

Appendix VI

Correspondence with Museum's etc

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Gareth Williams
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15 January 2008

Dear Gareth,

Following our conversation at the Design Museum, I attach some notes about some of the Heal furniture that you have in your collection at the V&A. Having now delved into the matter a bit more I think I understand better how things come to be mis-described in some instances. Your predecessors were provided with very little information when they obtained the furniture and therefore the fault lies, at least partly, with my predecessors, so to make amends I have tried to fill in as much detail as I can! (see enclosed schedule).

Sir Ambrose Heal was a passionate collector of Private Press books. By the end of his life he had a complete set of the output of the Kelmscott Press and very nearly complete set of Doves Press and Ashdene Press books amongst others. To enjoy these he designed and had made in his own workshops at TCR, firstly a 'library' table in walnut and then a glass fronted cabinet in blackbean to house the collection. Later when he had moved to a larger house (and presumably the collection of books had grown) he designed a companion bookcase to stand on the other side of the doorway. Evidently he himself considered these to be significant examples of his own work as he bequeathed them in his Will to the V&A. In any case they were designed specifically for his own use and remained in his home until he died, whereupon they went straight to the V&A, so they have impeccable 'provenances'. (You will see that I have mentioned sources of contemporary illustrations of the furniture in situ) In fact Peter Floud and Trenchard Cox decided only to accept the table and the earlier of the two cabinets and the second one went to the Geffrye Museum.

My father and my uncle who handled the bequest seem to have guessed at dates for the design of these items that they would have known from infancy. I do not know whether they gave an indication of the timber but if they did I suspect they would have said walnut.

Should you wish to recreate a little Edwardian Heal interior by filling the bookcase with Private Press books and showing it with the table you could complete the picture by including the carpet that was on the floor of the room (which was also later donated to the V&A) and I would happily contribute the sofa that was also there! (The book collection was sold through Sothebys in 1964).

There seems little doubt that these two items of furniture, which you have catalogued as being in mahogany, are in reality in walnut (the table) and blackbean (the cabinet). I would date them as 1909 and 1910 respectively.

The Paris sideboard which you acquired from Mr Woolf seems to be accurately described although there is no mention of the lattice screen at the back being in ebony. I suspect the cabinet makers name is Johns rather than Jones as you will see that name appears quite frequently. (I have not commented on the table and chairs that came with it as I have not seen these and neither have I come across any information about them – I suspect they are post-WWI).

The ‘signed edition’ desk was made by a factory called Cooper about whom I have not discovered anything yet other than the fact that they regularly made quality pieces that were also made in Heal’s own factory – the ‘Churchill’ model dining tables for example.

Heal’s did not make their own chairs but used a number of ‘quality’ chair makers of the period to make them up for them – probably upholstering in-house. The walnut chair was made by Cox. This information about manufacturers would not have been revealed at the time, but as it can be found at the AAD it seems reasonable to unveil it now as it is informative of the way the Heal business operated.

I trust this is useful.

Yours sincerely

Oliver Heal

Heal Furniture at the V&A

Circ. No.	V&A description abbreviated	V&A Wood identification	OSH comments
299-1960	Writing table by AH 1905. mahogany with inlaid ebony line	None noted	<p>In the H&S Cabinet stockbook for 1909 a 6' x 3' eng walnut table was made for 'Heal' for £23 as a special.</p> <p>An English walnut parlour table exhibited by AH at 1910 A&C exhibition (made by W. Johns). It was evidently not for sale but replicas could be had for £30. (are there photos anywhere that would confirm this was same table?)</p> <p>Table is visible in illustration for article on "The Fives Court" (Ambrose Heal's house in Pinner) in "Small Country Houses of Today" (1911?) and again in article on "Baylins Farm" (Ambrose Heal's house at Beaconsfield) in "Country Life" 1921.</p> <p>AH died 1959 and bequeathed this table (and bookcases – see below) to the V&A.</p> <p>For the 1972 AH centenary exhibition booklet at H&S the table was illustrated and described as C. 1908 Library table in walnut with panelled top, inlay on edge of ebony & boxwood. 6' x 3'. At this point Heal's boardroom contained a replica of this table (which had been there pre-war) but with fluted wooden drawer pulls in contrast to the bronze (?) 'pear-drops' of the original. So it should be dated 1909 and ticketed as made of walnut. Designed by AH made by Heal & Son, W. Johns cabinet maker.</p>
298-1960	Bookcase by AH, made by Heal's about 1905. Mahogany inlaid w ebony pearwood and mother o' pearl.	Brazilian rosewood dalbergia nigra (?)	C.H.B. Quennell in an article <i>The Case for Modern Furniture</i> published in <i>The House & its Equipment</i> , Country Life has an illustration of the bookcase and wrote <i>designed by Ambrose Heal jun., is interesting in that it has been made in a new Australian wood called "black bean."</i> <i>It is a very charming grey brown colour, with cream and dark brown</i>

			<p><i>figure, and has been left without any kind of polish. The inlay work is of mother-of-pearl, with lines and bands of brown ebony and boxwood and ebony star inlays. There are two slides in the bottom carcass for placing books upon. (1911?).). I have a note of a reference to Blackbean bookcase Architectural Review Oct 1911. At the 1912 Arts & Crafts exhibition AH exhibited a book and print case in blackbean which I think must be this one. I have not noticed it in the stock book. Bookcase is illustrated in "Tradition & Modernity in Furnishing" by Sir Lawrence Weaver pg 10. captioned as being made in <u>blackbean</u>, inlaid with ebony, ivory and mother-of-pearl (1910). (published 1928). I have an early sketch design by AH for the second bookcase to house his collection of Private Press books he designed around 1924 to "balance" the first one (now in the V&A). AH has written on the drawing "this bookcase was made in black bean inlaid with mother o'pearl." So it seems likely the first one was also in blackbean. (Both bookcases were bequeathed to the V&A along with the table but in 1959 Peter Floud and Trenchard Cox decided only to accept the table and the earlier of the two bookcases. The later one went to the Geffrye Museum). In 1972 AH centenary booklet it is described as 1907 and the later one c.1925 in the possession of H&S. 1910/11 seems the most reliable date for your bookcase and the timber should be described as Blackbean (Castanospermum australe). Designed by AH, made by Heal & Son, W. Johns cabinet maker.</i></p>
W.81-1975	Sideboard by AH executed by William Jones at Heal & Sons for Paris Exhibition	Walnut with black & white inlay.	I have what appears to be a very early sketch for this by AH annotated "Black Bean Sideboard". The final drawing is at the AAD dated 22.IX.1912. by which time AH had decided to use walnut as

	1914		<p>he has written on drawing “walnut sideboard with ebony screen at back”. It has the same design detailing (moulding and inlays) as 298 & 9 -1960. The design appears to have been done with the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society in mind for it was displayed at the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition which started on 25 November 1912 (only 2 months later) and sold from there. Another one was made and sold through the shop in 1913 and then this one was made in 1914 for the Paris exhibition. Stuck in the Louvre for the duration of the War it was returned to England (See label affixed to sideboard) and sold in 1919 (it is an assumption on my part that this is the one sold that year). One more was sold in 1920 and another in 1921. The model (No. 670) was again exhibited at the 1923 A&C Exhibition (and at Wembley that year) and a couple more were sold then with the last one remaining on display at TCR until 1930. Description should be ‘designed by AH, 1912, made 1914 by Heal & Son, W. Johns, cabinet maker, walnut with ebony screen, inlaid with mother o pearl’.</p>
609-1966	Desk by AH designed 1928, made by Heal & Sons 1929 in weathered oak.	Limed oak. Quercus sp.	<p>The idea for a “signed edition” series seems to have started in 1929 and this desk (Model no. C 554) was one of the first items to have been so ticketed. It was made by Cooper for Heal’s in Weathered Oak with brown oak writing panel and margins. It sold for £82.10.0. There were still a couple unsold in stock in 1939 – could this be one of those? Post WWII one was used by the Chairman in Heal’s boardroom until 1990s. I have established that none were sold from 1932 onwards but ideally would need to go back to 1928/9 to see how many were sold prior to this. For details see Heal’s 1930 catalogue “A</p>

			Matter of Taste in Furniture” pg 25. Designed by AH, made FOR Heal & Son by Cooper 1929. Weathered oak and brown oak.
W. 47- 1979	Lattice back armchair by AH in walnut 1923	None noted	AH’s original sketch for this chair is preserved in the archive. (Philip Tilden had nothing to do with the chair – only the Churchill table). I think this model was shown at the 1916 Arts & Crafts exhibition in chestnut but have so far been unable to confirm this. Heal bought himself a set of these chairs in chestnut in 1920 so the design is certainly anterior to this. The design sketch carries a note in AH’s writing that Cox of Wycombe were to be asked to cost for making in oak and chestnut so it seems probable that they were the makers. The walnut version is quite likely to date from c1923 and again the walnut chair shown at the A&C exhibition that year was probably this design (also made by Cox). Designed by AH ca 1916, made for Heal & Son by J. Cox & co, High Wycombe, 1923. walnut.

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Alexandra Corney
The Geffrye Museum
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21 February 2008

Dear Alex,

I much enjoyed our meeting yesterday and look forward to hearing from you later about the proposed exhibition. However the purpose of this letter is simply to return to the subject of the Ambrose Heal bookcase and our previous correspondence about it.

It was very helpful to be able to actually see the bookcase. Firstly, it is a relief to know you still have it and that it is in good condition. From our brief look at it I think a little remedial attention to the surface finish would bring back most of the colour to the faded base but a more detailed examination would be required to determine the real extent of the work it needs. I assume you have access to experienced restorers and conservators that you regularly use, but should this not be the case please let me know. My impression was that it had a 'finish' on it (i.e. shellac) but I see Quennell wrote of the earlier cabinet that it *has been left without any kind of polish*, so one would need to do some discreet tests before deciding what to do.

Secondly, now that I know the base also has a glazed front, it has enabled me to make more sense of the photographs in the archive. I enclose a copy of the four stylistically related bookcases designed between 1910 and 1926 with details of what I know about their provenance. It would be good to be able to put Ambrose's own two cabinets side by side to compare the timbers and see if they really are both in Black Bean (*Castanospermum australe*). Incidentally the V&A have their bookcase on file as either mahogany or Brazilian rosewood and I have written to Gareth Williams suggesting this is wrong.

Thirdly, I enclose photocopies of the two pages from Ambrose's sketch book that I possess in which he worked out the design for the bookcase you now have. As you will see he wrote on the first page (obviously at a much later date) that the lower part of the design was much altered from the original sketch and that it was made in black bean

inlaid with mother o'pearl, *to balance with one I had made for myself several years previously*. The second page shows how the detail of the cornice was firmed up and he decided to hide the vertical partitions behind the central glazing bar in each door. The overall height seems to have been determined by the need to accommodate the Doves Bible (14") below usual sized Doves Press books (10") and a top shelf for 9" books. It looks as though he originally hoped to incorporate two drawers in the base but was forced to abandon the idea in order to house 19.5" folios below 10" Vale Press books. The collection had obviously grown considerably between 1910 and 1924/5. When he died he had a complete set of the output of the Kelmscott Press and very nearly complete sets of Doves Press and Ashdene Press books amongst others. They were his highly prized possessions that he spent many years collecting and so it is understandable that he put a lot of care and attention into the detail of the design of the cabinets to house them. He evidently considered the cabinets and table to be significant examples of his own work as he bequeathed them to the V&A in his Will. The 'provenance' of the bookcase is impeccable as it was made in Tottenham Ct Rd, was at Baylins Farm until 1960 and has been at the Geffrye ever since.

Fourthly, I enclose a photocopy of the Geffrye Museum's receipt for the bookcase dated 21 October 1960 along with Mrs Harrison's covering letter. I trust this will reassure you that the bookcase belongs to the museum! Interestingly a couple of years later the Museum sent back a chest of drawers that had been on loan said to date from 1900 and I would be fascinated to know what this was.

Finally, as promised, I enclose a copy of the little booklet originally produced to mark the centenary of Sir Ambrose's birth in 1972 for your collection which I hope will be helpful. Gordon Russell's article about him is still the best assessment so far and Anthony Heal's potted biography the most reliable source on his life.

Thank you for welcoming Jeff and I and for giving up so much time to us which was much appreciated. We look forward to hearing from you later.

Yours sincerely

Oliver S Heal