

**TRADITION IS THE FOUNDATION OF INVENTION:**

**A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE WORK OF**

**SIR AMBROSE HEAL (1872-1959)**

**FURNITURE DESIGNER, MANUFACTURER & RETAILER**

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to reassess the work of Sir Ambrose Heal (1872-1959), designer, manufacturer and retailer of furniture, in order to reconsider his reputation. It offers a distinct contribution to knowledge by providing a more precise description of Ambrose Heal's contribution to furniture design in the early part of the twentieth century together with a more carefully considered analysis of his association with Heal & Son of Tottenham Court Road, London, than has previously been attempted.

In an innovative and close reading of archival materials held at the V&A and in private hands the thesis brings new insights and authoritative detail together with a greater understanding to the following:

- The historic influences that were to provide an aesthetic and commercial context for the work of Ambrose Heal and the development of Heal & Son.
- The furniture designed by Ambrose Heal, together with a consideration of the role played by Heal & Son's in-house Cabinet Factory and the contribution of outside suppliers and other designers in the years between 1895 and 1939.
- The part played by Ambrose Heal in terms of the philosophy and direction he introduced to Heal & Son and the influential role the firm came to play under his leadership.

In addition to the main text the appendices provide an accessible model for the development of a catalogue raisonné with a reliable chronology and detailed record of the sale of furniture produced by the Heal & Son Cabinet Factory between 1898 and 1939, together with other useful documents and analyses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In addition to personal books and documents preserved by Sir Ambrose Heal and his son Anthony, I am most grateful that I was also able to consult a collection of Heal's catalogues formed by Timothy Solloway and David Dunham, both former employees of the firm, which has been most helpful.

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## Abbreviations and Definitions

- A.A.D. – Archive of Art & Design, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
- A. & C. E. S. – Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society
- A.G. – Arthur Greenwood (1900-1990)
- A.H. – Sir Ambrose Heal (1872-1959)
- A.H. jun'r – Sir Ambrose Heal (1872-1959)
- A.H. sen'r – Ambrose Heal senior (1847-1913)
- A.S.H. – Anthony Standerwick Heal (1907-1995)
- A.W.G. – Art Workers' Guild
- D.I.A. – Design and Industries Association
- F.T.B.A. – Furnishing Trades Benevolent Association.
- G.M. – Gross Margin. Difference between cost price charged by supplier and retail selling price expressed as a percentage of the selling price.
- G.P. – Gross Profit. Difference between cost price and selling price expressed as a percentage of the selling price after allowances for wastage etc.
- G.S.M. – Gladys Stutchbury Maufe more usually known as Prudence Maufe (see P.M.) but used these initials on some occasions.
- H&S – Heal & Son (partnership until 1906), Heal & Son Ltd (limited company from 1907 onwards)
- H.T.S. – Hamilton Temple Smith (1883-1961)
- J.C.H. – Christopher Heal (1911-1985), John Christopher Heal always known as Christopher.
- J.F.J. – J.F. Johnson (1874-1957)
- M.A.R.S. – Modern Architectural Research Society
- M.U. – Mark up. Difference between cost price and selling price expressed as a percentage of the cost price.
- P.M. – Lady Prudence Maufe (1884-1976).  
Full name Gladys Evelyn Prudence Stutchbury Maufe.
- R.I.B.A. – Royal Institute of British Architects.
- R.T.S.A. – Retail Trading Standards Association.
- T.C.R. – Tottenham Court Road, London.

## Preface

In view of the author's relationship (a grandson) to the subject of this study it was felt that some clarification and explanation of this personal dimension was required.

By undertaking this reassessment of the work of Sir Ambrose Heal as a submission for a PhD it is intended to demonstrate that it is done in a professional, detached, analytical manner. By putting it forward for critical appraisal it is hoped that it will be seen as a serious review of his real achievements and not just an exercise in family history. It is certainly not intended as a panegyric and much less as a hagiography.

However as the second son of Ambrose's second son, fate has intervened to put me in a privileged position to contribute to our knowledge of his work. This is probably not the place to explore the "what ifs" of history but let it suffice to say that if Ambrose's eldest son, Cecil, had not been killed as a young man, straight out of school, in the First World War, but had taken his place in the Heal business, my father would almost certainly have become an engineer and not gone into the furnishing trade. Then, if my elder brother were not handicapped, it is highly probable that I would not now be living in the house that Ambrose lived in for the last forty years of his life.

Although Ambrose died when I was ten years old, he had suffered for some years from senile dementia so that I had very little contact with him and certainly no memories that are useful to this study. My curiosity to know more about this man, who had evidently made his mark during his lifetime, grew over the years following his death.

From 1970 to 1983 I worked for Heal & Son Ltd in Tottenham Ct Rd, London, where there were still people who would remark, when changes were proposed, "I am sure Sir Ambrose would not approve of that". His standards in merchandise selection and graphics were still upheld. A story was still told, with envy, of how Ambrose had, very firmly, told some disagreeable customer to leave the premises.

Heal's was always referred to as a shop and never a store because, it was said, Sir Ambrose always insisted that "*a shop is a place where things are made and sold – a store is a place where things are kept*". This training as a shopkeeper in the organisation that he himself had done so much to form gave me a good understanding of what he was striving for and how he operated, even though he had retired some twenty years earlier.

Despite the fact that the business had expanded considerably during the 1960's, there were still elements that had direct links back to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Although the merchandise policy was resolutely modern and forward looking, evidence of the historical heritage was all around. The bedding factory, the origin of the firm, was still housed in the back of the Tottenham Court Road premises, still making by hand sprung bed-bases, such as John Harris Heal's patent *Sommier Elastique Portatif* from 1862 and best hair mattresses for the Royal Palaces. It was here that I was first put to work as my father, his father and his father's father had been before. The bedding factory office was still run by an old lady who had joined the business in 1916 and still wrote up her ledgers, fluently in code, in ink. Examples of the same code exist in the earliest stock books that survive, from 1897, and it seems probable that it was used from the start of the firm.

The shop front consisted of three different phases of development. The first two had been constructed in Ambrose's time (1916, architect Cecil Brewer; 1937, architect Edward Maufe), whilst behind the scenes were remnants of the original Victorian building with its cast iron pillars.

As both Sir Ambrose and his father were historians and collectors it is not surprising that archives of the firm's past activities had been kept. I was introduced to these by the self-appointed archivist, Robin Hartley, when they were still stored in various cupboards around the building. Only much later was a separate archive room set up and his position formalised. When Anthony Heal took the decision to present a set of archive material to the Victoria & Albert Museum it was Robin Hartley who sorted out what was to go in 1979. It was only after his death and Anthony's final retirement that the balance of the archives also went to the Museum and the unique collection of furniture, mostly from the boardroom, was sold off discreetly through



Sothebys to fund the cataloguing of the archive by the V&A.

My interest in the work of Sir Ambrose Heal grew soon after I joined the business and it was I who suggested to my father in 1971 that we should do something to mark the centenary of Ambrose's birth the following year. Having discussed the possibilities for holding an exhibition I was a little taken aback when he said "Well, you'd better get on with it then". I was therefore responsible for pulling together a collection of Ambrose's furniture from various members of the family, within the firm and from private collectors. Naturally I was much helped by my father, my uncle, Mr Robert Coker, Managing Director, Mr Derek Liley, Publicity Manager and others, to put together a representative exhibition for which valuable ground floor selling space was rather grudgingly given up albeit temporarily.

One of my personal regrets was that I had not been apprenticed as a cabinet-maker as Ambrose had been. This was not because I wished to follow in his footsteps but because of a complex mix of enjoying the satisfaction of working with my hands, loving the smell of the woodworking shop, and wanting to acquire a recognisable skill. My only formal qualification was as a retailer and so in later life, after seventeen years working abroad, I took the opportunity in 2001 of doing a three year degree course as a furniture conservator-restorer at BCUC, High Wycombe, and subsequently got a job in a restoration workshop. This allows me to appreciate and admire in detail the skills that Ambrose and his craftsmen exercised over a century ago. In addition it has given me an insight into his historical inspirations. As an antique dealer he was accustomed to handling examples of the best furniture from the past and this combined with his historical research enabled him to reinterpret these in his own contemporary work.

Having restored the house in which Ambrose spent the last forty years of his life and inherited a quantity of his original furniture, documents and books, I have an unequalled perspective on how he lived. At the same time this highlighted the need for a study because there has been to date no published source of information about his work that can answer the questions of owners of early Heal furniture wishing to know when and where their furniture was made. As it is also highly likely that this personal collection will be dispersed in due course it is important to provide a record

for future historians.