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**HIGH WYCOMBE'S FURNITURE INDUSTRY: FROM THE BEGINNING
TO THE '80S**

Industrija namještaja High Wycombe: od začetaka do 80-tih

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Sažetak

High Wycombe, grad lociran u jugozapadnom dijelu Engleske, tokom 19-tog stoljeća bio je perjanica industrije namještaja za čitavo Britansko Kraljevstvo. Danas, s obzirom na uvođenje novih materijala i trendova koji bi namještaj učinili poželjnim, kao i radi jeftine radne snage na području jugoistočne Azije i istočne Evrope, ovaj industrijski sektor je postao dio prošlosti. Danas svega nekoliko kompanija koje se nalaze u ovome gradu predstavljaju ovaj sektor.

Ovaj rad dokumentira evoluciju industrije namještaja High Wycombe kroz vrijeme i razotkriva šta je prouzročilo pad sektora proizvodnje stolica. Također predočava utjecaj industrijalizacije na razvoj industrije namještaja, istorijski prati uspon i pad u ovome sektoru na lokalnoj razini, te prikazuje kakav je status ova industrija imala u sedamdesetim godinama.

Ključne riječi: namještaj, demografija, politika, socijalni, dizajn (design)

Introduction

The production of British furniture over the last 200 years was characterised, like most industries, by ups and downs. The authors will follow these developments in the context of High Wycombe.

The furniture industry will be assessed against general development in the Chilterns area with particular focus on the major changes affecting the sector since the 18th century and charting its progression from a specialist craft to the mass production of flow-line factories of the present day. New materials such as plastic and fibreglass

were due to changes in the desirability of the market of 60s and this contributed to a fall in the industry.

High Wycombe's furniture industry at the beginning

The beginning of industry in High Wycombe can be traced back as far as the eleventh century. In 1086, the Domesday Book recorded the fact that there were 17 watermills in the Wye Valley, between West Wycombe and Wooburn. Six of these were in the manor of Wycombe and they become integral to the progression of a number of industries, not least furniture, in the production of core materials and processes (Page, 1905).

However, the origin of the furniture industry in High Wycombe was in the twelfth century, when craftsmen began to produce simple turnery in the Chilterns' beechwoods. Records of local names, such as Peter Le Turner and Hubert Turnator show that turnery was an established trade by the end of that century (Page¹, 1908). The 13th century furniture was a mainstay and was produced to meet the needs of the agricultural community.

The abundant beech woods on the surrounding hills should not be underestimated as contributing to the development of the industry. Daniel Defoe's journal, in 1725, refers to the furniture industry in High Wycombe. He records that "...beechwood used for making felloes for the great carts of London, cole-carts, dust-carts etc., for billet wood for king's palaces and lastly for chairs and turnery ware." (Defoe, D. Tour in Great Britain, 2 (1752) 72 pg. as quoted in Page¹, 1908).

Chairs were first made in High Wycombe about 1670, they were not produced on a commercial basis until the early nineteenth century.

Eighteen century and Victorian times

When the supply of walnut and oak declined during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, local chair makers were forced to use beech as a substitute. This proved to be ideal, as it was strong, cheap and comparatively free of branches. It became the core material for all manufacturing in the area.

In the 18th century, furniture was no longer regarded as a luxury item and it gradually became more affordable to all ranks of society. Until that time only the upper classes had enjoyed the benefits of furniture in the home - High Wycombe firms concentrated, predominantly, on the production of Windsor, rush-bottomed and cane-seated chairs for the middle classes, and these were, in the most, decorative styles. The Windsor chair appears to have been invented in the Chilterns Hills, but it was not industrially produced until the first factory was established there at the end of the 18th century.

(Kelly, 1883). The Windsor chair is a very strong chair and its assembly required a great deal of skill as every spindle in the back of a hand-made chair necessarily enters the seat at a different angle. The assembly of the Windsor chair from standardised components was the first step in the development of the mass production of furniture.

For Victorians, design meant decoration, and if a furniture piece was not elaborately decorated it was practically invisible to the average Victorian eye. Carving well suited the Victorian passion for elaborate decoration and High Wycombe took a pride in delivering just that.

In the nineteenth century the larger manufacturers made a name for themselves by creating ever-more elaborate patterns which were then incorporated into bedroom, kitchen and barrack chairs (Page², 1908). Chairs were made to order in large numbers for homes of the new middle classes, evangelist campaigns, religious buildings, military barracks and public parks all over Britain and also for the export trade, especially the 'Colonies', yet the decoration and magnificent details of the period style still persisted.

All this activity aside, and despite the growing awareness of the furniture makers in High Wycombe, it was actually Prince Albert's Great Exhibition of 1851 which really succeeded in establishing High Wycombe as the indisputable centre of the world furniture industry. The 'Wycombe' chair with its interwoven seat was the masterpiece presented at this exhibition and it won the public vote against better-known designs such as the 'Windsor' chairs. By the time of the Great Exhibition the industrial revolution was in full development and Britain was undergoing the transition from the 'one-at-a-time' system of manufacture to, mass-production, although not quite at the scale of modern times.

By the middle of the 19th century about twenty factories were engaged in making chairs here (some of which were closed during the summer for agricultural activities). According to Pigot (1844) in 1844 23 chair-makers were listed, five carpenters, four cabinet-makers and upholsterers and six furniture brokers, who sold and distributed the products of the local craftsmen.

And thus began the expansion of the industry. More modern machinery, such as band-saws, fret cutters and planers was installed. After the introduction of steam power in 1864, production increased and general furniture was manufactured in addition to chairs. In 1864, Kelly listed 35 chair manufacturers among 59 commercial enterprises in High Wycombe. By 1875 there were 50 chair-producing units in the town. A local directory (Judson, 1875) estimated that these produced 4,700 chairs per day. After the introduction of machinery, rapid developments took place in the furniture industry. In 1883, Kelly listed 69 chair manufacturers in High Wycombe. Thus the number had almost doubled since 1864.

In 1885, the Austrian bentwood chair began to threaten the High Wycombe market. Competition was provided especially by Thonet type bentwood chairs. Michael Thonet at the 1862 London exhibition displayed chairs made for the lower price market and he was to remain a serious competitor to Wycombe chairs for many years. They were cheap and there was a great demand at the expense of local products. The High Wycombe industry retaliated by adopting more machinery and mass-production techniques, while town firms started to manufacture bentwood chairs.

The great depression in trade and industry which began in 1873 saw the boom in agriculture come to an end and profits reduce. Since taking the early lead in industrialization, Britain had been a major exporter of manufactured goods, but, as foreign countries become industrialised themselves, they started to manufacture their own essential goods. Some of these countries were able to exploit more effectively the link between science, art and industry, and they had the advantage of superior design and better technological education. America and certain continental countries, such as Germany, not only took much of Britain's export market, but successfully penetrated into the British market. The furniture trade proved to be an industry that was extremely volatile and sensitive to economic changes. It was considered for those times to be the barometer of the wealth of a nation.

The international instability started in 1851 and was of great concern during the last period of the Victorian era. The Franco-Prussian War saw the birth of Bismarck's German Empire, and Britain was drawn directly into many wars worldwide. This was a cause of stagnation in Britain's innovation and progress.

The Zulu War and later, the Boer wars (1880-1881 and 1899-1902) only served to increase the depression in Britain. The rural population was decreasing as people were attracted by the higher wages in the towns for fewer hours of work. This was reflected by the reduced demand for so-called kitchen type chairs that were found in countryside households.

20th Century facts

The period between the Great World War and the Second World War was characterised by the relocation of furniture firms. In 1898 Frederick Parker and Sons (later Parker-Knoll) moved to High Wycombe from the St. Pancras district of London and the following year W. Birch moved from Euston Road, London to High Wycombe (Oliver, 1966). In 1895 Kelly listed 78 chair-makers in the area. By 1903, however, there had been a substantial increase in the number of chair-manufacturers to 113 (Kelly, 1903).

The twentieth century found Britain lagging behind some other continental nations. In 1910 Germany substantially surpassed Britain in production terms and this was felt to be a result of serious deficiencies in science and art education. In Germany and the United States of America, education became fundamental to national government development policy.

In the case of some other countries, such as France, more emphasis was put on reproduction furniture and this fashion influenced many Wycombe designers to become 'masters of historical furniture styles', such as Georgian, Chippendale, Sheraton and Hepplewhite (South Bucks Free Press¹, 1915). By 1908 representative local manufacturers such as W. Birch, Skull and Sons, Nicholls and Janes, T C Sutton, William Bartlett and Sons, Cox and Sons, Frederick Parker Ltd, Barnes and Branch and R.T.Graeffe, mostly sold period furniture.

The turmoil in European politics that culminated in the Great War (1914-1918) was a burden on local skills and work power, with Birch Ltd. losing seventy, Howland and Sons forty-nine and W. Barlett forty-five men. In total two thousand five hundred men employed in the chair and furniture trade had joined the army, but three thousand were still at work (South Bucks Free Press, 1907). Despite this shortage in workforce the War office ordered 50,000 Windsor chairs (South Bucks Free Press², 1915).

The greatest change during the 1920s was the increase in the variety of materials used in the furniture industry, due to the challenge of imported iron and steel furniture. Sufficient timber could no longer be obtained locally and a great deal had to be imported. Large quantities of oak were obtained from Australia (Tasmanian oak), mahogany from Africa and Cuba and walnut from France. Increased quantities of African goatskins and 'Morocco' leather had to be imported, in addition to other upholstery fabrics. Demand for furniture was also increased by the expansion of credit facilities, first introduced into the furniture trade by the London-based firm of Wolfe and Hollander (Oliver, 1966) in 1909. This trend continued to increase and by 1960 about 40% of all furniture sold in Britain was on an instalment basis (IBID, 1966).

The economic boom that followed all this made it appear that the industrial future would be prosperous but unfortunately by 1921 this was ended. During the war time there had been practically no unemployment, but by 1921 about 2 million, five hundred and eighty thousand were out of work in Britain (Watson, 1983). But, for the Wycombe population (23,480 by 1921) there was employment. One reason for this was the nationwide boom in house building. Wycombe supplied the furniture that the new 'home-owner' required (Mayes, 1960). This continued for the next four years until 1926 when there was the General Strike and Britain came to a standstill for nine days in May. The peak of the fall of furniture demand was in 1929 when a slump in building and national spending finally affected the furniture factories.

L. R. Ercolani embraced this when, in February 1931, he stated that there was a need to 'build to last (but) inexpensive and which poses a character and individuality of its own consonant with the very finest traditions of British craftsmanship.' (Bucks Free Press, 1931).

In 1924, there were 134 chair-manufacturers and 19 associated industries. The competition among firms stimulated a constant flow of new and improved designs, which led to specialization in specific types of furniture and by 1939, for example, 13 firms specialised in dining, lounge and bedroom furniture, 3 in theatre and cinema furniture, 3 in chapel and church furniture and 2 in ships' furniture.

During the 1930s, many firms increased in size but they remained essentially family businesses. In order to survive, many of the smaller firms started to concentrate on the production of very high quality furniture, which required a great variety of detail and was not suited to the techniques of mass production. The level of export at this time was comparatively small, less than half a million pounds per annum.

The outbreak of the Second World War faced the industry with the prospect of serious changes. Materials were difficult to obtain and under government control. Some factories were converted to war production making aircraft parts, some were declared redundant under Government concentration schemes, labour was dispersed and many small firms went out of business permanently. Men who were made redundant did not find it was easy to get new jobs in the furniture trade, which was becoming a luxury. Orders declined and unemployment within the industry increased.

The Second World War found the Wycombe industry at bottom of its fortune but as it was the case in the Great War, the local industry turned to aircraft production, such as wings for the de Havilland Mosquito (Bishop, 1995). Small furniture companies made ammunition boxes, tent pegs and air raid shelter bunks. Companies such as Maurice Clarke made wooden crosses, and Ercol made tent pegs and any other requested products out of wood for the war effort.

The war brought a new concept in furniture design- Utility Furniture. This was to be produced with an agreeable design and at reasonable price for sale with maximum economy of raw material and labour. The first designers to pick up on this idea in local industry were H. J. Cutler of Wycombe Technical Institute, E.L. Clinch of Goodearl Bros. and L.G. Barnes of E. Gomme Ltd. (The Cabinet Maker², 1942). The first range was simply called the 'Chilterns'. On the 1st of November 1942 the manufacture of any type of domestic furniture was prohibited, apart from those issued with a special license or to complete pre-Utility orders (The Cabinet Maker¹, 1942).

Between 1950-60, High Wycombe's share of the turnover of the furniture industry of Great Britain increased from 8.9% to 13.4% and in 1961 the High Wycombe area was second in importance in the furniture industry of Great Britain.

The Cabinet Maker Directory (The Cabinet Maker Directory, 1958) published in 1958, named 90 furniture manufacturing firms in High Wycombe. It did not distinguish between those engaged specifically in the production of chairs, as Kelly had done in his Directory, the last issue of which appeared in 1939. It listed 65 firms engaged in the production of bedding and upholstery, which was a considerable increase since pre-war days. Many of these firms were among the firms also listed under furniture-manufacturing. By this time, the techniques of furniture production had changed considerably and only the most expensive furniture was hand-polished or traditionally upholstered. Factories had become more stream-lined.

During mid 1970s, ten major furniture companies were still found in High Wycombe. These were Gomme Holdings Ltd., Parker-Knoll Ltd., Furniture Industries Ltd., Goodearl-Risboro' Ltd., Dancer & Hearne Ltd., Walter Skull & Son (1932) Ltd., W.H. Deane (High Wycombe) Ltd., Johnson Holland & Company Ltd., William Bartlett & Sons Ltd. and Mines & West Ltd.

If in 1910 most of the furniture export was done with Australia and New Zealand, by 1960 this market was not of great importance anymore. Overseas trade was now made not only with the European market, but also with the Middle East, the Far East and North America.

High Wycombe furniture industry understood that to survive they need it new markets and this was only possible through participation at international exhibitions. For the first time in 1967, ten member firms of the High Wycombe and District Furniture Manufacturers' society exhibited over two thousand items of furniture at the international furniture exhibition at 'Meuropam' in Lyons, France, which was attended by representatives from over twenty countries. By 1975, a growing number of local manufacturing firms were exhibiting in Europe, America, the Middle East and the Far East. Exhibitions were attended in Brussels, Cologne, Lyons, Milan, Paris and Utrecht in Europe as well exhibitions staged in Japan, the Middle East and the United States. This helped local companies to survive for some time but soon new players from Asia and Eastern Europe will make many of them to close due to competitive pricing based on cheap labour and materials.

In 1982 there were still 110 furniture factories in the High Wycombe area, but only ten employed more than 150 workers. Gomme and Ercol Furniture were pillars of local industry in the 1980 but nowadays are gone or relocated else where due to the new competition from Asia and Eastern Europe.

Industrialization impact on furniture industry development

The basic inventions in furniture-manufacture were made by General Sir Samuel Bentham in the 1790s. In 1791, he patented a planing machine and, in 1793, a rotary planing and moulding machine, a mortising and tenoning machine, a dovetailing machine and a veneer cutting machine (Oliver, 1966). Thomas Robinson and Son Ltd., of Rochdale, established in 1838, produced their first woodworking machinery between 1840-45 (IBID., 1966). All their early machines were belt-driven by steam power. The full application of these inventions did not take effect until the 1930s. After the installation of alternating current in 1935, mechanization within the furniture industry made rapid progress.

The opening of branch railway in 1874, which connected High Wycombe with the Great Western Railway main line, made it considerably more economical to transport Windsor chairs to the London market. After the advent of motor transport, the journey became even more economical taking only 4 hours to make a return journey to London, via the A40 road. M. Keen in 1904 introduced a steam wagon to transport chairs to London (Sparkes, 1975). A railway link with Birmingham and the Midlands was established in 1905, when the joint Great Western Railway Great Central Line from London to Birmingham was opened, passing through High Wycombe. This helped the local furniture industry which had faster ways to access Bristol port both for export and materials import and the market of London.

The fall of the Wycombe chair industry

By 1944 the High Wycombe Furniture Manufacturers Association started to talk of post-war prospects and problems. As a result of the Second World War and new divisions of the zones of economic influences, the High Wycombe industry was faced, in 1947, with a lack of hardwood. This was to be the beginning of the decline. It did not happen immediately and there were a few ups before the decline was definite. Towards the end of 1948, the furniture industry got more freedom and at that time industry leaders considered a boom as inevitable. This was a very optimistic affirmation considering that towards the end of 1950 the supply of raw material was still a problem (The Cabinet Maker, 1950).

By 1956 war trauma started to disappear and the local economy was not affected by recession, as was the case with other furniture centres (East London, Leeds, Lancaster, Nottingham, Bristol) (The Cabinet Maker, 1956).

By 1951 furniture was no more the only major industry in High Wycombe. Other types of manufacturing such as paper mills, sawmills, engineering works, printing and

the manufacture of precision instruments and clothing had started up as a result of the needs of the Second World War effort. 1957 signalled to the furniture industry that customers could also demand other materials. A fibreglass chair made by Tyl Kennedy was presented at the High Wycombe College of Further Education open day event. This was followed in 1960 by a chair made from wood wool and synthetic plastic, lined with plastic foam (Bucks Free Press, 1960).

Signals on reduced demand for furniture for the UK market that came from other furniture centres were considered not important by the local High Wycombe and District Furniture Manufacturers Society and instead of considering a long plan and to reduce the size of the business it was expanding (Bucks Free Press, 1957).

By 1961 it was acknowledged that this industry sector was under pressure from fashion requirements and good, sober furniture was not much in demand (The Cabinet Maker, 1960). A chair made of polypropylene, designed by Robin Day was to sell in millions. The last song of the swan was sung by Dancer & Hearne Ltd. who launched the 'Beaconsfield' chair type which sold nearly a hundred thousand pieces in 1963. By 1967 the furniture trade in High Wycombe was described as being '.....very difficult'.

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Zaključak

High Wycome se, tokom perioda od sto godina (1860-1960), razvio iz maloga grada u provinciji, ovisnog o tradicionalnoj industriji čija je glavna djelatnost bila proizvodnja stolica, do grada mnogih različitih industrija. Sada kad je drvna industrija već odavno ugašena i ustupila mjesto razvoju nekih novih sektora, kao što su dobavljanje kompjuterske opreme, roba široke potrošnje, elektronskih uređaja, inženjeringu, proizvodnji instrumenata, farmaceutskoj industriji, plastici, komunikacijskoj opremi, pakiranju, pumpama, štampi, proizvodima od gume, odlaganju otpada, obradi i prečišćavanju vode, i mnogim drugim.

Jasno je da su razvoj industrije namještaja u High Wycombe i njegova trenutna struktura i organizacija direktno vezani za lokalitet ovog mjesta i tamošnje drvene resurse. Brojni faktori kao što su: (i) resursi koji su vremenom nestali i industrija je morala uvoziti 80% bukove drvene građe iz drugih zemalja kao što su Francuska, Danska, Rumunija, Bugarska, bivša Jugoslavija, itd; (ii) većina namještaja uvožena je iz država jugoistočne Azije, ili Evrope, gdje je materijal bio dostupan a radna snaga jeftina, i (iii) radi uvođenja novih materijala i trendova koji bi namještaj učinili poželjnim, ovaj industrijski sektor više se ne smatra značajnim za lokalnu ekonomiju.