

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to reassess the work of Sir Ambrose Heal, designer, manufacturer and retailer of furniture. An attempt has been made to separate out his work as a manufacturer by looking at the output of the Cabinet Factory whilst the rest of his business endeavours were included under the heading Creative Retailing. His work as a designer stretches across both domains. Many items of furniture for which he was personally responsible have been identified, but in the area of retail management that embraces publicity, promotion, merchandising and management his own creative input is more difficult to assess yet his responsibility for the overall result is clear. No attempt has been made to consider his life outside the business where he was also active as sportsman, traveller, researcher, collector and author.

Had A.H. himself sought to define the function of the designer he would surely have reached for his eighteenth-century copy of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* where he would have found, as the first meaning of design: *To purpose; to intend anything*. Whilst the second meaning given was: *To form or order with a particular purpose*. It is under this broad definition of design that one can allocate to A.H. responsibility as the designer of the way the Heal business operated between the Wars. It was his defining hand that ultimately ordered everything from the selection of the merchandise, the advertising, the graphics to the layout of the shop.

The central thrust of the thesis has sought to examine his work in a way that has not previously been attempted by going back to original documentation in order to build up a systematic record of what was manufactured by Heal's own Cabinet Factory. This is the closest one can get to beginning to catalogue what A.H. himself designed, in the modern sense of the word, i.e. with his own pencil, and therefore consider his work as designer and manufacturer. No study devoted entirely to his work has been undertaken before and previous authors who have written about his furniture in compendious studies of the period, have illustrated their work by borrowing images that have caught their eye in the archive, with the result that the impression we have

of the furniture he designed has been limited to a small number of well known pieces supplemented by an erratic assortment of others whose provenance has been unclear. The other source of illustrations for such writers has come from auction houses or antique dealers through whose hands items of Heal furniture have passed. Again, because these are the result of the lottery of survival, the record that these leave is by definition not truly representative of the original output and, by and large, have circulated in the market without supporting background documentation to confirm their attribution as an Ambrose Heal design. By systematically recording stock numbers and sales details of individual products a firm base has now been established for the beginning of a *catalogue raisonné* in as far as such a thing is feasible. This information has not been made available before – the information existed but no-one previously has extracted it on a methodical basis as this thesis has attempted to do. Not all of the items thus identified are illustrated but it is the author's firm conviction that if the photographic archive was digitised and made more readily accessible it would be possible to link more of the stock numbers to illustrations.

What it has revealed is that the output of the Heal Factory was small and that therefore it only represented a small proportion of total retail sales. There is much more research to be done to investigate the work of other manufacturers who made furniture for Heal's in order to understand their relationship with the firm and how much design and manufacturing influence came from Tottenham Court. Road. This too would inform our understanding of the role of A.H. as manufacturer.

The final part of the thesis devoted to Creative Retailing has considered A.H.'s career as a retailer which has left less tangible traces but, as this thesis has shown, constitutes an equally important part of his contribution to design developments in this country in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Key areas in the history of the business, such as the Mansard Gallery, corporate identity, publicity, merchandise philosophy and practice have been considered and key members of his team have been identified and their fascinating contribution drawn from the shadows. It is here, in considering the overall impact of his work, that the full extent of A.H.'s engagement in the field of design comes to light and finds a proper context.

What emerges very strongly from this examination of his work is the fact that,

although A.H. had a long career throughout which he set high standards, the most significant decisions were taken in the first five or ten years of the century. It was in this period that:

- He developed his mature vocabulary as a furniture designer.
- He set in train the manufacture of well designed, inexpensive furniture by mechanised production methods.
- He created and/or endorsed the visual details that built up Heal's corporate identity. (The use of the Fourposter logo and the chequer border in advertising.)

Subsequently these elements were enlarged, developed, amended and built upon but the foundations had already been firmly laid.

Perhaps the most important and enduring decision taken after that period was the decision to rebuild the shop in Tottenham Court Road in 1913 because this not only embodied his ideas about design and retailing in concrete form, thereby underscoring the visual messages that his furniture and publicity were sending out, but it then became the setting that permitted activities such as the creation of the Mansard Gallery. The *Unity, the Interdependence and the Solidarity of all the Arts* that A.H. strove to achieve through merchandise and graphic design was given an appropriate fitting physical framework that at the same time imposed a subtle change on A.H.'s own priorities from an emphasis on design to an emphasis on retailing.⁵³⁶ When the building was extended in the 1930s essentially no changes were made to the ideas incorporated into the 1913-17 construction, thus confirming the soundness of the original concept and the continuing currency of A.H.'s engagement in the field.

It has been shown that A.H.'s reputation should not rest simply on his work as a furniture designer but also on his skill as a businessman who successfully ran a sizeable firm for some forty years. The consistency and persistence of his contribution is even more remarkable because his stewardship marked the introduction of high standards of design and business ethics that distinguished the business from the accepted norms of the times. As a result his legacy easily bears comparison with that of other better known figures from the same epoch.

⁵³⁶ Selwyn Image, address delivered on 25th anniversary of foundation of AWG, 1909.

Comparisons with other contemporary figures are not simple because of the breadth of A.H.'s activities and the lack of truly comparable figures trying to achieve the same ends at the same time. It is not the purpose of this study to compare his work with that of others as this can be better dealt with subsequently by others, but a number of personalities present themselves.

Sir Arthur Liberty (1843-1917) was another talented retailer, knighted for his services to the applied and decorative arts, but, although a clever businessman, according to Pamela Todd, he: *completely ignored the social and ethical side of Arts and Crafts while trading on its spirit, visual appeal, and the current fashion for Aesthetic style.*⁵³⁷ Certainly, when the fashion for Art Nouveau expired, the Liberty furniture department turned to a mixture of Japanese, Chinese, and Moorish influences combined with items in the old English spirit that had little to do with working out a new style fit for a new English society. Alison Adburgham recorded:

*Linen-fold panelling was a Liberty speciality. ...The Liberty style at this time might be called Abbotsford Baronial – less oppressive than Balmoral Baronial and without the stags' heads and tartan.*⁵³⁸

Gordon Selfridge (1856-1947) was the ultimate showman as a retailer, a member of the DIA (his advertising print and layout conformed to their ideals), who proclaimed the principles of his store as: *integrity, truthfulness, value-giving, dignity, liberality and courtesy*, and who was set upon making retailing a respected profession. Yet, as a mass merchandiser, he was in a different league to A.H. His biographer commented: *An impartial study of his store publicity between the two wars would endorse the opinion that he was more successful as a showman than as a salesman.*⁵³⁹

Sir Blundell Maple (1845-1903), although closer in specialisation to A.H., was another showman but one who had no pretensions about design standards and whose objective was to sell the maximum quantity of furniture. He might be said to have been more successful as a salesman than as a showman.

The only personality of that preceding generation who had had similar ideals and who

⁵³⁷ Pamela Todd, *The Arts and Crafts Companion*, Thames & Hudson, 2004.

⁵³⁸ Alison Adburgham, *Liberty's, A Biography of a Shop*, George Allen & Unwin, 1975, p 96.

⁵³⁹ Reginald Pound, *Selfridge, A Biography*, Heinemann, 1960, p 52, p 190.

had put them into practice was the man who had inspired A.H., William Morris himself. Although A.H. shared Morris's ideals and was a better furniture designer, his historical impact was much less significant in comparison to that of Morris, not just on design, but on the thinking about work and design and communicating that to a wide audience.

Frank Pick (1878-1941), who rose to become Joint Assistant Managing Director of the Underground Electric Railway Company of London in 1921 and Managing Director in 1928, was younger than A.H. and, although he had started commissioning artists to produce posters around 1910, according to his biographer, it was only his joining the DIA fraternity in 1915 that: *resulted in his finally becoming the man he was during his best years.*⁵⁴⁰ Pick became a crusader for the cause in a way that A.H. never did because of his reluctance to be in the limelight. A.H.'s unwillingness to write or speak about why he was doing what he did has led to his contribution being largely overlooked. But it is clear that the example he set concurred with Michael Saler's analysis of the movement that Pick joined and which Saler has dubbed the Medieval Modernists who

Did not spurn modernity...Rather they sought to spiritualise capitalism, infuse mass commodities with soul and reshape an increasingly fragmented and secular culture into an organically integrated community of the faithful.

Saler argues that the Medieval Modernists, of whom Pick was the prime example (and I would suggest A.H. was another), were the real avant-garde of the interwar years, *they tended to be pragmatic idealists who hoped to transform the country into a modern Earthly Paradise, a merry mechanized England.*⁵⁴¹ Pick undoubtedly shared the same philosophy and through his work at London Underground was able to follow A.H.'s example in integrating good design into every aspect of the operation, but running a public service is not the same as running a shop and making furniture - so the comparison only goes so far.

⁵⁴⁰ Christian Barman, *The Man who Built London Transport – A Biography of Frank Pick*, David & Charles, 1979, p 46.

⁵⁴¹ Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England – Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p 14.

Another man, twenty years younger and who in many ways followed in A.H.'s footsteps was Sir Gordon Russell (1892-1980). He had returned from World War One determined to properly establish his own furniture-making factory at Broadway in the Cotswolds, yet rather than follow the local example of the handcraft workshop that Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley had set, he chose to move towards batch production methods. In the words of Penny Sparke, his *furniture designs and writings were dedicated to reconciling hand and machine manufacture and creating a balance between Arts and Crafts tradition and modern innovation.*⁵⁴² Jeremy Myerson has described him as *a towering figure in British twentieth century design.*⁵⁴³ A.H. evidently thoroughly approved of what he was trying to do in those early years, advising and helping him and even sending his son Anthony to learn cabinet-making skills in his workshops for a couple of years. Certainly A.H.'s heart remained with the Arts & Crafts movement even though his own designs had moved on to a more sophisticated style by then. Gordon Russell's personal designs remained very much in the spirit of what Ernest Gimson had done before and it was only when Gordon's brother Dick started designing that the firm leapt forwards to embrace modernism. Whilst Russell remains one of my personal heroes it does not stop me wondering whether, if he had not become so well-known through his later work on war-time Utility furniture and subsequently for the Council for Industrial Design, his reputation as a designer would stand so high.

The skills of the good retailer remain unchanged to this day. For example, Edwin Heathcote wrote of Vittorio Radice, the man who revitalised Selfridges in recent years that he was *cleverly making it a site of cultural as well as commercial consumerism, blurring the distinction between shopping and culture and between public and private urban space.* By creating a place where culture and commercialism blend indistinguishably the store becomes a destination for an outing or an inspiring experience. Radice explained:

...we create a sense of place: 80% of the people coming into Selfridges are on a day out, they are not shopping. The fact that they shop is almost immaterial. We should bring them into the place out of curiosity, out of a willingness to

⁵⁴² Penny Sparke, *A Century of Design*, Mitchell Beazley, 1998, p 72.

⁵⁴³ Jeremy Myerson, *Gordon Russell*, Design Council, 1992.

discover new experiences, new products, to meet friends.

...To surprise people, shock people, interest people, generate curiosity, that is our daily job because once they are here they will buy something.

52% of those who enter the store buy something so the objective has to be to get the people in.⁵⁴⁴ The Heal shop, as a result of the standards set by A.H. and continued by his successors, became a place of pilgrimage for those interested in home furnishing and modern design. My memory of customer flow counts in the 1970s suggests that nearly three quarters of the visitors were there just to look.

Similarly furniture retailers today are exhorted by the trade press to make their showroom their own stage:

People don't want product. They want personality. Personality with an attitude! They want to be delighted and excited about their choices. They spent the price of admission (their valuable time) to attend your performance with the hope of finding a solution. But they also want to be entertained in the process.

However the shopping experience goes deeper than just superficial entertainment, particularly in such a personal area as furnishing your home:

One of the real keys for success is understanding the difference between service and hospitality. Service is how well something is done technically: hospitality is how well something feels emotionally.⁵⁴⁵

A.H. had demonstrated how to do all of these things almost a century before, with the additional bonus that he believed that what he was doing was genuinely making the world a better place to live in. This was not showmanship but done from heartfelt conviction. He did not see it as his job to explain or record what he was doing in order to assure his place in the history books.

If A.H. would recognise much of the furniture retailing scene today from his experience of display, advertising, catalogues, direct mail, etc., he might have more difficulty recognizing the recent world of furniture design and architecture. He might

⁵⁴⁴ Edwin Heathcote, *Interview with Vittorio Radice*, *Architectural Digest*, Vol. 72, July 2002, p 91.

⁵⁴⁵ Cathy Finney, *The Fine Art of Retail Sales Presentation*, *Furniture World*, January 2007.

be relieved that, in the words of Charles Jencks, Modernism's *virtual stranglehold on the profession from the late 1930s to the 1970s*, had finally collapsed and that

Thankfully, today no single orthodoxy dominates Western society: neither the Pre-Modernism advocated by Prince Charles, the Neo-Modernism advocated by his adversary the President of the RIBA, nor the Post-Modernism caught in the cross-fire between the two camps. If anything reigns it is pluralism...

A.H. would surely have welcomed a willingness on the part of some architects once again to look to the past for inspiration. Lucien Steil writing in *Tradition and Architecture* (1987) has said:

*Tradition is emphatically not a rigid dogma, but a living, organic, ecological project. It has nothing to do with obscurantist practices, reactionary customs and irrational revivalism. Tradition is always young, fresh and new; not a defence of the old, the ancient or antique. It is a project about continuity, based on memory, common sense, and experience. Thus it would be erroneous to regard tradition as the antithesis of inventiveness: **tradition is the very foundation of invention.***⁵⁴⁶ (my emphasis)

A.H. would have empathised with the idea that designs rooted in tradition were sound, providing continuity and identity, whilst, at the same time, abhorring simple reproduction. "Tradition is the Foundation of Invention" might have been his motto and hence it has been chosen to title this thesis. One of the fundamental ideas behind the Arts & Crafts movement was a wish to develop an artistic expression that reflected Englishness (continuity, rootedness, based on a view of a non-intellectual vernacular tradition) that at the same time was representative of its own time and society's needs. A.H. would have felt at home with ecological living, energy saving, renewable forests, recycling, the growth of designer-maker workshops.

However it seems less likely that he would have felt quite so at home with the world of superstar designers whose products, in the words of Neil Cummings, *merely shout 'look at me, look at me, look at me'*; products that are designed to be extraordinary, not ordinary. Cummings explains how Reyner Banham described as *furniturisation* the change in which

...previously unselfconscious and virtually invisible domestic artefacts...had

⁵⁴⁶ Lucien Steil, *Tradition & Architecture*, Architectural Design, Vol. 57, no. 5/6, 1987, p 5.

*suddenly become great design objects that demanded attention. Previously humble things were growing vast promotional superstructures...*⁵⁴⁷

Edwin Heathcote on the same subject wrote:

*Architect-designed furniture is the status symbol par excellence, it has become art furniture...The originals of these cult objects have become highly sought-after artworks, bought as investments like paintings and placed in museums and collections around the world. But these are not artworks. They are chairs...to be sat in... This museumification... confers upon the industrial designer or the architect the status of artist. Art of course does not have to work. Chairs do.*⁵⁴⁸

A.H. might not have agreed that art does not have to work, coming from a period when all the arts including architecture and design were regarded as one, for he was a down-to-earth practical designer for whom things had to be functional as well as beautiful. The idea of 'look at me' furniture is not new, even if it is perhaps now more prevalent, and A.H. lived through several generations of items that were more to be looked at than useful, from the excesses of Art Nouveau to the extravagance of Art Deco and his disapproval of these was clear.

The classic example of furniture becoming cult object is that of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's chairs. Current collectors' attitudes are summed up by the fact that a single Mackintosh chair, impractical and renowned for being poorly made, can be auctioned for around £50,000 whilst a solid useable Heal chair can be had for less than £500.⁵⁴⁹

Tracey Potts has demonstrated that A.H. did his best to reinforce the reputation of his firm through subtle marketing techniques designed to create 'symbolic capital' which she explains thus:

'Symbolic capital' is to be understood as economic or political capital that is

⁵⁴⁷ Neil Cummings, *Look at Me*, Architectural Design, vol. 72, July 2002.

⁵⁴⁸ Edwin Heathcote, *Introduction, Furniture & Architecture*, Architectural Design, vol 72, no. 4, July 2002, p 5.

⁵⁴⁹ A wooden seated armchair designed by Mackintosh in stained oak made for the Argyle Street Tea Rooms in Glasgow in 1897 was sold through Sotheby's on 20.03.2008 for £50,900. Two other Mackintosh chairs in the same sale did not reach their reserve price and were not sold. The more expensive of these had been estimated at £100,000 to £150,000. A little Voysey designed chair in oak with a rush seat sold for £10,000. Estimate of Heal chair price arrived at in discussion with Brian Thompson of the Millinery Works, March 2008.

*disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a 'credit' which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees 'economic' profits (1993;75 Bourdieu).*⁵⁵⁰

*The coinage of symbolic capital disguises itself as something other than money. It may present itself as "prestige" or "authority" or as a diffuse air of knowingness around cultural goods and practices and is therefore necessarily charismatic in appearance (one of Bourdieu's favourite words...). Accordingly, in producing belief and believes in the virtues of modern furniture, retailers and other agents can be seen to be, surreptitiously, mobilizing and transferring capital funds between objects and not simply conjuring a revaluation of appearances.*⁵⁵¹

Applying the theory specifically to Heal merchandise and the experience of shopping there, Potts argues:

*Mass produced or serial furniture becomes marketed, in the case of Heal's, as aesthetically distinct regardless of production cost. Heal's 'Reasonable Furniture' for instance disarticulates production costs and market value from cultural value and puts in place new distinctions between the cheap and reasonable.*⁵⁵²

*Grounded in commonsense notions of quality and pleasantness, Heal's designs thus promote themselves as examples of the 'honest' and the 'sincere' and in doing so achieve the separation of the aesthetic and commercial concerns so necessary to the cultivation of symbolic capital.*⁵⁵³

With the divorce of the aesthetic from commerce, shopping at Heal's is reconfigured, fundamentally as an aesthetic encounter. 'Good Taste' is uncoupled from expense ...and the shop becomes the location for disinterested conversations about 'modern decorative schemes'. ...Crucially, the shop

⁵⁵⁰ Tracey Potts, *Creating 'Modern Tendencies', -The Symbolic Economics of Furnishing*, p 158.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid*, p 159.

⁵⁵² *Ibid*, p 162.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid*, p 163.

*becomes a gallery, transmuted into the scene of an 'aesthetic conversion'.*⁵⁵⁴

How can A.H.'s success as a creator of symbolic capital be measured? Potts insists that in the long term this capital can be converted into real economic capital. Economic arguments were merely temporarily suspended in this experience where aesthetics were uncoupled from their costs. The implication seems to be that the strategy of separating the two permits in the longer term greater economic benefits to be harvested. There is little evidence to suggest this was the case here. Heal's only operated on the trade's normal 50% markup and company profits were never huge; there was no notable pay back on the investment at the time. Success can be seen to have been achieved, however, in simply creating a demand (in conjunction with others of the same persuasion) for well designed furniture. The fact that the business thrived in a market where the majority taste was still for reproduction-style furniture, and where much larger, more powerful competitors were at play (Maples, Waring & Gillow), is indication enough of the power of the reputation that was established and the success of the strategy.

A further question that arises is whether items imbued with symbolic value retain that value to this day. Possibly this is a truer measure of the success of the generation of symbolic capital as the true costs are long forgotten, even function is no longer of prime importance. The economic price of antiques is fixed primarily by their inherent symbolic value but this no longer simply depends on the value that their makers gave them but is influenced by their personal history as well as the opinions of collectors and writers on the subject over the intervening years and so it is not a reliable measure either. However it gives us an insight into the present standing of reputations of designers, craftsmen, architects and shopkeepers.

A unique A.H.-designed dresser, with a known impeccable provenance, made in solid oak and still in good condition, was valued for probate some years ago at half the price of a Sydney Barnsley dresser that fulfils exactly the same function and does not differ significantly in terms of quality and workmanship. The point about the price of an unusable Mackintosh chair has already been made. Yet a Heal piece of furniture of

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, p 163.

the pre-War period will fetch more at auction than a similar item with a Maple or Waring & Gillow label. The symbolic value is therefore successfully maintained even if it does not compare with that now accorded to members of the Cotswold School or the Glasgow School.

If all this is so then perhaps one should conclude therefore that Sir Ambrose Heal has been correctly assessed by the market and historians over the years. A man who sought to bring good furniture and other well designed products to a wide but discerning middle class clientele, is positioned half-way up the ladder of history in his niche – somewhere between Maple and Barnsley. However I trust that this study has shown that in terms of conviction, persistence and consistency Heal deserves reconsideration and that design history should now note the following:

- that to judge him on his furniture alone is to vastly underestimate his contribution;
- that the output of his own factory was much more limited than previously assumed and as a result specific items of furniture can now be reassessed in this knowledge;
- that through his stewardship of Heal's he should be remembered for his contribution to and continuing promotion of twentieth century art and design across a broad field which included the culture of retail display, graphics and exhibition, a contribution which was not just confined to historical scholarship and contemporary furniture design.
- that he was a talented creative retailer – an ignored and underrated profession - maintaining relationships with significant figures in the arts, crafts and industry to obtain the results he wanted.

Unravelling these threads has been a fascinating voyage that has imbued a new sense of respect in the author for the work of Sir Ambrose Heal. This can now be justified through a much deeper knowledge of what he (and his colleagues) achieved rather than relying on received impressions based on sometimes dubious assumptions. He was never likely to fit into the role of what Pevsner was to define as a 'Pioneer of Modernism' as his work did not fit usefully into the established canon that took design towards the growth of what was thought to be the style of the century. As a result his work has been described with dismissive terms like 'derivative' because

somehow 'traditional' was inadequate.

Was he a plagiarist, profiteer and philanderer? The answer seems to be no to all those accusations although one can see how such assessments have arisen. Plagiarism is defined as stealing ideas from another's work and passing them off as one's own. As has been demonstrated again and again, A.H. constantly sought inspiration in the work of others (mostly the great 18th century cabinet makers) but reinterpreted the ideas in his own way for his own time. A.H. was never a profiteer in the sense of making excess profits but he was aware of commercial opportunities and knew how to make the most of these. He is to be respected for having built up and run a profitable business for so many years through difficult times. His extra-marital activities are fortunately outside the scope of this thesis and not much time has been devoted to their investigation, but from the information available it would appear that he went through a mid-life crisis that put his marriage under considerable strain, and although for a while there were a number of liaisons, it seems he found his soul-mate in Prudence Maufe; so this was in no sense a casual relationship.

The limitations of this thesis are recognised and much research remains to be done to complement or complete that undertaken for this study. Possible areas for post-Doctoral work might include:

- Using the information in the thesis as a foundation to set up a digitisation project for the Heal photographic collection held by the Archive of Art and Design at the V&A in order to make it accessible and informative to scholarship, collectors and an interested public. This could possibly be an area of cooperation between the Victoria & Albert Museum and Bucks New University and, as already stated, would enable more of the furniture recorded by this thesis to be visually identified. The paucity of illustrations in certain parts of the thesis confirms the need for this.
- Publishing the findings of this research and organising an exhibition to demonstrate in physical form the changes and developments in the work of A.H. over a forty-year period.
- Setting up a web-based Ambrose Heal Society which has already been outlined in theory but has not advanced for lack of time and funds.

- Continuing research into key suppliers to Heal's (like Mansfield, Cooper, Bianco) which would be very informative about the aspects of the furniture industry during the period.
- Continuing research into other aspects of the retail business to shed more light on domestic consumption between the Wars (e.g. the Modern Tendencies exhibitions).
- Firming up the information to produce a *Catalogue Raisonné* of A.H.'s work and to make this widely available.
- Recording and cataloguing the A.H. collection of furniture, papers and artefacts at Baylins Farm to form a permanent historical record of his lifestyle, taste and relationships with contemporary artists and craftsmen.

The avenues of research identified above demonstrate the rich potential of the Heal Archive and point to a field of endeavour that this author hopes will inspire and promote further research in the future.