogany merchant. Later there was even a link to the Aesthetic and Arts & Crafts movements when, in the 1870s, the cousins Agnes and Rhoda Garrett, with links to the Century Guild, set up as interior decorators at 2 Gower Street and William Watts 'Art Furniture Company' was selling E.W. Godwin's furniture designs from its premises in Grafton Street, off Gower Street.¹⁶¹

Although Tottenham Court Road came to be recognised as the centre of the retail furniture trade, it did not have a good reputation. To talk of 'Tottenham Court Road furniture' was to imply bad design and doubtful quality. Throughout its existence the firm of Heal & Son fought against this image and has managed to stand out as an exception to the general rule.

If one compares the Heal business to that of Liberty, for example, one can see similarities in the contribution and difference that one man can make to developing the business. But it is noteworthy that the size of Heal's remained relatively small throughout the nineteenth century when compared to Maples, Liberty or most of the other department stores. Although the Heals lived comfortably from their trade they never made fortunes that could be invested in large country estates, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

¹⁶⁰ See Ambrose Heal, *London Furniture Makers 1660-1840*, Batsford, 1953 and Geoffrey Beard & Christopher Gilbert (Ed.s) *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, Furniture History Society, 1986.

¹⁶¹ Mary Greensted (Ed.), *An Anthology of the Arts & Crafts Movement*, Lund Humphries, 2005, p 13, and Reg Winfield, *A Tendency to Grace*, p 127.

1.3 Personal Background

1.3.1 Early History of the Heal Business 1810-1890

The particular branch of the Heal family from which Sir Ambrose Heal (1872-1959) was descended had been farmers on the Somerset/Wiltshire borders for many generations. The first member of the family to bear the name Ambrose Heal died in 1696 at Maiden Bradley, Wiltshire. It is known that he possessed, amongst other things, twenty “milch cows”, seven heifers, a bull, twenty ewes and two pigs and in addition his best bedroom was used for storing seven or eight hundred cheeses. However, early in the nineteenth century, two sons of a later Ambrose Heal (the fourth 1748-1812) of Kingston Deverill, left to seek their fortune in London. Because they are not mentioned in their father’s Will, in which he left everything to his wife, it is tempting to speculate about a family rift, but nothing is known for certain.¹⁶²

1.3.1.1 Foundation of Heal & Son

In 1810, John Harris Heal (1772-1833) the elder of the two sons, set up his own feather-dressing business at 33 Rathbone Place, London, after spending five years learning the trade. By 1818 it was sufficiently successful to move to larger premises at 203 Tottenham Court Road, where he described himself as a “Mattress and Feather-bed Manufacturer”, trading next door to the then well-known furniture shop, Hewetsons. Fifteen years later John Harris Heal died leaving his widow, Fanny Heal (1782-1859) and their twenty-two year old son, John Harris Heal junior (1811-1876) to carry on the business. This partnership seems to have been a particularly successful one as in 1840 they bought up the premises known as “Miller’s Stables” at number 196 Tottenham Court Road, the present site of the firm. On this site they constructed their bedding factory, equipped

¹⁶² Ambrose & Edith Heal, *Heal Family Records*, privately published, 1932, p 89.

*...with a feather-dressing mill and stove and machine for carding the wool, to which a steam plant for dressing and purifying feathers was added four years later...*¹⁶³

The business traded as “Fanny Heal & Son” until Fanny retired in 1845. John Harris Heal junior also proved himself to be a dynamic and shrewd businessman, who by 1851 was employing 85 men. Subsequently he had the shop rebuilt (Fig.s 1-5, 1-6) with large plate-glass windows in an Italianate style.¹⁶⁴

1.3.1.2 Merchandise

The new factory was dedicated to producing the best quality in bedding materials. In fact they claimed to have been responsible for introducing the real Eider-duck down quilt and duvet to the market, which is far lighter and warmer than ordinary goose down. After ten years (1840-1850) of making Eiderdowns exclusively, the much less expensive goosedown-filled quilts and duvets were added to the range to satisfy the need for something cheaper. Heal’s had, however, been using goose feathers (rather than goose down) for a long time as the goosefeather bed (what we would call an over-mattress that would have been used on top of a straw-stuffed palliass) was the backbone of the business. As an attempt to offer a more comfortable option, a so-called “French Mattress” was introduced in 1840. This consisted of a luxurious blend of outer layers of fine long East India wool on either side of a core of best quality black horse-hair. It was not until 1844 that a spring mattress (now known as a sprung bed base) was introduced as an improvement on the straw palliass on wooden slats. In the same year John Harris Heal junior was proud to proclaim his specialisation when he made this announcement in an advertisement: *the establishment being the largest in London for the manufacture and sale of bedding –NO bedsteads and other furniture being kept.*¹⁶⁵ Perhaps this was the first attempt to distinguish the firm’s uniqueness and underline the difference to Maples that had opened nearby in 1841 and was already expanding.

¹⁶³ Sir Ambrose Heal, *The Story of the Fourposter*, unpublished typescript, ca 1950.

¹⁶⁴ The architect was Morant Lockyer and the building was completed in 1854.

¹⁶⁵ Sir Ambrose Heal, *The Story of the Fourposter*, unpublished typescript, ca 1950.



Fig. 1-5. Engraving of interior of Heal's shop ca. 1854 showing mattress making in the foreground with women sewing behind on ground floor and customers climbing stairs to bedstead showroom on first floor gallery (F. Wild).

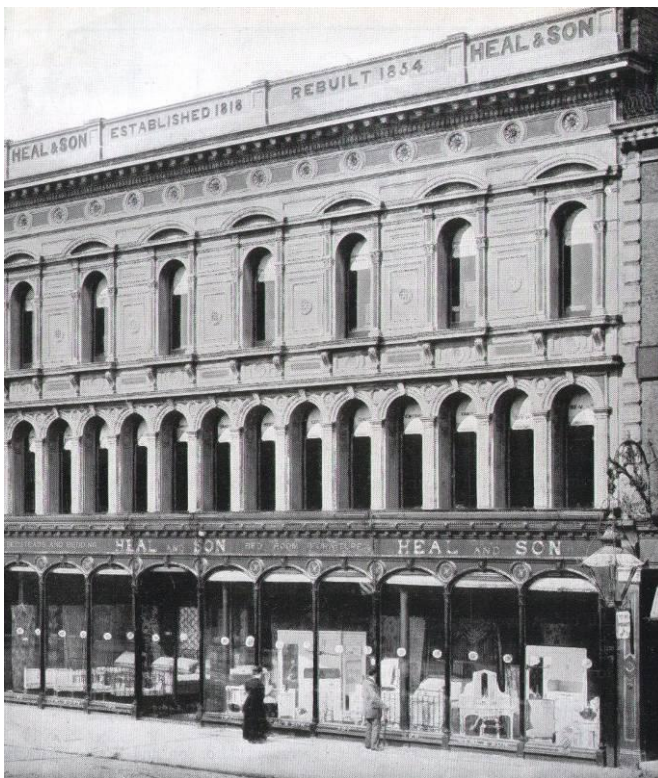


Fig. 1-6. Frontage of Heal & Son shop rebuilt in 1854 by the architect J. Morant Lockyer

However John Harris Heal junior soon saw the advantages of widening his product range and by 1852 was publishing a catalogue that not only illustrated a selection of fourposter and half-tester bedsteads and no fewer than sixty-seven iron and brass bedsteads and cribs, but also included a list of wardrobes, chests of drawers, toilet tables and even, sofas and easy chairs. By 1856 bedroom furniture had become sufficiently important to justify a forty-page, illustrated section within the catalogue.

Changing fashions are reflected in the Heal catalogues of the times. Through the 1860s wooden bedsteads are replaced increasingly by iron and brass ones that get more ornate as the years pass. In 1862 a special leaflet was produced to promote the latest fashion of bedroom furniture in *the very finest Christiana deal stained dark suitable for houses of Gothic design*.

1.3.1.3 Publicity

Making the business known to a broader public, beyond the passing traffic in Tottenham Court Road, was an important objective for John Harris Heal junior. The publication of catalogues was one key marketing tool that he used regularly from 1844 onwards, the first illustrated catalogue being published in 1852. However he was also a firm believer in the power of direct advertising, using a wide variety of media to get his message across. Regular advertisements were placed in *Illustrated London News*, *Punch* and *the Spectator*, amongst others, and posters on railway station platforms were also used. Particularly interesting was his decision to advertise in the works of Charles Dickens, then being published in monthly parts and avidly read by a wide public. His announcements appeared in *Pickwick Papers* as it came out in 1837 and for the next twenty-eight years Dickens' novels carried Heal advertisements.¹⁶⁶ Possibly there was some personal link as Dickens spent much of his life around the area.

¹⁶⁶ All these details taken from Sir Ambrose Heal, *The Story of the Fourposter*.

1.3.1.4 The Decline

Following the death of John Harris Heal junior in 1876 the firm was continued by three partners: Alfred Brewer, Harris Heal and Ambrose Heal. Alfred Brewer (1825-1901) was John Harris Heal junior's son-in-law, and also Fanny Heal's nephew, who had joined the business as a young man in 1840 and, following the death of his first wife, had married 'the boss's daughter' Ann Heal (1835-1902, m. 1862). By 1876 Brewer would have been fifty-one years old and very much the senior partner. Harris and Ambrose, John Harris junior's two sons, had joined in 1861 and 1867 respectively and were still only aged thirty-three and twenty-nine when he died in 1876.

When Sir Ambrose came to write the history of the firm he politely described the activities of his parent's generation as though they had been treading water. One is left with the impression that, even if there had been no great innovations, things had been kept ticking over awaiting better times. He wrote:

*During the twenty five years following the death of John Harris Heal in 1876, no particular expansion of business took place, though one or two subsidiary departments were added for the sale of carpets and curtains, and the upholstery side of the business generally was developed.*¹⁶⁷

This version was adopted by Goodden in the published history of the business, who wrote: *during the next twenty five years the shop coasted happily.*¹⁶⁸ However research for this study has discovered that the original partnership balance sheets give a very different picture and that the three partners were responsible for such a prolonged and steep decline in the company's fortunes that it is astonishing that it was able to survive at all. For the first time it can be revealed that for twenty years things just got worse and worse.

In 1875, the year before J H Heal junior's death, when the three younger members were confirmed as partners, sales amounted to almost £120,000 and the net profit

¹⁶⁷ Sir Ambrose Heal, *The Story of the Fourposter*.

¹⁶⁸ Susanna Goodden, *At the Sign of the Fourposter, a History of Heal's, Heal & Son Ltd*, 1984, p 17.

exceeded £11,000. The following year sales slumped to £102,000 although profits were still respectable at £9000. Every year for the following eleven years sales continued to slide until they had halved by 1885 and by 1887 they amounted to less than £50,000. There then follow four years of relative stability and one senses that at last they had taken matters in hand and were beginning to turn the corner, only to find the balance sheet for 1892 reveals a further drop in sales to £42,000. Things went on getting worse until they hit rock bottom in 1894; sales for that year amounted to only £34,000 (71% below the 1875 peak) and, for the second year running, a loss on trading was made.

Further research into the analysis of sales by department (in the original ledgers turnover was broken down into the following five departments: Bedding, Cabinets, Iron & Brass, Upholstery & carpets, and, at the beginning of the period, Blankets), reveals that initially all areas of the business suffered similar set backs. However as time goes on, it becomes evident that cabinet sales declined more steeply than other sections. In 1875 sales of bedding and cabinets were the two main pillars on which the business was supported – each accounting for about a third of turnover. By 1886 cabinet sales were down to just £12000 or some 23% of total sales, and by 1895 they had sunk to £6000 or 16% of sales – even less than Iron & Brass. Bedding sales reduced steeply as well, dropping from a peak of £40,000 to just £17,000 in 1895 but becoming more and more significant as the main trading plank on which the Heals relied. By 1886 Bedding accounted for 45% of total sales and continued to do this until near the end of the century.¹⁶⁹ (See Appendix III)

One can propose a number of probable reasons for this decline in the Heal family's fortunes between 1875 and 1895.

- Trading conditions generally were difficult. Prices and wages were actually falling.¹⁷⁰ In 1885 furniture makers Constantine Leeds closed down and Jackson & Graham had to merge with Collinson & Lock. A trade depression lasted from

¹⁶⁹ Heal archive, V&A archive of art & design, AAD/1978/2/38, 43, 44.

¹⁷⁰ Charles Harvey & Jon Press, *William Morris, Design & Enterprise*, Manchester Univ. Press, 1991, p 77. Between 1874 and 1896 prices fell by about 40 per cent. Alan Powers *1884 and the Arts & Crafts Movement*, Apollo magazine, April 2005, p 60-65. *Wages fell continuously from 1879, without any reverse until 1886.*

1873-1886.¹⁷¹ Christopher Dresser's Art Furnishers' Alliance closed in 1883.

- Competition was getting fiercer. In particular, direct competitors Maples continued to grow nearby, and Shoolbreds, a large department store, also in Tottenham Ct Rd, opened its own extensive furniture department in 1870.

However at the same time there is evidence that others were managing to grow their businesses in this same period:

- As already mentioned both Maples and Shoolbreds were developing their furniture trade not reducing it.
- 1875 was the year that Arthur Liberty set up his own shop which was to go from strength to strength over the next twenty-five years. By 1880 he had a department selling furniture.¹⁷²
- William Morris was building up his interior decorating company. He restructured the business in 1875, took premises in Oxford St in 1877 which were expanded in 1882 and took over the furniture-manufacturing business Holland and Son in 1890.¹⁷³
- Watts & Co. was founded in 1879 by George Gilbert Scott, G.F. Bodley, and Thomas Garner to sell a wide range of furnishings.¹⁷⁴
- The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw huge growth in those great machines for inciting mass-consumption, the department stores, most of which would have sold furniture, for example: Whiteleys were showing *fitted up rooms in their windows in 1882*.¹⁷⁵

In the final analysis one has to seek the reasons for decline within the business itself. Here the finger seems to point inexorably towards Alfred Brewer, the senior partner. He had joined the firm at the age of fifteen, working in it for thirty-five years before John Harris Heal's death whereupon he had to assume the role of senior partner.

A.H. wrote that Brewer *concerned himself almost entirely with the financial side*.¹⁷⁶

This is probably the crux of the matter: during this period the firm was controlled by

¹⁷¹ Pauline Agius, *British Furniture 1880-1915*, p 171.

¹⁷² Alison Adburgham, *Liberty's, a biography of a shop*, Allen & Unwin, 1975, p 42.

¹⁷³ See Harvey & Press, *William Morris, Design and Enterprise*, pp 119, 168. *The profitability of Morris & Co seems to have risen new heights in the 1880s.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p 170.

¹⁷⁵ Pauline Agius, *British Furniture 1880-1915*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1978, p 157.

¹⁷⁶ Sir Ambrose Heal, *The Story of the Fourposter*, unpublished typescript, ca 1950.

a conservative, risk-averse accountant. One can well imagine this man arguing against the cabinet side of the business because the gross profit margin was smaller than it was on bedding, which was made in house. In addition cabinet furniture is much more prone to damage on delivery and is more difficult to store so he probably convinced himself and his partners that they were better off sticking principally to the bedding trade which was, after all, the purpose for which the firm was founded.¹⁷⁷ At a time when many large retailers were growing rich, the Heals were getting poorer and poorer.

It is striking that as soon as Brewer retired, the business started to recover. It was just at that point, when the business reached its nadir, that Ambrose Heal junior joined as a young man. However, although A.H. junior was, within a few years, making a contribution to its success, he cannot be credited with this recovery so early in his career. His uncle Harris and his father Ambrose senior, would appear to have taken matters in hand and turned things around or at least seen how to make the most of an improved economic situation and they should be given more credit for this than they have previously been accorded.

1.3.2 Early Influences

As has already been explained, A.H. was born into a family that had been in the furniture trade for several generations but it was not a foregone conclusion that he would follow the same path. What therefore were the influences that led him to go into the family business and more critically how did his interest in design develop?

From home in London, via school at Marlborough and six months in France, his character was formed as he grew up, but a cabinet making apprenticeship and architect cousins seem to have been the motivating forces that pushed him to the

¹⁷⁷ The archive includes letters written by Alfred Brewer to Mr Woolley, manager of the Bedding Factory (?), in 1885 which show that in addition to being concerned with figures, Brewer visited bedding clients and was also responsible for extending the range of bed-bases offered by the firm. (AAD/1978/2/507)

front of current aesthetic developments.

1.3.2.1 Family & Education

His parents lived in Crouch End, North London, when he was growing up and not a great deal is known about them. Ambrose senior worked in the family business, and, as has been revealed above, lived through its decline before supervising the recovery at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. When the firm was made into a Limited Liability Company in 1907 Ambrose senior became its first chairman until his early death in 1913. He seems to have been a shrewd businessman, investing in the Staples patent for his younger son and supporting Ambrose junior in his furniture design and manufacturing projects. That he was a man with a social conscience seems evident, not just from the fact that he encouraged his son to read the works of Ruskin, but also because he was a committed churchgoer, being *a very ardent, warm-hearted and enthusiastic supporter of Christian work*, and active as *prime mover in the re-starting of the Pinner Men's Club*.¹⁷⁸ Additionally he was active on behalf of the Furniture Trades Benevolent Association.¹⁷⁹ In his will he left money to his long-serving employees. Whether he transmitted all of this philosophy of life to his son is uncertain, but one passion that he definitely passed on was that of researcher and collector of historical information. A.H. senior built up an enormous collection of ephemera about the area in which he traded, and where he had been born, namely Saint Pancras. On his death this collection of Pancratia was bequeathed to the Borough where, even today, it continues to provide historians with a rich and eclectic source of material.¹⁸⁰

Although his father provided for A.H. junior to go to Marlborough the boy's leanings seem to have been sporting rather than academic. He had been despatched to a boarding school at the age of nine writing home: *I like the school verey (sic) much all except that I have had my ears boxed soundly*.¹⁸¹ He went on to Marlborough before

¹⁷⁸ Pinner Observer, *Death of Mr Ambrose Heal, Funeral at Pinner*, 17 October 1913. A.H. possessed books by Ruskin given to him by his father.

¹⁷⁹ FTBA Minute books, High Wycombe Furniture Archive, Bucks New University.

¹⁸⁰ The Ambrose Heal Collection is housed at the Camden Local Studies & Archives Centre, Holborn Library, 32-38 Theobalds Road, London, WC1.

¹⁸¹ Ambrose Heal jun, letter to his mother, Author's collection.

he was thirteen. It was as a result of a sports injury that his time there was cut short a couple of years later and his schooling was continued by a private tutor in Westgate on Sea where he soon recovered sufficiently to play tennis. He was joined at this last tutoring establishment by his cousin, Cecil Brewer, thus cementing a close friendship that was to be enormously influential.

The parallels with the youth of William Morris are uncanny, as he too had been sent to Marlborough and his mother withdrew him to finish his schooling with a private tutor but this was after the pupils rioted.¹⁸²

In September 1889, aged nineteen, A.H. was sent to Angers in France for six months to improve his French. In addition to language lessons he was taught French history, and took up sculling on the river. Some of his letters home to his mother survive from that period and are interesting because they reveal that his future career path was still undecided at that stage. It would appear that his parents were trying to push him to think about the matter by suggesting possible options. In January 1890 he wrote home:

What would Surveying, Auctioneering, Estate Office & that sort of thing be like? Something in the Book line would be interesting & nice work I should think either in a Book Seller's or Publisher's but you say that there is nothing to be made of it.

Evidently his interest in books was already awakened but parental approval was not forthcoming and they had other thoughts because, a couple of weeks later, he wrote:

Yes, I think I should like the Stock Exchange alright, not that I know much about it.

By mid-February ideas had not advanced very far as he wrote:

...as to the hereafter that is ever so much harder seeing that I know nothing whatever of the Stock Exchange, (I asked a lot of questions about 3 letters ago that you haven't answered referring to the S.E.)...[I know] a very little about the Decorating line. As far as I know at present, I have no choice. But you haven't told me your opinions yet? Or are you still for the "dry goods store"?

¹⁸² C. Harvey & J. Press, *William Morris, Design & Enterprise in Victorian Britain*, Manchester University Press, 1991, p15.

This last question must have raised parental hopes that he might be considering the family business in Tottenham Court Road for in his next letter he replied:

No, I didn't mean "TCR" by "Dry Goods Store". You know you used to say that you would like me to go into a "Wholesale Grocery business like Mr Bell's" and Maurice always pictures me in the future with well oiled hair, a greasy smile, dealing out lbs of butter.

Soon after this he returned from France so the letters ceased and we are left in the dark as to how he and his parents made the decision that he should undertake a cabinet-making apprenticeship before, after all, joining the family firm.¹⁸³

1.3.2.2 Cabinet Making Apprenticeship with James Plucknett

James Plucknett was an 'Art Furniture' manufacturer in Warwick to whom A.H. was apprenticed in September 1890. Melanie Hall has pieced together much information about Plucknett, (whom she describes as *one of the less well-known of the Warwickshire carvers*,) and the history of his firm, from which it emerges that it went through many changes of management, including one that provided a link to the Heal business in London.¹⁸⁴

By 1851 Cookes & Sons, as the firm was then known, was well established and made the intricately carved 'Kenilworth Buffet' for the Great Exhibition of that year, that became one of the most famous symbolic pieces of furniture of its period¹⁸⁵. Although William Cookes' sons carried on the business after his death in 1853, by 1867 they in turn passed the factory on to Frederick Coote. Although Coote only ran it from 1867 to 1869 he is of interest because he had previously worked for John Harris Heal in London's Tottenham Court Road; unusually, a comment was added into the Heal salaries record ledger when he left in July 1867 that he was going to *Cook & Sons, Warwick* (sic). He did not stay long in Warwick for in 1870 he was

¹⁸³ Ambrose Heal, letters written to his mother between 1881 and 1890 from New College, Eastbourne, Loudwater, Westgate on Sea and 15 Rue de la Roë, Angers. No letters from his time at Marlborough survive. Author's collection.

¹⁸⁴ Melanie Hall, *James Plucknett of Warwick and Leamington Spa*, Furniture History Society Journal, 1996, p. 195.

¹⁸⁵ Kenneth L Ames, *Death in the Dining Room*, Temple University Press, 1992, p 51.

back in London setting up his own factory in Tottenham Court Road (see 2.6.1.Key Suppliers), from where he became a major supplier to Heal's, but one assumes he must have remained on good terms with the new owners of the firm in Warwick, Collier and Plucknett, and facilitated Ambrose's apprenticeship twenty years later.

Between 1870 and 1880, Collier & Plucknett promoted themselves as

*upholsterers, cabinet makers and decorators by appointment to Her Majesty, and Manufacturers of rich carved furniture in the peculiar styles characteristic of the Gothic, Tudor and Elizabethan ages,*¹⁸⁶

thus indicating that they were makers of high quality furniture. After Collier's retirement Plucknett was in partnership with a Mr Steevens and they announced that they operated their *wholesale art furniture works by steam power*,¹⁸⁷ and also, notably obtained the order for furniture for the new Town Hall in Leamington Spa in 1884. However, from 1886 James Plucknett alone was responsible for the business so it was to James Plucknett & Co. Art Furniture Manufacturers that A.H. was apprenticed. The indenture, dated 30th August 1890, signed by James Plucknett, Ambrose Heal senior and Ambrose Heal junior states that A.H.

Doth put himself Apprentice to the said James Plucknett to learn the art, profession or business of designing and manufacturing Furniture...to serve until he is twenty one years of age.

For this his father paid one hundred pounds as well as agreeing to pay for food and lodging. Furthermore it was agreed that A.H.'s first year should be spent in the workshops, whilst thereafter he was to be employed in the Drawing Office *to learn the designing of Furniture, Working Drawings, preparing Estimates*.¹⁸⁸ It would seem that this arrangement was only entered into after a trial period because he was already writing letters from his address at 4, St Johns, Warwick, in July 1890. He reported:

I am getting along very comfortably still. Last Monday I went up into the shops & I have been employing my time putting my tools in order (& I have a right goodly set) putting handles on chisels and making a box for the oilstone &

¹⁸⁶ Kellys Post Office Directories, cited by Melanie Hall, *James Plucknett of Warwick and Leamington Spa*, Furniture History Society Journal vol xxxii, 1996, p 159.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸⁸ Indenture of Apprenticeship, Ambrose Heal to James Plucknett, August 1890, author's collection.

*other little preliminary jobs. The time seems to go quicker in the shops than in the Office.*¹⁸⁹

Apart from this glimpse of work his letters home are about his sporting activities and theatrical shows he has seen so we learn nothing about the Plucknett business. Fortunately Melanie Hall uncovered a number of commissions undertaken at this period so it is possible to get an impression of the quality of work Plucknetts produced. For example an Elizabethan-style, 'Shakespeare bookcase', from 1890, made in oak that was said to come from places with connections to Shakespeare's life and work, survives in the Huntington Library. It is possible that the billiard table at Tyntesfield, near Bristol also dates from the years when Ambrose was learning his craft in Warwick. The most high profile job was undoubtedly the furnishing of the Royal Pavilion at the Royal Show held in Warwick in 1892. This would appear in part, at least, to have been achieved by borrowing furniture commissioned by other clients and there is evidence that A.H. was there whilst one of these commissions, a major order for Mrs Urquart, was being made.¹⁹⁰

From all this evidence it is clear that much of Plucknett's output was highly carved and in the 'Elizabethan' style (according to Melanie Hall: *it seems the firm employed seven carvers and had several apprentices*) so that, in terms of the development of his own design style, A.H. took away very little from his time in Warwick. However he honed his skills as draughtsman, learnt his craft as a cabinet maker and the basis for costing, all of which was valuable to him; soundness of construction was always a characteristic of his work.

To further his education in the retail furnishing trade A.H. subsequently spent eight months with the Oxford Street firm of Graham & Biddle, as Gillows did not have a place for him. He was then sent by his father to experience furniture mass production first hand in the Hackney factory of Lebus but he was so disgusted by what he saw that he left before lunch-time on the first day, never to return. Within a few days he was at work in Heal's own Bedding & Upholstery workshops and in 1895 he

¹⁸⁹ Ambrose Heal, letter to his mother, 12.07.1890., author's collection.

¹⁹⁰ Melanie Hall, *James Plucknett*, and also A.H. notebook, author's archive, in which he lists joke titles for the false books in the Urquart Library doorway.

progressed to work in the sales desk, the year he also started designing furniture.¹⁹¹

1.3.2.3 Cecil Brewer & Architecture

The influence of the architect, Cecil Brewer (1871-1918) upon the work of Ambrose Heal is not to be underestimated. As first cousins they had grown up together and become close friends as the frequent references to Cecil and his elder brother Maurice, in the letters A.H. wrote to his mother, bear witness. However it is the professional world that Cecil opened up for Ambrose that is of particular interest.

A.H. himself acknowledged the extent of his indebtedness to Brewer when, reminiscing about his early days as a designer, he explained that Cecil Brewer had been *his closest friend and inspiration in those early days. I owe everything in the way of design I may ever have done* to him.¹⁹²

Whilst they were both still learning their trades, Brewer was subtly passing on an architect's way of looking at things by taking A.H. with him to sketch old buildings around Warwick. Brewer was articled to Frank T Baggally (1855-1930) in 1889, the year A.H. was sent to France. Baggally himself had been articled to T. H. Wyatt and then worked for Sir Arthur Blomfield before setting up his own practice in 1880. Baggally became President of the Architectural Association in 1891-2 where Brewer was continuing his studies after attending the Slade School of Art and the Heddon Street Atelier.¹⁹³ From Baggally's office Brewer moved on to spend a year working for Robert Weir Schultz in 1894-5, which must have been a particularly formative experience.¹⁹⁴ He then went into partnership with Dunbar Smith in order to submit an

¹⁹¹ Many years later A.H.'s mother wrote out for him a list of dates from her diaries – possibly to help with the preparation of a biography. These include: 24 June 1890 A to Warwick, 3 June 1892 A left Warwick, 13 June 1892 A to Graham & Biddles, 9 February 1893 A left G&B, 23 February 1893 A to Lebus, only stayed to 10 o'clock, 27 February 1893 A started TCR. See AAD/1994/16/1485/27-31.

¹⁹² Sir Ambrose Heal, speech to RDI, 1952.

¹⁹³ Information from *Directory of British Architects 1834-1914*, RIBA.

¹⁹⁴ Robert Weir Schultz (1860-1951) was a close friend of WH Lethaby and had helped the latter with research for his book *Architecture, Mysticism & Myth*. Schultz set up his own office in 1891 and Gavin Stamp, (*Robert Weir Schultz*, Mount Stuart, 1981) described him as *a very busy, conscientious and hardworking man*. C.R. Ashbee (*Masters of the Art Workers' Guild*, unpublished, AWG library)

entry for the Passmore Edwards Settlement design competition in 1895 and henceforth they were known as *Smith and Brewer Architects*.

The Passmore Edwards Settlement, in Tavistock Place, London, is today a Grade I listed building known as Mary Ward House. The Smith and Brewer design for it was selected in a competition assessed by that crucially important architect, Norman Shaw. Nikolaus Pevsner commented, in his book *Pioneers of Modern Design*, on its significance:

*Even more remarkable historically (than Baillie Scott and C.R. Ashbee) is the Mary Ward Settlement... Its relation to Norman Shaw (Venetian Window) as well as to Voysey (top parts of the projecting wings) is evident. The rhythm of the blocks on the other hand, the proportions of the recessed centre part with its blank brick wall and the high bare cornice, the wide projection of the roofs, all point distinctly forward to the style of today, and the asymmetrically projecting porch is freer and more 'organic' in treatment than Voysey ever wanted to be.*¹⁹⁵

This very first building of Brewer's included architectural features that can be found later in the furniture designs of A.H. – the shape of the Venetian window, the simplified fluted columns, the octagonal hall. When the Settlement opened in 1898 some of the furniture for the interior was made in Heal's new cabinet factory a few hundred yards further West. Adrian Forty has explained how the philosophy behind the building was to break down social hierarchies and class differences and that it should be a place of social rebirth. Its interior decoration reflected this, stressing humility, the absence of hierarchies and protesting against artificiality. It used *the language not just of domesticity, but also of rustic simplicity reinterpreted into high culture*.¹⁹⁶ There can be little doubt that A.H. would have been well aware of his cousin's thinking as he developed the plans and got caught up in the idealism of the project.

called him *a very serviceable purge for constipation – especially for architects...in his biting antagonistic way. You felt he was right, though usually put in the wrong way, and himself too.*

¹⁹⁵ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, first published 1936, reprinted as *Pioneers of Modern Design*, Penguin, 1991, p 163.

¹⁹⁶ Adrian Forty, *Mary Ward Settlement*, Architects Journal, 02.08.1989, pp 28-49.

In 1900 Brewer went on to design a house, in Pinner, for A.H. and his wife to live in, that was in the Voysey spirit, but he could turn his hand to other styles, as he demonstrated with a country house in Sussex (1904), a basic cottage for the Letchworth Cheap Cottages exhibition (1905), and most remarkably the National Museum of Wales in a Beaux Arts style (1910). Perhaps his best known building however remains the new shop created for Heal & Son during World War One. Sadly Brewer died, aged forty-seven, in 1918 thus cutting short the career of a highly talented architect. C.R. Ashbee described him as: *one of those rare people who in the metier of architect have true feelings, who see and understand what architecture means, love it and can design for it.* According to Fiona MacCarthy, Ashbee included Brewer in his short-list of the 'real architects' then at work in England; the others being G.F. Bodley, Philip Webb, Lethaby and Harry Wilson and Charles Holden.¹⁹⁷

Although it is possible to discern in A.H.'s furniture designs, details that are directly taken from some of Brewer's buildings, the importance of his influence is not just in the detail but in the way that he helped A.H. to develop a whole philosophy of life that informed everything he did. Through Brewer, A.H. was drawn into an artistic and cultural milieu that, one assumes, would have been very different to his normal middle-class, tradesman's background. A.H. described how:

*By my close association with Cecil Brewer I was thrown in with a set of young Grays Inn architects and through them I met those fervent spirits Lethaby, Selwyn Image, Voysey and others of the Art Workers Guild.*¹⁹⁸

The Art Workers' Guild was a meeting place for people, particularly those connected with architecture, for whom the Arts were central to a better life, so that through Brewer, A.H. met all the 'movers and shakers' of the design world. At their fortnightly meetings discussions were held about a wide variety of subjects but the interchange between members was probably just as influential for the young men as the papers delivered. One of the Guild's Masters described it as

¹⁹⁷ C.R. Ashbee, *Ashbee Journal*, September 1902, cited in Fiona MacCarthy *The Simple Life*, Lund Humphries, 1981, p 57.

¹⁹⁸ Sir Ambrose Heal, MS notes for speech to Royal Designers for Industry, 30.07.1953, author's collection.

*...a spiritual oasis in the wilderness of modern life, a haven and a heaven...I know...few more recreative, regenerative influences than those to be found in the Guild.*¹⁹⁹

Brewer entered fully into the social side, taking part in performances members put on for their own amusement, even appearing on stage with CFA Voysey. He seems to have remained eternally youthful exerting his charm to get things done, but by throwing himself wholeheartedly into his work and all the other activities he wore himself out. His obituary in *The Builder* spoke of his *unquenchable interest, his fresh youthfulness of soul...genius for architecture, friendship and life.*²⁰⁰ A.H. himself explained that he came *under the magnetic influence* of Cecil Brewer and one is left wondering which way his career would have developed without that Brewer influence.

However Brewer was not the only architectural influence in the family on the young A.H. Another cousin was Percy Adams (1865-1930) who built up a successful architectural practice specialising in hospital design. In 1894 he was awarded the RIBA's Godwin Bursary to study Eppendorf Hospital, Hamburg and Stuivenberg Hospital, Antwerp. In 1899 Adams took into his partnership a very talented architect, Charles Holden, firstly as chief assistant and from 1907 as a partner, who was to become one of the significant names in 20th century architecture bridging the Arts and Crafts movement and the Modern movement in Britain. This partnership provided links to Gertrude Jekyll, with whom they worked, but perhaps more significantly the contact put A.H. in a good position when Adams and Holden built the King Edward VII Sanatorium in Midhurst, and that resulted in a substantial furnishing order. In addition to the contract for the Sanatorium the H&S stockbooks record numerous orders for tables supplied to other hospitals and it seems reasonable to conjecture that these were, at least in part, the result of this family connection.

This information about early influences on A.H. reveals above all else how he was steeped in the Arts and Crafts Movement when he started designing and those ideals were to prove decisive in influencing the direction of his subsequent career.

¹⁹⁹ H. Wilson, *Inaugural Address of the Master*, AWG Annual Report for 1916, p 16.

²⁰⁰ *The Builder*, 25.10.1918.