

Introduction

This thesis conducts an appraisal of the High Wycombe furniture industry from 1952-2002, observing the way in which it changed in its scope and direction. 1952 marks the end of the furniture Utility scheme, the date is also found to be just prior to the peak of furniture employment in High Wycombe in 1955. By the year 2002 most of the renowned furniture companies in High Wycombe had either closed or relocated, and therefore this year marks the closing stages of the furniture industry being based in High Wycombe.

This research investigation has evolved from the author's experience in working in the furniture industry and later from a career in furniture education and training. A considerable amount has been written about the industry from its early development in the 1800s to the war efforts throughout both the First and Second World Wars and the literature generally ends at 1950. This thesis aims to provide for the first time an account of the industry post Second World War, analysing the changes in the industry and the decline of numbers employed within it.

Many of the research sources used for this study are furniture trade journals and archive collections. Other research sources include lesser known material such as the Furniture Industry Reports, the Furniture Union minutes and reports, and the Office for National Statistics (ONS).¹ Most of the documents used do not cover the entire period 1952-2002 consistently: for example the statistical employment data from the Office for National Statistics dates from 1970-2007. J.L. Oliver (1966), who charted the location of furniture-making establishments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Lowe (1983) provided additional employment figures for the industry. Notwithstanding this 'patchiness' in the literature, there was sufficient evidence in the range of source materials to provide a review of this lesser studied period.

This thesis could be seen to follow on from Karen Wilson's PhD thesis from 2003, 'High Wycombe's Furniture Industry 1900-1950'. Wilson reviewed the High

¹ ONS figures for the furniture industry are referenced under the National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS).

Wycombe furniture industry within this earlier timeframe, but did not use archival material extensively as she found it difficult to date or put the material into context, finding that catalogues and trade directories were incomplete (Wilson, 2003). Wilson provided a history of William Bartlett Ltd and William Birch Ltd, two well-known High Wycombe furniture companies.

The UK furniture industry has been researched by a number of prominent design historians, including Clive Edwards, Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield. They have all contributed to a deeper understanding of this industry through the craft stages into mass production. Attfield's 1992 PhD study *'The role of design and the relationship between furniture manufacture and its retailing 1939-1965'* and her 1996 article in the Journal of Design History, *'Give 'em something dark and heavy': The role of Design in the Material Culture of Popular British Furniture,'* used the High Wycombe furniture company J. Clarke as a case study. Attfield examined the role of this firm in the production of Utility furniture throughout the years of the Second World War. Edwards (1994) also researched the UK furniture industry, looking especially at the materials used in production and retail, where he used High Wycombe furniture companies to illustrate these areas in particular. Kirkham, on the other hand has extensively researched the history of London's furniture industry offering insight into researching a particular geographical area. In her PhD thesis *'Furniture-Making in London c. 1700-1870: Craft, Design, Business and Labour'*, Kirkham (1982) provided a scholarly approach to the history of the furniture industry in London providing a useful structure to emulate. This model observes employment issues, the role of the trade unions, training, technology and materials as well as studying the largest furniture company in the UK, Harris Lebus Ltd, as a case study. In *'Furnishing the World: The East London Furniture Trade'* Kirkham *et al* (1987) described the rise of London's East End furniture trade and the decline of London's West End trade. Kirkham's publications therefore provided a geographical model for the study of the furniture industry in any region of the UK.

The history of the furniture industry in High Wycombe had not been as widely researched as the London furniture industry, especially the history of the second half of the twentieth century. Certain aspects of the subject had remained neglected. For example there was no data analysing the decline of the furniture industry in High

Wycombe. There had been little documentation of employment in the industry, for example divisions of labour and working conditions. There had been no study carried out comparing this local industry to the wider UK manufacturing industry decline. This thesis therefore aims to address these neglected areas and also looks at using the rich source of archive material available. The aim is that this thesis will provide some new insights on these topics, and address the issues at the heart of the industry's decline.

The author has contributed as co-investigator to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded High Wycombe Electronic Furniture Archive (HWeFA) digitisation project (2006-2009). The project has provided wider access for researchers and the broader community to the archival material held in its collections and illustrates that furniture making in High Wycombe contributed significantly to furniture design, both nationally and internationally, throughout the twentieth century. High Wycombe has a strong furniture heritage, and the archive, which has been held locally within the furniture department library at Buckinghamshire New University, comprises over 16,000 images and accompanying technical papers. The archive is therefore a rich collection of assets from a select group of High Wycombe furniture companies, offering a rich resource for this study. Included are photographic prints, transparencies, negatives, slides, drawings and glass plates, including 6991 items from Ercol, 558 from Skulls, 5055 from E. Gomme (G-Plan) and 3510 from the Furniture Union. Material has been gathered and collated as furniture firms have relocated or been liquidated (Kaner *et al.*, 2007a). Images disseminating the HWeFA can be seen in Appendix A, Figures A1- A2. The HWeFA offers a rich research provision for those seeking reference and guidance into twentieth century furniture (Kaner and Grover, 2012, p.139).

Apart from the HWeFA there are also many other archival collections held locally and nationally which provide a disparate set of records of the High Wycombe furniture industry. The HWeFA digitisation project moved towards illustrating High Wycombe's influence on the design industry, challenging its current image as a manufacturing town, showing a visual record of twentieth century furniture production, including post-war catalysts of innovation such as 'Utility' and other aspects of modernism (Kaner *et al.*, 2007b, p.41). This thesis aims to elaborate on

this claim and to establish the designers of the High Wycombe furniture manufacturing design teams as making a significant contribution to twentieth century British furniture design. It will challenge the widely accepted view that High Wycombe was solely a manufacturing town. There is little mention of Wycombe designs in the furniture history texts. Indeed High Wycombe is well known for its chair making, but is not mentioned in ‘1000 Chairs’ (Fiell, 1997). Towards the first decade of the twenty-first century, designs from a small number of renowned High Wycombe furniture companies have become more prominent in the magazine Design Press (Post, 2004), offering another perspective to the perception of High Wycombe and the furniture industry (a small number of examples can be found in Appendix B, Figures B1-B4).

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of the High Wycombe furniture industry after 1952 to the start of the following century. It also reflects the national and international recognition that this furniture making location received during this time as well as how it was considered later in history. In order to do this, the thesis examines High Wycombe furniture companies in general and focuses in detail on a number of industrial case studies/furniture companies to narrow the field of investigation, whilst at the same time giving due recognition to the larger companies, whose designs and methodology have been previously overlooked. Other reasons for driving this research have been informed by the author’s personal experience in relation to the furniture industry. The author² moved to High Wycombe to study Furniture Production in 1990, at the High Wycombe College of Higher Education (now Bucks New University). The author was the last furniture student to carry out a placement year at Parker Knoll in 1992/3, and the last student to be awarded the E. Gomme recognition award in 1994. These awards and placements were discontinued, apparently because of the decline of the furniture industry in High Wycombe. Being responsible now for creating a furniture digital archive, the author is aware that much rich and relevant research information will be lost if this work is left any later, as key personnel from the industry are reaching old age. Some have even passed away during the period of this research.

² Sharon Grover – née Sharon Rooke.

With respect to furniture making in High Wycombe since the Second World War, the number of companies manufacturing furniture has declined significantly. It is widely accepted that there has been a decline nationally in furniture manufacturing areas in recent times, due largely to changes in importing furniture from overseas. Cheaper materials and labour rates are often reasons given as destroying the manufacturing base in the UK. However this study will show that the underlying reasons for the decline in furniture manufacture in High Wycombe go deeper than the issue of labour rates alone.

Aims

It is the intention of this thesis to:

1. Provide a better understanding of the changes in the furniture industry of High Wycombe during this time (1952-2002). The thesis aims to bring together the disparate work written to date on the High Wycombe furniture industry and to identify gaps in the research that require further study.
2. Identify the reasons behind the decline of the industry, and to quantify the decline.
3. Demonstrate High Wycombe's design influence on the UK furniture industry.

The main purpose of the study is to carry out an appraisal of the High Wycombe furniture industry from 1952-2002, and to identify the main changes that have occurred within it, relating to its subsequent decline. The thesis will therefore synthesise for the first time published sources which refer to the furniture industry in post Utility High Wycombe. This will capture the history of the industry after the Utility programme and present a full comprehension of High Wycombe's position in the UK furniture industry. Finally, it aims to understand the reasons why High Wycombe has not been extensively discussed in furniture design history.

Objectives

1. To identify the main changes in the High Wycombe furniture industry (1952-2002).
2. To complete the history of the High Wycombe furniture industry identifying the gaps in published research (1952-2002).

3. To identify the main reasons for the decline of the industry and the extent of the decline.
4. To understand why High Wycombe was such an important town in both furniture manufacturing and design and why this is no longer such a vibrant industry in the town.
5. To compare the furniture industry based statistical data with the rest of the UK, ascertaining whether the decline of the industry in High Wycombe was mirrored across the rest of the UK.

Position of Research & Order of Thesis

This research is positioned within the subject of furniture history, with particular reference to an industrial study. The methods used are interdisciplinary and include some elements of Design History, Medical History and Statistical Analysis (Industrial History). Researchers such as Wilson, Attfield and Kirkham have also carried out research on the furniture industry using interdisciplinary approaches. The use of industrial history methods are based on the author's experience of working within the industry and the use of statistical and medical methods are based largely due to the collaborative research within this area.

The ordering of the thesis chapters relates to the research process carried out. The thesis starts with a literature-based study (Chapter 1) which includes empirical evidence, such as photographs. The Literature Review brings together the current published sources regarding the industry and it identifies gaps in the knowledge that had not been previously researched enhancing the understanding of the High Wycombe furniture industry. It includes a wide range of sources, from scholarly to non-academic, because of the imprecise coverage of the industry in the last twenty years. A broad range of sources have discussed the issues that are addressed in this thesis and have been valuable to the argument. The extensive research into High Wycombe and its furniture industry has been organised into themes. The study includes a detailed overview of High Wycombe's influence on the furniture produced as part of the Utility scheme, which commenced in 1943, allowing a continuation of the literature and research carried out during this period.

Chapter 2 identifies secondary literature through the Visual Arts Data Service (VADS) archive, highlighting a number of furniture companies in High Wycombe and their designs. The study of this collection led to the primary sources at the Design Council Archives in Brighton. The Design Council Archives established the leading position of the industry in High Wycombe nationally. The chapter includes industrial case studies of the companies that were prominent in both the Literature Review, VADS and the Design Council Archives (E. Gomme, Ercol and Parker Knoll). This chapter brings together the main findings for putting the High Wycombe furniture industry into context and positioning it nationally. The Literature Review identified some of the main changes observed in the furniture industry. The archival sources enabled the completion of this history.

Chapter 3 carries out a more detailed investigation of the furniture industry in High Wycombe using local and national press reports, including the industry trade journal *The Cabinet Maker*. The chapter includes a section on the three main companies (E. Gomme, Ercol and Parker Knoll) that were also prominent in the press coverage. The press coverage also highlighted some important issues in relation to the decline of the furniture industry. These issues could be seen as anecdotal and so a fuller investigation was required for clarification. This was carried out using primary sources such as the Furniture Industry Reviews in the following chapter through further discussion.

This anecdotal evidence (from the press) was investigated further in Chapter 4, using the primary sources from the Furniture Industry Reviews and Statistical Reports. It was necessary to compare High Wycombe with the rest of the UK in terms of manufacturing to identify national trends. At a micro level High Wycombe is compared to a similar industrial town, Stoke-on-Trent. Stoke-on-Trent also had a single main industry (pottery) employing much of the workforce and has also seen a dramatic decline. The study of the decline of both industries (furniture and pottery) was undertaken to ascertain whether High Wycombe and Stoke-on-Trent shared any similarities or illustrated differences in order to establish patterns of decline. The decline of the pottery industry aided the understanding of Wycombe's position and decline. The two towns shared similarities, as they were traditional in the materials that they used, the production techniques they utilised and the towns both grew on

the skilled workforce. Like High Wycombe, Stoke-on-Trent also relied on a predominant industry, the pottery industry, as a main employer. The notion that both industries were infiltrated by overseas products and that the industries could not compete with the cheap wages in China (S.E. Asia) is evaluated.

Chapter 4 uses the statistics from NOMIS to measure the decline of the furniture industry in High Wycombe and compares it to the rest of England. NOMIS was used to collate statistical data on the number of people working in the industry and also to compare these figures to the rest of the UK, which provided evidence of the decline.

Chapter 5 develops the research further looking in detail at the labour issues and nature of the workforce. The Furniture Industry Reports in Chapter 4 looked at the number of men and women working in the furniture industry whilst Chapter 5 considers more specific details of workers and the working conditions. As the research developed an unexpected development occurred, which was not part of the original research plan. The study developed into a more detailed account of the working conditions linked to nasal cancer. John Capper, ENT surgeon at Wycombe hospital and the author carried out extensive research in this area, following John Capper contacting the author for assistance in the historical aspects of his research. This work produced some relevant findings that informed the study of some contributing factors concerning the decline of the industry.

The thesis concludes with the main findings and recommendations for future work, and includes a section on the furniture industry in High Wycombe today.

The thesis is therefore structured in the following way:

- Literature Review – researching the written text and relevant images that have been published on the High Wycombe furniture industry. It shows the scope of what has already been researched and published in this area, and draws attention to the gaps in knowledge.
- Archival Evidence and Industrial Case Studies – puts the research into context and positions the findings within the study.

- The following sections all develop the investigations by offering the main discussions and findings of the research:
 - High Wycombe in the local and trade press
 - Comparison with UK Manufacturing
 - Statistical Review of the High Wycombe furniture industry
 - Working conditions and labour issues
- Conclusion and Industry Today – main findings of the study and recommendations for further work
- Bibliography and Appendices

Use of images

The photographs used throughout the thesis relate to the text, add value to the discussion and enhance the aims of the thesis. The photographs can be found grouped together at the end of each chapter throughout the thesis. Many of the photographs used have in fact been located by the author and were not previously in the public domain, and are an addition to knowledge and therefore part of the primary findings. The criteria which determined the inclusion of the images was that they must relate to the text; they must add valuable information and they must illustrate points made in the text. Throughout the course of this research the author took a number of colour photographs, mostly recording and capturing the High Wycombe area and related furniture factories. The High Wycombe area was being developed rapidly and furniture factories and workshops were being demolished and the area re-developed. These images are located in the appendices. The references for all the images used throughout the thesis can be found in the List of Figures.

Methodology

1. **Literature Review** – standard desk-work research including books, journals and articles (secondary sources).
2. **Archival Research** – a substantial amount of work was carried out including researching the Design Council Archives, the HWeFA, the Furniture Development Council (FDC) and Furniture Industry Research Association (FIRA) reports, furniture union reports and *The Cabinet Maker*.
3. **Statistics** – analysing the statistical data from the Office for National Statistics.
4. **Comparative analysis** – using industrial case studies (Ercol, Parker Knoll and E. Gomme) to understand High Wycombe furniture companies and business demographic
5. **Oral History** – interviews with personnel from the furniture industry.

The following information identifies the purpose and scope of the methodology:

Literature Review

As discussed earlier for the Literature Review key texts were identified and these were critically reviewed. The texts highlighted themes of study and the critical analysis provided areas in the Literature Review that were not always in agreement. These differences in opinion and differing factual information were summarised and discussed. This enabled further research strands to be followed. This evaluation of the literature brings together the published sources of High Wycombe's furniture industry.

Archival Research

To identify the main changes in the industry and to address the main aims and objectives of the study it was necessary to evaluate primary material. Archival material relating to High Wycombe and the furniture industry was identified and analysed. The majority of the primary findings were obtained from archival sources and trade literature. There are a number of disparate archives in the UK that hold reference material relating to the High Wycombe furniture industry. These archives were visited and researched, bringing together this widely dispersed information. To

ascertain the reasons and extent of the decline of the industry it was also necessary to evaluate other primary and secondary research material including industry journals and reports, and design publications.

High Wycombe's presence in these national and local archives highlighted the importance of this furniture making town in the design related industries represented in these broader arts and furniture archives. It also emphasised the extent to which High Wycombe's history of furniture making was collected and recognised in this wider community, which had been largely ignored by design historians. Details of the relevant research material that is held in each of the archives is used extensively to fill in the gaps identified in the research literature.

The following archives were researched:

Wycombe Museum holds a significant amount of material from the furniture industry in the Thames Valley region, which is centred on High Wycombe. The furniture collection itself includes Windsor chairs from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. This includes other locally produced chairs, a small selection of chairs from other regions and a small selection of other types of furniture. Documents and catalogues are also housed at Wycombe Museum and include companies such as Glenister, Skull, Birch, Bartlett, Ercol and E. Gomme. Selections of the museum's photographs have been included on Buckinghamshire County Council's website, *Sharing Wycombe's old photographs (SWOP)*. This content-rich primary material provides insights into the working conditions in the furniture industry in High Wycombe as well as providing information on the furniture models being designed and manufactured and the factory buildings themselves.

SWOP is a collection of more than 17,000 photographs which have been digitised and collated as a website. Several collections have been included in this resource, from High Wycombe Library, Wycombe Museum and *The Bucks Free Press*, and have been brought together for this Heritage Lottery Fund project. Access to SWOP is via the internet and the link can be found in the references. It has provided the study with images showing the history of the furniture industry the social and technological changes in the industry (<http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/swop>).

High Wycombe Library owns and previously stored a collection of archival material relating to the industry. The archive contains articles from *The Bucks Free Press* and other local and national publications. This collection is now housed at Buckinghamshire New University library, and was extensively researched for this study.

Buckinghamshire County Archives (Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies) hold a small amount of E. Gomme paperwork and other related High Wycombe furniture making companies. The paperwork held on E. Gomme emphasises its position within the national furniture manufacturing industry. ‘E. Gomme pioneered the dining room suite and after the Second World War E. Gomme became one of the country’s largest manufacturers’ (Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, 2011). As well as holding information that highlights the standing of E. Gomme, the collection holds papers relating to the history of the company, and it also holds a small number of press cuttings from local and national newspapers relating to the furniture industry generally in the town. This collection has been used to support the study alongside the other related archives discussed in this section.

VADS is the online resource for visual arts, and includes over three thousand photographs from the Design Council Archive, alongside images from the Design Council Slide Collection at Manchester Metropolitan University. It has built up a considerable portfolio of visual art collections comprising over 100,000 images that are freely available and copyright cleared for use in learning, teaching and research in the UK. The collection of High Wycombe related images from VADS were researched, but many of the relevant images had not been catalogued or digitised, and were housed at the Design Council Archives in Brighton.

The University of Brighton Design Archives hold the **Design Council Archives**, and other design-based collections. The Design Council archive maps the wide-ranging activities of the Council of Industrial Design. It was founded in 1944 and changed its name to the Design Council in 1972. The archive includes material relating to all fields of the Council's activities, particularly design promotion in industry, national and overseas exhibitions, publications, education and the administration of design competitions and awards. The University of Brighton Design Archives and the

Design Council Archives together house over 250 images relating to High Wycombe furniture companies. The archive also holds the Gordon Russell collection of interviews and lectures which provided some useful and relevant information relating to the High Wycombe furniture industry.

The High Wycombe Electronic Furniture Archive (HWeFA) website, as discussed in the introduction, allows users to access the online library of images relating to the furniture industry in the High Wycombe region. The collection holds images from Ercol, E. Gomme (G-Plan), Skulls and the furniture trades unions. The electronic archive enables the original analogue material to be accessible digitally, giving wider access for researchers and the broader community. The collection illustrates that furniture making in High Wycombe contributed significantly to furniture design, both nationally and internationally, throughout the twentieth century. This collection was beneficial to the study, enabling access to images of furniture models, interior and exteriors of factories, and access to the union reports provided an invaluable insight into the history of the furniture industry at the time, including the references to Utility furniture and women workers. The HWeFA holds a digital record of the National Union of Furniture Trade Operatives (NUFTO) and the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association (NAFTA) trade union minutes. There are also references to the Amalgamated Society of Mill Sawyers, Wood-Cutting Machinists, and Wood Turners (ASWM) reports and minutes. A range of material in the form of Furniture Trade Union Reports provide insights into the landscape of union activities relating to the High Wycombe furniture trade, ranging from reported events such as lectures by Lucian R. Ercolani (of Ercol) through to the minutes describing how the trade was organised and negotiations on working conditions. This material forms a different perspective than that given by the companies' sales books and furniture model ranges. The union material provides revelation into the personal working lives of those many individuals who found themselves in this manufacturing town throughout the twentieth century (Grover, 2009).

London Metropolitan University³ houses ‘The Frederick Parker Furniture Collection’, which consists of a collection of chairs, a collection of carvings and the Frederick Parker Company archive. The chairs and carvings were collected by Frederick Parker himself as a study collection to inspire his designers and makers of fine, contemporary furniture (Cross and Newton-Short, 2007a) and are displayed in its purpose-built Metropolitan Works gallery. Cross and Newton-Short (2007) have produced a catalogue of the chair collection which includes known data about each chair, an image and a description. It has been deposited with the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS). The AHDS was a UK national service to collect, preserve and promote the electronic resources which result from research and teaching in the arts and humanities and the information is therefore available to the public through online catalogues. The Frederick Parker Company archive has been catalogued as part of a pilot study with the HWeFA. This archive is currently unavailable in digital format but it has provided this study with analogue images.

The Geffrye Museum, London, also holds some High Wycombe archive material. The museum shows the changing style of the English domestic interior in a series of period rooms from 1600 to the present day (Geffrye Museum, n.d.). Its collections comprise furnishings, pictures and ornaments reflecting the history of the English home over the past 400 years. The focus is on the living rooms of the urban middle classes, mainly in London. This means that the Geffrye is a museum showing the mainstream rather than the extraordinary. As well as London, it also has objects from High Wycombe manufacturers and a small amount of High Wycombe-related research material. The Geffrye Museum also has furniture models from High Wycombe in its store, including a G-Plan secretaire c.1953 and chest of drawers bought in 1991 for £100 each by Harriet Dover from Peter M Fiell, a G-Plan room divider and a 1950s Parker Knoll armchair. The collection has a number of High Wycombe company brochures including G-Plan, Castle Furniture, Parker Knoll and Ercol. The presence of this furniture in a museum that focuses on predominately East London, illustrates the importance of High Wycombe in the furniture industry and the quality of the furniture being produced in the town.

³ Now moved to the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers.

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London holds an extensive collection of art and design including more than 14,000 furniture pieces and an archive holding furniture-related articles, brochures and catalogues. A number of High Wycombe company related information is held in the V&A archives, although this was not officially catalogued. It is mainly comprised of company catalogues and correspondence and did provide a small selection of primary research for this study. The Archive of Art and Design (AAD) was established in 1978 to house the V&A's growing archival holdings at Blyth House. It collects, conserves and makes available for research the archives of individuals, associations and companies involved in the art and design process. Particular emphasis is placed on records concerning twentieth century British design. The AAD did not have relevant High Wycombe links and so was therefore not included in the research.

The Bruce Castle Museum in London houses local history collections relating to the Borough of Haringey. It also houses the archive of Harris Lebus Ltd, Finsbury Works, Tottenham, the largest furniture manufacturer in the country at the end of the nineteenth century and therefore a major competitor to the furniture companies in High Wycombe. This archive was researched to identify any links to the furniture industry in High Wycombe as no catalogued or digitised information was available. The research proved little use, other than some images highlighting women workers in the Lebus factory during both the First and Second World Wars.

An extensive study of the '**Cabinet Maker**' periodical from the 1950s-2002 was conducted for this research. As High Wycombe was such a significant furniture town it was extensively reported on in the 'Cabinet Maker' with High Wycombe being the only town to dedicate a monthly advertising brochure solely for furniture companies and related industries. The approach here was to digitally capture all of the High Wycombe related information from the 'Cabinet Maker' in order to extract valuable material of relevance to this study. The 'Cabinet Maker' offered a unique view of the High Wycombe furniture trade on a consistent basis reflecting its economic success and decline. The initial survey provided sufficient evidence that this industry periodical gave an accurate commentary of the High Wycombe furniture industry during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s with further reference to High Wycombe from the 1980s through the 1990s. It was the only journal of its type during the early

period (1950-1980), giving High Wycombe prominent coverage in its reporting. The research community have also validated this periodical through peer review and it is accepted as a research source. Kirkham references photographs and advertisements from a number of Cabinet Maker's from the 1700s to the 1950s. She also uses images and written records from NUFTO, NAFTA and The Furniture, Timber and Allied Trades Union (FTAT) records. The references to High Wycombe have not been collated previously in their entirety, and so this research identified the portrayal of High Wycombe in the furniture industry, most of which had been buried in this dated furniture periodical. The author reviewed each periodical from the 1940s to the early 2000s, and collated any relevant references to the industry and the thesis research questions. It is interesting to note that *The Cabinet Maker* cites 301 references to High Wycombe in the 1950s, 288 in the 1960s, 196 in the 1970s, 46 in the 1980s and finally 26 from the 1990s up to 2002. This clearly shows the decline of the reporting of the High Wycombe furniture industry of 78 percent from 1950-2002. As indicated, High Wycombe was the only furniture town to have a dedicated section in the periodical for advertisements. Figures 1 and 2 show these types of advertising, with a double page spread in the 1950s and the final 'High Wycombe' section seen on a single page in 1984.

This journal has been known under the following names:

- The Cabinet Maker and Complete House Furnisher – from 1897 until 1 December 1961
- Cabinet Maker and Retail Furnisher (5 January 1962 – December 1989)
- Cabinet Maker (1990-present day)

For ease the journal will be referred to as '*The Cabinet Maker*' throughout.

The final collection of archival evidence to be used in this study was one outcome of the British Industrial Organisation and Development Act (1947). It was the establishment of the **Furniture Development Council (FDC)**. The functions assigned to the Development Council included scientific and technical research to benefit the whole furniture industry; prompting a greater degree of standardisation of products; improvements in marketing and distribution; better and more uniform methods of cost accounting and the collection of statistics. In 1949 the FDC was

established, and then in 1969 it was renamed to The Furniture Industry Research Association (FIRA). A number of reports were used for this study to ascertain figures about the furniture industry in High Wycombe and the UK furniture industry as a whole. These Economical Reviews, Statistical Digests and Statistical Publications have rarely been used for research purposes, and offered a vital resource to this research. The FDC and FIRA reports included important information on the furniture industry across the UK and for High Wycombe. The reports also recorded export and import data for the industry, and were integral to compiling statistical data, along with data which is discussed below.

Statistics

To research the extent of the decline and to compare High Wycombe with other similar industrial towns it was necessary to carry out analysis of quantitative data. Statistical data was required and this was identified and evaluated from The Office for National Statistics (ONS). Industrial reports from the Furniture Industry Research Association (FIRA) and the National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS) were used to provide the actual employment figures working in the UK furniture industry as well as giving data on employment in High Wycombe.

The Literature Review illustrates that it was very difficult to ascertain exact and reliable figures for those working in the furniture industry in High Wycombe. Some inconsistencies were found in the figures for both the UK and High Wycombe. The British Furniture Manufacturer (BFM) at one time kept High Wycombe furniture figures but these are now unavailable and so the research had to focus at a national level.

Comparative analysis

The case studies selected to denote the furniture companies in High Wycombe were chosen because of the 'iconic' representation they gave. Initial research from the Literature Review, VADS, the Design Council Archives, and the Cabinet Maker, indicated that three of the most influential furniture companies in High Wycombe during the second half of the twentieth century were E. Gomme (G-Plan), Ercol

Furniture Limited and Parker Knoll. They have been constantly recognised as important to the town's furniture industry, both in manufacturing and design terms. They represented the key brands of furniture to be manufactured in High Wycombe and the archive material available offered a rich content of information.

Oral History

The author carried out a number of interviews with personnel from the industry. The purpose was to include anecdotal evidence, helping to address the main aims of the thesis. Many of those interviewed were retired from the industry. Their perspective was important to the qualitative nature of this research, but was not used as primary material. The interviews undertaken were not audio recorded because the author believed that this could have stifled the nature of the interviewing process and add unnecessary tension, particularly when dealing with the older generation, some of whom can be very wary of technology when discussing personal issues. Therefore, notes were taken by the author whilst the discussions took place. These were then transcribed and sent back to the respective interviewees for their verification. Sometimes this necessitated a one or two month gap, often with several amendments in between. This was important because it allowed the interviewee to reflect and reconsider the views they initially expressed. No references to interviews in this thesis have been made without the interviewees' authorisation and/or their own amendments. This was done in order to guarantee the truthfulness of the views expressed. Although the author was privileged to speak with many furniture workers throughout High Wycombe, most of the key issues relevant to this research are captured in only a small number of interviews.

In the field of furniture history, oral history is one important method of gaining vital information that may not be documented elsewhere. Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield have started to fill the oral history gap in furniture studies. Kirkham, in one of her earlier studies *'Recollections of furniture makers: labour history, oral history and furniture studies'* (1978), identified the gap in this research, and therefore this method of research was included in this study. Kirkham (1987, p.62) states that oral history adds to our knowledge of how and why furniture is or was designed and made. But warns us:

...that although these recollections are crucially important to record, memories can fail and that one person's interpretation of events may not always tally with another, their experiences provide a unique type of evidence which cannot be extracted from documents.

During the interviews carried out for this research the 'failing memory' and differing interpretations of events were often witnessed between different personnel. It was also apparent that the research could not be based solely on these interviews because much of the information changed with subsequent visits. John Rutland⁴ also confirmed that most of his interviews were carried out to 'put meat on the bones' but he was very uncertain that he was told the truth. On subsequent visits he was often told a different version of events.

Qualitative research involves not only the study of what can be visualised but also that which cannot, for example, experiences, beliefs and ideas (Arksey and Knight, 1999, pp.3-4). For this research the author had to develop an empathy and rapport with the interviewee. The author believed that this was achieved as they always appeared comfortable and were willing to answer the questions. An example of the author interviewing a past member of the furniture industry can be found in Appendix C. The visit was of 45-60 minutes duration. The visit was based on a 'semi structured interview style because this method generated data about people's opinions, ideas and experiences' (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.7). Relevant topic areas and themes were chosen beforehand and questions generated. However this structure allowed for flexibility and the author followed up conversational threads and asked for clarification and elaboration as required. It also allowed the interviewee a certain degree of control as they decided what and how much to say on a given topic. A mixture of open and closed questions were used with a slight bias towards open questions as these encouraged communication and avoided focusing in on a topic too early at the risk of missing vital information. The author used active listening skills to pick up on key themes and signals from the interviewee. In this way the conversation was easily followed and the author was able to take up new topics and spot any contradictions. Rapport was achieved by adopting a friendly, professional and polite manner. Interviews that build rapport, trust and openness in this way increase the validity of the findings (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.32). The questionnaires were designed to cover the main aims and objectives within the study

⁴ Author interview with John Rutland, 23 November 2009.

and to get the best data to answer the questions in a neutral and non-judgmental manner.

The author was also aware of the ethical issues relating to oral history interviews, and wrote a letter in advance of the interview detailing the purpose of the visit and inviting any questions the interviewee may have regarding the project (Appendix C). By allowing the study to go ahead the interviewee was thus giving their informed consent. They also signed a consent form, which provided some biographical information, which formed a valuable historical context to the interview. Permission was also given for photographs to be taken. The concerns and strong views of participants were central to this research and all participants were given information about the study in person as well as a consent form and information sheet (see Appendix D, Figures D1-D9 for images from the interviews). Interviews were fully transcribed and returned to individual participants for validation. At the outset of this research oral recollections were planned to be a major contributor to research findings, but they proved less important than anticipated. The information from interviews was however vital to add information and knowledge to the research; they added a richness of thought to the reasons why High Wycombe was such a prevalent furniture-making town and its recent decline.

Early publications on the history of High Wycombe's furniture industry have included oral recollections. L.J. Mayes was one such author to be inspired by the local industry and capture its history. As with Mayes' work in the 1960s, capturing an industry at the end of its craft stage, this thesis aims to capture some of the more recent changes in the industry. Mayes (1960a, p.175) was inspired by the bodgers working in the beech woods surrounding High Wycombe:

Throughout the 1930s it became apparent [to Mayes] that this way of life was sure to decline, the young workers of the day were unwilling to accept this way of life when they could earn more in a factory in the town under more favourable conditions. After returning from the War 'the slow decline of the old craft had given way to a rapid decline with only a few operators left'. [Mayes] therefore set about recording the scenes and processes by recordings and photographs.

Without the passion and dedication of Mayes the early history of the chairmaking town would have been lost and the stories of those hard working men and the

beginnings of the furniture factories in High Wycombe lost with them too. Mayes also comments on the positive recollections of the workers: ‘without exception, every man and woman I interviewed commented on the sunnier side of those early days...one thing I never heard was a whine’ (Mayes, 1960b, p.213). The interviews undertaken for this research have therefore been used as anecdotal evidence and added a valuable thread to the themes of research. The personnel identified were selected to give a deeper understanding of the furniture industry at the time of the study. Many of the interviewees were known to the author through her involvement with the HWeFA. The sampling also gives a broad account of the companies chosen as case studies. The following people have provided oral history recollections and the findings were used throughout the thesis to add anecdotal evidence:

- Edward Tadros, Chairman of Ercol furniture, and grandson of Lucian R Ercolani the founder of Ercol.
- Tom Dean, former Managing Director of Ercol, now retired.
- Mike Pengelly, previously worked in the Design Office at Ercol, now retired.
- Brian Rodgers, previously worked in the Design Office at Ercol, now retired.
- Roger Bennett, previously worked as a designer at G-Plan and Hands of Wycombe, now retired.
- The late Leslie Dandy, previously worked as Designer at E. Gomme / G-Plan.
- Charles Vernon, former Director at Parker Knoll and Master of The Furniture Makers Company and Group Managing Director of Gloster Furniture.
- Peter Legg, previously worked in the furniture industry and lecturer at High Wycombe.
- John Rutland, previously worked in the furniture industry and lecturer at High Wycombe.
- Alun Watkins, previously FIRA Environmental Manager, now Director at The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC).
- Martin James, previously Managing Director at Rye Machinery, now Director at CRDM Ltd, Didac Ltd and Neat Concepts Ltd.
- The late Peter Batchelor, previously worked in the High Wycombe furniture industry.

- Angela Forward, wife of the late Arthur Edwin Forward, Managing Director of Forward and Donnelly Furniture.
- Gordon Gray, previously worked as an apprentice with Forward & Donnelly, and Managing Director of G M Gray, now retired.
- The later Raymond Peach, previously Manager at Thomas Glenister Ltd.
- Christopher Riley, Sales and Marketing Director at Verco.

Scope and Limitations

This study addressed the research themes stated in the aims and objectives and the techniques declared in the above methodology. The Literature Review starts initially by covering earlier sources i.e. before 1952, to ensure understanding of the subject is reached and also to synthesise the history of the High Wycombe furniture industry in this study. There are a number of limitations to the study:

The NOMIS records used for researching employment figures in the furniture industry in the UK and High Wycombe and the statistical analysis have figures from 1970-2007. Figures prior to this have been sourced from other books and papers. The figures from NOMIS have also used different town boundaries for the statistics, which can be seen in Appendix E.

FIRA reports start at 1952 and the most recent figures are for 2012, but they also have some limitations. The statistics use different group names throughout the period of study, and the results may include or omit differing furniture sectors. It is therefore difficult to ascertain a clear comparison of statistical information. The most recent figures from across the research material have been included, although this is varied across the research.

The interviews included in the thesis were carried out with contacts made by the author. It would have been advantageous to have put an advert in the local paper for past furniture employees to come forward, but this would have been unmanageable in the time allocated for this part of the research. Because of the changes in the relevance of the interviews this was seen as unnecessary.

The furniture industry in High Wycombe is compared to the furniture industry in the rest of the UK, and it is also compared to the pottery industry in Stoke-on-Trent. It may have been beneficial to compare to other industries such as the steel industry in Sheffield or the textiles industry in Manchester, but again the scope of this would have been too large for this thesis.

The decline of the furniture industry in High Wycombe is also linked to the issues arising with wood dust in the furniture industry. This area of research was not predicted at the start of the thesis but has developed into a major topic with the depth of evidence found. The author has worked alongside John Capper (ENT surgeon at Wycombe Hospital). The statistics for this section have been collated by Nadia Wagner, former statistician at Buckinghamshire New University, using A Spearman's rho non-parametric correlation to investigate the degree of association between the number of people working in the furniture industry and the number of new cases of nasal cancer diagnosed. This chapter (Chapter 5) proved to be structured differently from the rest of the thesis because of the conventions of the medical discipline.

THE CABINET MAKER AND COMPLETE HOUSE FURNISHER Supplement 21 OCTOBER 1950

HIGH WYCOMBE

The Traditional Centre of the British Furniture Industry

W. KEEN
West End Road, HIGH WYCOMBE
Phone: 824, 822
* Chairs, High Wycombe *

PRODUCTIONS
Dining-Room Furniture
*
Firesides and Suites
*
Bedchairs and Kitchen Chairs

ESTABLISHED 1860

Radnor
a fine example of D & H quality and finish is shown in this inexpensive set which can be sold below the maximum price

RADNOR SET

- 4' 6" sideboard with shaped ends and highly figured bow fronted doors. The interior is fitted with a full length shelf and two drawers, one being baize-lined for cutlery.
- Draw leaf panelled and table 3' 3" x 2' 8" extending to 5' 3" x 2' 8". This table is very rigid, and the top is constructed from black board.
- Dining Chair: Loose seat, upholstered in beige leather cloth, shaped veneered panelled back.
- The whole set is veneered in a pleasing combination of straight grained and highly figured walnut with zycamore embellishments, and the sideboard is mahogany lined.

FIRST IN REAL EXCLUSIVE STYLISH INDIVIDUAL DESIGNS EXCELLENT SELLERS

DINING CHAIRS

STYLANEASE
Sure to please
FURNITURE

THREE-PIECE SUITES

S. & E. HUTCHINSON
DESBOROUGH STREET
HIGH WYCOMBE
Telephone: 1197

FRANK HUDSON
WOODCARVER TO THE TRADE
Architectural and General Reproductions from the Antique a Speciality

16 EASTON STREET - HIGH WYCOMBE
Telephone: HIGH WYCOMBE 1630

Fireside Chairs
Dining Chairs
Café Chairs
and Tables

COLLINS
FURNITURE

8 DASHWOOD AVENUE HIGH WYCOMBE

DANCER & HEARNE BROS LTD.
LINDSAY AVENUE, HIGH WYCOMBE
PENN STREET, AMMANFORD, PENY-DANU, ROAD, AMMANFORD

Chairs & Furniture schemes

NERO

THE COMBINED MEMBERSHIP OF THE HIGH WYCOMBE FURNITURE MANUFACTURERS' SOCIETY
Secretary: Allan Jones, 21 Easton Street, High Wycombe

FURNITURE SOCIETY CONSTITUTES A COMPLETE NATIONAL FURNISHING SERVICE
Phone: 1424, who will be pleased to afford every assistance.

Figure 1 High Wycombe advertising section dated 21 October 1950

HIGH WYCOMBE

England's furniture town

Over 100 firms in the Furniture Society can between them supply any kind of furniture. The Society Secretary will be pleased to answer your enquiry.
High Wycombe Furniture Manufacturers' Society,
9 Amersham Hill, High Wycombe, Bucks. HP13 6NR.
Telephone: (0494) 23021/3.

CR Bates & Sons

C. R. Bates produce one of the largest selections of Windsor furniture, all manufactured in the Chilterns by our own craftsmen.

Sales office:
Crownland Works,
Chilmar,
Chelmsford,
OX9 4HA.
Telephone: Kingsdon
Barnet 53005
(STD Code 0844)

Woodstock breakfast suite in elm finish.
For details circle 22

GM Gray Furniture

Illustrated is our Plain Back Cross Slit model, which is one variation of our solid mahogany regency style dining room chairs. These can be supplied in any mahogany or veneer colour to meet your requirements. Other variations include: vinyl brass tops, rope tops, upholstered padded backs (with pleated buttoning) and solid tops.

**Copyright Law, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP12 3HE,
Telephone: High Wycombe (0494) 30318.
For details circle 18**

SAMURAI By JSSmith

The Samurai programme of compact, knee cushion Showwood suites includes occasional tables & display cabinets.

Sales office:
Wycombe Road,
Stokenchurch,
Buckinghamshire
HP14 3DQ.
Telephone: Radnage
2318 2336
(STD Code 0494 654)

Samurai Suite
For details circle 21

Pierrey Biggs & Ruckstrau Ltd.

Dashwood Avenue,
High Wycombe, Bucks.
Telephone: 0494 27275

MAKERS OF FINE ENGLISH CHAIRS

Catalogue sent on request

NO. 1192
For details circle 19

Blue Line Office Seating

Combining elegance with durability, Prince Seating, part of the range of Blue Line Office Seating, will complement almost every form of office decor. Available in five standard based variations or rich wood covers, each chair is built to the same high standard set during 30 years' of manufacture.

Like all Blue Line Office Furniture, high quality is combined with realistic prices, each piece being an unconditional three year guarantee.

**Blue Line Office Seating,
Kilburn Rd., High Wycombe, Bucks.
Telephone: 0494 30133
For details circle 20**

IF YOUR COMPANY IS A MEMBER OF

The High Wycombe Furniture Manufacturers Society

YOUR PRODUCTS CAN APPEAR HERE IN FULL COLOUR FOR ONLY £165 INCLUDING PRODUCTION COSTS

TELEPHONE: 0732 364422 FOR FURTHER DETAILS

Figure 2 High Wycombe advertising section dated 29 June 1984