

# Introduction

## a. Introduction

*The ascription of design achievements to individual genius is much too simplistic. There is no doubt that individuals do make unique contributions to design but the magnitude of this element is generally exaggerated out of all proportion as a result of individualism which has been so powerful in the West since the Renaissance. (John A. Walker)<sup>1</sup>*

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.

Through a close reading of archival materials held at the V&A and in private hands the thesis brings authoritative detail and 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

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto Press, 1989, p. 175.

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.

In full consciousness of the risks of over-emphasising the individual input of one man, as referenced by Walker above, this study is careful to put into context Ambrose Heal's work and the influences to which he was subject but also to explore and record the work of other members of the team. In seeking to provide a more comprehensive record of his achievements than has been attempted before, this thesis allows a more rounded assessment of Ambrose Heal's contribution to the culture of twentieth century consumption to emerge and his place within design history to be better understood.

## **b. Who was Sir Ambrose Heal?**

A brief portrait constructed from comments by those who knew Ambrose Heal in his lifetime may be helpful to understanding how he achieved what he did. (Fig. 1-1, 1-2) Hereafter Ambrose Heal will be referred to as A.H. (as he was for most of his career) to avoid confusion with his father, Ambrose Heal senior, and the eponymous firm, which will be referred to as Heal's, Heal & Son or H&S.

A.H. was the first member of the fourth generation of the Heal family to join the business in London's Tottenham Court Road. By the time A.H. joined in 1893, the firm, founded in 1810, had expanded from feather dressing, to bed-making, to selling bedroom furniture alongside the mattresses and beds made in its own factory. However the Heal's business was relatively limited until the young A.H. arrived on the scene and played a key role in revitalising it. Through positioning Heal's at the forefront of furnishing fashions of the time he expanded the firm and turned it into a significant force in British design developments in the first half of the twentieth century.

His contemporaries recognised the value of his contribution through the conferral of

a knighthood and by electing him a Royal Designer for Industry.<sup>2</sup> He was celebrated as *being one of the truly great designers of our time, making a practical thing out of the romantic theories of William Morris.*<sup>3</sup> One renowned design critic even went so far as to state (albeit privately) *I doubt whether any one man in the whole history of furniture design in this country has had quite such an individual and far reaching effect.*<sup>4</sup>

However A.H. was not an easy character. He has been accused of being a plagiarist, a profiteer, as well as a philanderer. These accusations were no doubt in part just a reflection of his success. As Sir Gordon Russell recalled:

*He was sniped at from all quarters. By many craftsmen he was distrusted because he was in charge of an efficient business. By most businessmen he was regarded as a long-haired chap with odd notions.*<sup>5</sup>

But one is forced to conclude that A.H. was not a “nice man” in the way that, for example, Gordon Russell is portrayed. Russell comes across as a generous-spirited, gentle giant, loved and respected by his men.<sup>6</sup> Although A.H. was respected for his leadership and what he achieved, he was regarded as ruthlessly determined to obtain his objectives and feared as a result. Arthur Greenwood, his chief draughtsman for many years said:

*He was what I would call an utterly ruthless man, not a nice man to work for at all. He could be very rude.*<sup>7</sup>

Noel Carrington describes his behaviour as follows:

*When I first met Ambrose Heal my impression was of a man who was decidedly withdrawn and unsociable. On a committee he seldom spoke unless his opinion was invited. On other speakers he fixed a rather baleful stare which could be slightly intimidating.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Knighthood conferred for ‘Services to Industrial Design’ 1933. Elected to Royal Society of Antiquaries 1934 and appointed to Advisory Council of V&A Museum. Elected Royal Designer for Industry 1939. (limited to 40 living designers). Awarded Royal Society of Arts Gold Albert Medal, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Harling, *Obituary Sir Ambrose Heal, The Master Craftsman*, Sunday Times, 22. 11. 1959.

<sup>4</sup> John Gloag, letter to Sir Ambrose Heal, 12.01.1953, author’s collection.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Gordon Russell, *Ambrose Heal*, *Mobilia*, Sept-Oct 1964, p 68.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Myerson, *Gordon Russell, Designer of Furniture*, Design Council, 1992, p 30.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Greenwood, from a taped conversation quoted by Tim Benton, *Up and Down at Heal’s: 1929-35*, *Architectural Review*, February 1978. Despite his opinion Greenwood, who joined the business in 1916, stayed until he retired in the 1970s, so it cannot have been too bad!

<sup>8</sup> Noel Carrington, *Industrial Design in Britain*, Allen & Unwin, 1976, pp 36-39.

The baleful look was part of his character but he developed the silent intimidating stare as a technique he practised on his staff in order to try to get them to admit to some fault, imagined or otherwise, as one of his salesmen between the Wars, Reg Higgs, has recorded:

*It was a favourite ploy of Ambrose to wait, looking one in the eye for what seemed ages, hoping, I suppose that you would make some incautious remark, when he would pounce.*<sup>9</sup>

Even his close friend and mentor, the architect Cecil Brewer, found him tiresome at times. He wrote to Harry Peach :

*...my three years with him on D.I.A. have taught me to expect no ideas from him. "Take all give nothing" seems to be the motto there.*<sup>10</sup>

But for all that he was undoubtedly a man of integrity who passionately believed in his mission to improve the design of the objects with which we surround ourselves. Sir Gordon Russell wrote of him:

*His outlook was not just a fashion of the moment. It was a deeply felt way of life with him and affected everything he did.*<sup>11</sup>

He was a man who led by example, whether it was in the decoration of his own home or by demonstration at the workbench.<sup>12</sup>

It was Ernest Gimson who was reportedly responsible for implying A.H. was a plagiarist and, as he was also reported to be behind the profiteering insinuation, it must raise the possibility of some professional jealousy having influenced the judgement.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Reg Higgs, *Memories of Heal's*, unpublished, c1986. Higgs joined Heal's in 1929, retiring in the 70s, by which time he was Staff Manager. Harold Stabler in recalling the initial discussions about setting up the DIA wrote to Harry Peach *Ambrose's typical stony & puzzled stare remains a very vivid memory.* 29.11.25 RIBA/DIA Peach papers.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Cecil Brewer to Harry Peach, 24.03.1917. Peach Papers RIBA. I am grateful to Alan Crawford for drawing my attention to this reference.

<sup>11</sup> Sir Gordon Russell, *Sir Ambrose Heal*, Mobilia.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Fowler, apprentice cabinet maker before WWII at Heal's, recalled to the author how AH would arrive in the workshop where Fowler might be trying to cut a dovetail for example and say "Not like that boy", take the chisel out of his hand and demonstrate the correct method.

<sup>13</sup> See Cheltenham Museum & Art Gallery archive, Burrough Collection, record of John Gregory conversation with Norman Jewson who recalled Gimson's disapproval of AH for selling Clissett chairs at a large mark up after his death. (See p 233 for a discussion of this matter.) Also Gregory's 1954 conversation with Gimson's sister who had been warned not to show AH too much for implied fear of copying.

His extra-marital activities have been noted by Valerie Grove in her biography of Dodie Smith and need not concern us here other than to remark that he was evidently capable of being charming when he wanted to, as a number of women fell for his virile attraction. However the description that Dodie Smith herself left was hardly flattering:

*Ambrose Heal was then about fifty. One noticed first his rather fluffy hair which was nearer gold than red, though he was invariably described as a red-haired man. He had the pink, slightly freckled skin that goes with such hair, a long nose, rather small, heavily-lidded eyes, which were apt to look down that nose, and an indeterminate mouth. His voice was unusually quiet...and gave the impression of conscious superiority.*<sup>14</sup>

Valerie Grove, Dodie Smith's biographer, summed up Dodie's assessment of him a little more tersely:

*She supposed he had charm but she never thought him really handsome.*<sup>15</sup>

Robert Harling made him sound more interesting when he wrote in A.H.'s obituary that he was

*... one of those rare beings who looked the way a famous designer ought to look. White hair, twinkling blue eyes, fine tweeds, exquisitely casual shirts of mildly assertive checks and stripes, folding steel spectacles from the eighteenth century...everything most carefully considered and presented.*<sup>16</sup>

What is clear is that A.H. was a man who knew what he wanted and was intolerant of those who did not share his vision or were ready to accept lower standards:

*...that strong face and steady blue eyes convey a character of complete assurance and powerful will...He will never tolerate slovenliness in thought nor design and has a genius for spotting a flaw. He does not suffer fools gladly.*<sup>17</sup>

*...there was nothing of Frank Lloyd Wright's flamboyance about Sir*

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<sup>14</sup> Dodie Smith, *Look Back With Mixed Feelings*, W.H. Allen, 1978, pp 271-277.

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Grove, *Dear Dodie*, Chatto & Windus, 1996, p 65.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Harling, *The Master Craftsman*, Sunday Times, 22.11.1959.

<sup>17</sup> The Cabinet Maker, *Sir Ambrose Heal is Eighty*, 30.08.1952. p 700.

*Ambrose. He was a quiet understating man, his comments always laced with quizzical astringencies.*<sup>18</sup>

But part of this awkwardness in handling people was due to the fact that he was unhappy in public situations. He was, apparently, most at ease when researching and pursuing his interests as a collector of information relating to the history of trades in London, where his high standards were a positive advantage. His research resulted in a series of books that have remained valuable sources of reference in their areas but which fall outside the scope of this study.<sup>19</sup> (See footnote for list of books.)

Despite his force of character... *Heal's dislike of public speaking, and indeed of any personal publicity, caused him to refuse office on many occasions.*<sup>20</sup>

*In spite of his wide knowledge and experience he remained essentially modest and diffident, with strong leanings to scholarly research.*<sup>21</sup>

One is left with the impression of a man uncomfortable in public but with such confidence in his ideals that he did not care what others thought of him as he consistently pursued his goals with persistence and integrity of purpose.

Prudence Maufe, his close colleague, summed him up as follows:

*When Ambrose came into the shop the whole place was illuminated...he had the eye of an eagle. He had integrity of design, of shopkeeping; his taste was unquestionable. His dominant personality and complete integrity inspired his staff with admiration and respect, and they worked happily with him to carry out his ideas.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Harling, *The Master Craftsman*, Sunday Times, 22.11.1959.

<sup>19</sup> Books by Sir Ambrose Heal

| <b>Title</b>   | <b>Publisher</b>            | <b>Date</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------|
| London Tradesmen's Cards of the XVIII Century            | First Edition Club/Batsford | 1925        |
| The English Writing Masters & their Copy-Books 1570-1800 | Cambridge University Press  | 1931        |
| The London Goldsmiths 1200-1800                          | Cambridge University Press  | 1935        |
| The Records of the Heal Family                           | Privately printed           | 1932        |
| The English Penmen, their portraits & biographies        | Cambridge University Press  | 1945        |
| The Signboards of Old London Shops                       | Batsford                    | 1947        |
| The London Furniture Makers 1660-1840                    | Batsford                    | 1953        |

<sup>20</sup> Design Magazine, *Patrons of design*, Sir Ambrose Heal, April 1951.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Russell, *Ambrose Heal*, Mobilia, Sept-Oct 1964, p 68.

<sup>22</sup> Prudence Maufe, letter to Christopher Heal, cited by Susanna Gooden, *A History of Heal's*, p 111.

Sir Ambrose Heal portraits



Figure 1-1 Ambrose Heal, date unknown but thought to be ca 1922 when he would have been 50 years old. (Swaine)



Figure 1-2 Sir Ambrose Heal in 1952 aged 80 (Douglas Glass)

### c. The Case for Reassessment and the Methodological Framework

*It is easy to understand the appeal of the monograph/biography: to write or read about the life and work of one person is reassuring because the subject matter is limited and sharply defined; the story has a clear beginning, middle and end; the hero or heroine serves as a fulcrum around which everything else revolves. This type of text has a compelling unity.*

*Yet there are problems. Since identification with the central figure is more or less inevitable, it is difficult for writers and readers to maintain a critical objective attitude.*<sup>23</sup> (John A. Walker)

Walker's view (above) points to one reason why the study of design history through the examination of the work of so-called 'great designers' is criticised, with justification, as being unrepresentative of the real process of design. It is no longer fashionable amongst historians to undertake a monograph on a particular designer and in the search for originality, new angles of approach are sought. According to Walker *the social history approach* is the favourite alternative.<sup>24</sup>

This is partly a reaction against previous practice where, as Adrian Forty has also pointed out, design historians have tended to concentrate on the designer, to the exclusion of information about the maker, the product itself, the way it was sold or even the customer. Forty argues that,

*Because designers generally talk and write only about what they do themselves, design has come to be regarded as belonging entirely within their realm. This misunderstanding has reappeared in innumerable books and in the coverage of design in the press and on television.*<sup>25</sup>

Despite what they might like to think, designers are only one part of a whole team required to make a product and bring it to market. The roles of the craftsman and

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<sup>23</sup> John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto Press, 1989, p 46.

<sup>24</sup> John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto Press, 1989, p 47.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire*, Thames & Hudson, 1995, p 241.



patron are often ignored. This could be simply because it is easier for design historians to focus on the writings of designers and architects than to seek to interpret the contribution of other team members who remained silent. Trevor Keeble, for example, has lamented the imbalance that has resulted from this reliance on such texts, stressing particularly in his study that the voice of the consumer is missing, owing to the shortage of evidence, and concludes that this has led to

*...an account of the later nineteenth century interior which is largely complicit with the twentieth century modernist project to exclude any notion of the individual or the personal.*<sup>26</sup>

The didactical nature of architects' writings, such as Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* (1923) made the architect's vision seem so important that what the client or workman thought was irrelevant.<sup>27</sup> In the furniture trade, as will be discussed later, the desire by the retailer to obscure his sources of supply has served to compound the problem. Designers' names have sometimes been promoted to underline the exclusiveness of the product in the mind of the public but in the pages of design history, manufacturers' names go unrecorded.

The reasons for studying the work of AH, in spite of these reservations, are that as an individual, he represents the complex interface between design and society: between retailer and manufacturer on one hand and between retailer and consumer on the other. He spanned design, production and consumption.

This thesis will attempt to show that A.H. was not only a designer of furniture but a personality whose career throws light on the study of many different social, economic and cultural developments. For example, the thesis will demonstrate that:

- A.H. was an entrepreneur, the leader of a thriving business and therefore influenced the output of other designers and manufacturers to obtain the merchandise he required.
- As a retailer A.H. was able to assert considerable influence on public taste by offering, through his shop, products that he believed met high standards of

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<sup>26</sup> Trevor Keeble, *The Domestic Moment, design, taste and identity in the late Victorian interior*, PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> See Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Abacus, 1983, who lampoons the rise of *the famous architect who did little or no building*, p 26.

design and quality. At the same time he recognized the commercial enterprise had to offer what customers were prepared to buy – it was a difficult balancing act.

- The period when A.H. was actively working (1895-1939) covers a period of change in the field of cultural production that marks the shift from Arts & Crafts to Modernism, to which he brought a quintessentially English response. His was a generation that bridged the two movements and as a result, may well have been little researched as appearing not to belong to the vanguard of either.
- As a trained cabinet maker A.H. was aware of the potential of timber - both structurally and aesthetically. As an antique dealer he was intimately acquainted with the best historical precedents in furniture design. As a retailer he was acutely aware of the needs of his clientele. As a manufacturer he understood the possibilities of machinery and skills available to him. His designs reflect these different threads of influence woven together in the work of one man, who, despite the multiplicity of influences, developed a distinctive individual style, combining quality and elegant proportion and an acute sense of the market which appealed to the ‘culturati’ of the day.
- A.H.’s connections with leading members of the design and artistic milieu of the period and his promotion the fine and applied arts through Heal’s and the Mansard Gallery illustrate his position at the centre of advanced ideas of the times.

For all these reasons a critical reappraisal of A.H.’s work will also serve to illuminate different areas of design history. The evolution of A.H.’s own furniture designs can be seen to be linked to developments in architecture and provide a revealing commentary on the tensions between the historically ambivalent tendencies of the times. The products Heal’s promoted reflect social, economic and cultural developments of the period which can be considered in the light of the work of such recent philosophers as Baudrillard and Appadurai. Baudrillard for example stresses how our society now compels us to consume and that we consume, not just to satisfy needs, but in order to differentiate ourselves from others in society. Our understanding of consumption is now more delicately shaded than Thorsten Veblen’s

identification of a tendency to ‘conspicuous consumption’. Whether we seek to emulate those we admire or to differentiate ourselves from those whom we regard as inferior or other, consumption is a complex system of semiotics that communicates how we and others perceive our role in society and how we construct our identity.<sup>28</sup> A.H.’s positioning of his firm and his products within a particular ideological niche, (and not just a commercial niche) plays to the use of such language and his products can be seen as part of a complex symbolic order. Further interest can also be seen to derive from the way the meaning of these symbols changes over time.

Arjun Appadurai reminds us that:

*Politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities. ...such politics can take many forms: the politics of diversion and of display; the politics of authenticity and of authentication; the politics of knowledge and of ignorance; the politics of expertise and of sumptuary control; the politics of connoisseurship and of deliberately mobilized demand.*<sup>29</sup>

This thesis will demonstrate that display, authenticity, knowledge, and connoisseurship for example, were all interactive elements in the strategy employed to create the Heal’s brand.

The role of the retailer in the life history of commodities is critical as Walker has suggested:

*Shops are significant places because they are where use-values are translated into exchange-values, where consumer goods are exchanged for money and become commodities. Since shops and stores compete with one another, design is an important means of increasing their appeal to customers and differentiating themselves from rivals.*<sup>30</sup>

The design critic Stephen Bayley, for example, has drawn parallels between the functions of museums and retail outlets and how increasingly these two apparently

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<sup>28</sup> See: Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, English translation, Sage 1998. Chapter 4 *The Social logic of consumption*.

<sup>29</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things, Commodities in a Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p 57.

<sup>30</sup> J A Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto Press, 1989, p 176.

opposed operations have come to reflect one another. The retailer uses dramatic display and informative ticketing to attract and inform his customers, just as the museums do. The museums seek to commercialise their wares by becoming retailers themselves and selling reproductions and souvenirs. Bayley for example cites the furniture store Design Research in Boston, U.S.A. which, in 1953, displayed design classics to attract a knowledgeable clientele thus becoming a sort of commercial museum, making a *commercial venture into a cultural experience*.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly enough, as Sir Hugh Casson recognised in his foreword to the history of Heal's, the shop in Tottenham Ct Rd had established itself as a Mecca for design cognoscenti many decades before the Americans came up with a similar idea - *it was a symbol rather than a shop*.<sup>32</sup>

The study of this 'design business' can also help in the understanding of how England coped with the influx of ideas from the Continent after having led the way up to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A.H. was part of the process of bringing those very products and ideas in from abroad yet remained committed to an idea of 'Englishness' for his own designs. The way the retail environment was developed can inform studies of social and fashion changes generally. That this investigation should be undertaken as an examination of the work of one man is appropriate as his working life neatly spans the period from the turn of the twentieth century to the Second World War. An individual with powerful convictions and character, he made a lot of things happen within Heal's so that without him it is doubtful that there would have been much worthy of being recorded. It is clear that, under his leadership, many others also contributed to the success of the firm, directly and indirectly, and that, through his patronage, he contributed to their growth and prosperity. If the definition of a 'great designer' is one who introduced revolutionary new concepts, then Heal does not qualify. If on the other hand, working consistently and persistently in the pursuit of 'better design' is a measure, then this thesis will argue that AH's contribution must be regarded at the very least as significant.

Although A.H. wrote prolifically about his interests as a researcher and collector, he

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Bayley, *Commerce and Culture*, Design Museum, 1989, *The Designer Cult*,

<sup>32</sup> Sir Hugh Casson, Foreword to *A History of Heal's*, Heal & Son, 1984, p 1.

wrote very little about his work as a shopkeeper and furniture designer. In turn very little has been written about him and this is one thing that this thesis hopes to amend. He was recognised by his contemporaries and was knighted for his services to design (1933) and elected a Royal Designer for Industry (1939) but since then his reputation has waned. There are a number of other reasons why he has been neglected by historians to date. One reason is the fact, already mentioned, that practically and chronologically, he appears caught between two ideological poles – the Arts & Crafts and Modernism. A.H. was committed to machine-assisted production contrary to the popular perception of Arts & Crafts furniture being entirely hand made, but he was at the same time inspired by historical influences, thus making him a reluctant Modernist. Although thoroughly immersed in and committed to Arts & Crafts *mores*, he was nevertheless born into the generation that made their mark on the twentieth century rather than the nineteenth century.

There are other possible reasons too for this lack of interest in his career, which will be explored later within the thesis but which could be summarised at this stage as follows:

- A.H. was not an architect and is thought therefore to lack the necessary intellectual weight to warrant study. Architecture being traditionally positioned as one of the fine arts is accorded more status than being “in trade”, a regularly denigrated profession.
- A.H. was not struggling in a Cotswold village leading the ‘simple life’ (like Gimson, the Barnsleys and Ashbee for example). He did not fit the typical image of the struggling arts and crafts figure as he was based in London and part of a sizeable commercial firm. Not only is this deemed to give him an unfair advantage but it has also made it less easy to assess the extent of his personal contribution amongst the welter of activity within Heal’s.
- A.H. was thought to be producing his furniture in ‘quantity’ so it has been considered too commercial to warrant special interest (this is another misconception this thesis will seek to address). In addition, over a forty-year period, he designed an enormous number of individual items that make any review highly complex.

- A.H. did not produce particularly innovative designs. Because his inspiration was historical (and in the early days also derivative of his contemporaries), and because his market was essentially middle-class, he is not remembered for the kind of avant garde design favoured by design historians.

However A.H. has not been completely ignored by history either. Although Alan Crawford, author of the entry on Sir Ambrose Heal in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, noted that obituarists overstated his significance he pointed out that A.H.

*... has a niche in the present state of historical writing, especially in the present atmosphere where there is a strong view that the A&C failed to make good design widely available. This argument always brings him to the fore, and he gets his two illustrations and his half paragraph.*<sup>33</sup>

This is certainly true and more is known about his work than, say, that of W.J. Neatby and Charles Spooner, who were singled out for distinction by Herman Muthesius alongside Ambrose Heal in his contemporary review of English design at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>34</sup> But A.H.'s "half paragraph" is essentially based on a very superficial view of his work and anyone who wants to know more searches in vain to find any comprehensive account of his output. The potential for further research provided by the preservation of the Heal business archive, now at the Archive of Art & Design, has been ably demonstrated by Tim Benton who wrote *Up and Down at Heal's: 1929-35*, a detailed study of the firm's reaction to the depression. But few have sought to exploit this resource and reveal its riches.<sup>35</sup>

Finally one has to conclude that the fact that little has been written about A.H. is in large part due to the arbitrary nature of the way history is recorded. It is a matter of chance that no author has happened to choose to devote the time and effort necessary

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<sup>33</sup> Alan Crawford, e-mail to author, 17.04.2004.

<sup>34</sup> Herman Muthesius, *The English House*, first published as *Das englische Haus*, Wasmuth, Berlin, 1904. English translation by J. Seligman, BSP Professional Books, 1987. Muthesius wrote: *The following subscribe to entirely independent forms and are for the most part concerned with interior decoration and furniture design: W.J. Neatby, Charles Spooner, Ambrose Heal junior, and that master of the pen-and-ink drawing C.H.B. Quennel*, p 46.

<sup>35</sup> Tim Benton, *Up and Down at Heal's: 1929-35*, *The Architectural Review*, February 1978, pp 109-116.

to a thorough study. It is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate that study of A.H.'s story can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the period.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to provide an overview of the work of A.H. both as a furniture designer and as a retailer between 1895 (when he started designing) and 1939 (when he stopped designing and the Second World War dramatically changed the way the business was run). It should also be noted that this account is constructed from primary resource material held by the Archive of Art & Design and by the author. It is not the intention of this thesis to trace in detail A.H.'s personal biography but the study will range across such aspects of design, manufacturing and retailing that relate to Ambrose Heal and his stewardship of Heal's between 1895 and 1939 that design history has largely overlooked, in order to offer a broader more informed view of his significance to the cultural production of the early twentieth century.

#### **d) Review of Sources**

No in-depth study of the work of AH has yet been undertaken so sources of reference are limited to contemporary press articles and a few memoirs which were drawn upon above. Little information about his work is to be found even in works on furniture history, although Heal & Son published a little booklet to mark the centenary of his birth in 1972 that includes a brief biography, a copy of Gordon Russell's *Mobilia* article about him, an appreciation by John Gloag together with a selection of photographs of his furniture.<sup>36</sup> More recently Alan Crawford has written a more thorough entry on A.H. in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> A. S. Heal (Ed), *A booklet to commemorate the life and work of Sir Ambrose Heal 1872-1959*, Heal & Son, 1972.

<sup>37</sup> Alan Crawford, *Heal, Sir Ambrose, (1872-1959)*, *Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004-2006. [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com) . accessed 04.06.2006.

However, one useful and significant source of information is *A History of Heal's*, by Susanna Goodden, published in 1984. This book was published to mark the 're-launch' of Heal's after the business was taken over by Habitat Mothercare (which soon after became Storehouse) in 1983. It is a valuable addition to the literature particularly as it puts into the public domain a good cross-section of the photographic records covering the firm's history. Inevitably because of the publishing deadline (the aim was to coincide with Habitat's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary) it had to be based very largely on historical information readily available within the business.<sup>38</sup> A.H. himself had researched the early history of the firm and his unpublished typescript was held in the archives along with another unacknowledged source: Tim Benton's study of Heal's during the Depression of the 1930s.<sup>39</sup> Whilst giving a good overview of the development of the firm, research for this thesis revealed that Goodden's book includes a number of inaccuracies which, together with the benefit of hindsight, now enable us to perceive the extent to which the final chapter about Terence Conran was little more than public relations hype!<sup>40</sup>

A.H.'s furniture is covered in useful detail in books on the period such as Jeremy Cooper's *Victorian and Edwardian Furniture and Interiors*<sup>41</sup> and John Andrew's *Arts and Crafts Furniture*.<sup>42</sup> His work had been picked out previously by Nikolaus Pevsner, the man who perhaps did the most to establish the significance of various 20<sup>th</sup> century designers, who when discussing the turn of the century, remarked in the 1930s: *On a really commercial basis good progressive furniture was...being made by Sir Ambrose Heal...Living amongst such objects we breathe a fresher air.*<sup>43</sup> However, it is telling that two recent important publications concerned with reviewing the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a whole do not mention A.H.'s work at all. These are

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<sup>38</sup> Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, Heal & Son, 1984, p 133.

<sup>39</sup> See Ambrose Heal, *The Story of the Fourposter*, unpublished typescript ca 1950, and Tim Benton, *Up and Down at Heal's: 1929-1935*, *The Architectural Review*, February 1978, pp 109-116.

<sup>40</sup> The final chapter that covered what were then current events and hardly history put a Conran gloss on events. Conran was certainly not approached by the Directors of the Company and "encouraged to consider taking it over". It is an over-simplification to say "Terence bought all the Heal family shares" (p 133) as firstly it was the Habitat Mothercare company that bought the shares, not Conran personally, and secondly the Heal family were only minority shareholders as the majority were held externally by insurance companies and other investors.

<sup>41</sup> Jeremy Cooper, *Victorian and Edwardian Furniture and Interiors*, Thames & Hudson, 1987.

<sup>42</sup> John Andrews, *Arts and Crafts Furniture*, Antique Collectors' Club, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, Penguin, 1991, p 154, first published as *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, Faber & Faber, 1936.



*Twentieth Century Furniture Design* by Sembach, Leuthauser and Gössel<sup>44</sup> and *A Century of Design* by Penny Sparke.<sup>45</sup> This gives some measure of the extent to which the reputation that A.H. had acquired in his lifetime has diminished when viewed retrospectively from a European or even global perspective on the century as a whole.

The resource that has provided the vast majority of information for this thesis is the Heal & Son archive held at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Archive of Art & Design. This collection which covers the period from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards contains:

- Marketing and public relations records.
- Operating and internal administrative records.
- Accounting and financial records.
- Property and premises records.
- Corporate and legal records.

Most of these were presented to the Museum by the company in 1978 with additions being made over the following decades. A total of nearly 4000 items have been catalogued (the index alone fills three large lever-arch files) and there are in addition some 18,750 photographic negatives in the collection. This unique primary resource has enabled most of the information included in this thesis to be extracted, although it has been supplemented by information held in the author's own collection that encompasses artefacts as well as documents, and by the collection of Heal catalogues etc. formed by two previous employees of the firm, Timothy Solloway and David Dunham. Other valuable archival material for the period is to be found at the Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery collection and the Art Workers' Guild library in London.

Most recently an interesting insight into the meaning of some of this material has been provided by Tracey Potts' study *Creating 'Modern Tendencies', The Symbolic Economics of Furnishing*, (2005) while some use has also been made of Matthew Denney's valuable thesis *Arts and Crafts Furniture and Vernacular Furniture*,

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<sup>44</sup> Sembach, Leuthauser & Gössel, *Twentieth Century Furniture Design*, Taschen, 2002.

<sup>45</sup> Penny Sparke, *A Century of Design – Design Pioneers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Mitchell Beazley, 1998.

(1997) listing A.H.'s contributions to the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society shows.

Because none of A.H.'s immediate colleagues remain alive and even the following generation who started work with him before World War Two have died, it has not been possible to interview at first hand any contemporary witnesses. However descendants of some key suppliers have been located and interviewed to put on record previously unrecorded details of a vanished era. More significantly, whenever practicable original items of furniture by Heal have been examined including those items in the V&A's storage collection, together with examples held by specialist dealers in the furniture of the period (particularly The Millinery Works and Liberty) all of which proved most useful.

Chapter One of the thesis which examines the historical context of A.H.'s work is largely based on published documentation and as such may be seen as a discrete review of the relevant literature.

### **e. The Organisation of the Thesis and its Contribution to Knowledge**

The thesis is divided into three main chapters that review different areas of A.H.'s work and career.

Chapter One reviews the historical context to A.H.'s work. It is in turn divided into three sections, the first of which examines the aesthetic and design background through the growth of the Arts & Crafts movement and the roles of its leading members, many of whom A.H. came to know personally, as well as the philosophy behind the movement that subsequently influenced later design movements with which A.H. was involved during his career and these are also examined.

The second section examines developments in the retail trade and in particular the growth of department stores in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and their impact on merchandising in general. In considering the position of shops and shopkeepers in society, the background to the ethical ethos which underpinned A.H.'s work is recorded and the growth of the furniture trade in the Tottenham Court. Rd. area of London is traced. These two sections are largely based on published histories.

The third section, which examines A.H.'s personal background and early life is based on documents in the Heal Archive held at the Archive of Art & Design supplemented by material in the author's own collection of letters, etc. This section reveals for the first time that the initial rise of the Heal business from its foundation in 1810 until 1875 was then followed by a long period of decline before A.H. joined. The section also traces early influences in his life, in particular that of the architect Cecil C. Brewer, which put into context much of his subsequent work.

Chapter Two examines Heal's Cabinet Factory as a 'business within the business' and begins to systematically catalogue and evaluate A.H.'s furniture and in turn to identify, where possible, the contribution of other designers and manufacturers.

The methodology applied here entailed returning to original documentation (the firm's cabinet furniture stock books) to extract the information necessary to build up a systematic picture of furniture production and sales over a forty-year period. Other approaches could have been used, such as taking a number of published Heal catalogues and seeking to identify the sources of the ranges illustrated. Whilst this would have been a valuable and fascinating exercise it would only ever provide a partial result as much interesting furniture never found its way into the catalogues. Another starting point could have been to work from the photographic collection of contact prints held at the AAD which were annotated with comments, (such as *probably AH design*) by Ambrose's sons Anthony and Christopher when they were in semi-retirement, and then seeking to identify the manufacturer, a date and (where possible) a confirmation of the design ascription. But again this would have at best produced only partial information for there is much doubt as to the completeness of the photographic print collection and little scope for identifying and confirming with any certainty who was responsible for individual designs.

Because of these reasons, combined with a fundamentally held belief that it is the primary duty of historians to record systematically before any attempt at interpretation is made, the decision was taken to extract from the surviving stock books all the information that could be found on furniture made in Heal's own Cabinet Factory. This gives a possibly uniquely detailed record of the output of one

small factory in the early twentieth century enabling the relative success of different products to be measured and conclusions to be drawn about changing tastes. It is based on empirical evidence and not biased by a simply aesthetic search for products that would support an argument, for example, of the development of a particular style. The assumption is made that unless there is evidence to the contrary all the furniture was also designed in-house and wherever evidence for ascribing designs to a particular individual was found this is recorded. A.H.'s differing levels of design input over the period are considered.

In addition this section includes information on the management and equipment of the factory, labelling, timbers, finishes and design details, as well as details of a number of key suppliers. It is here that it becomes clear that A.H.'s reputation as a man responsible for making well-designed furniture available to a wider public was based, not so much on the output of his own factory but more on furniture made to his designs elsewhere. Research for this thesis has revealed that these included projects for a very early unit-furniture system and a range of mass-produced 'reasonable' furniture that was intended for national distribution. In contrast the output of the Cabinet Factory is shown to be relatively limited. Its products and their sales over a forty-year period are also recorded in tabular form in Appendix 1 for ease of reference thus providing the basis of a *catalogue raisonné* of the output of the Factory and of A.H. himself. The text has been extensively illustrated to identify visually individual products but some still remain unidentified. It is confidently predicted that if the glass plate negative collection in the archive were to be made more easily accessible it would be possible to identify many more, thereby advancing the catalogue.

Chapter Three covers the activities of A.H. as a creative retailer. Although based on information extracted from original period documents held at the Archive of Art and Design, this chapter has inevitably had to be more selective in scope in view of the scale of the subject matter but it still serves to illustrate that the Heal reputation should be based on far more than just furniture design. It underscores the fact that the Heal lifestyle and design philosophy embraced everything from what we now refer to as the corporate identity, to the fine art on the walls and the shape of the buildings themselves; that the management philosophy was as modern as the trading

philosophy which underpinned the whole operation; that at the centre of this web was the controlling influence of A.H. In addition however the contribution of key colleagues who shared A.H.'s objectives is uncovered to counter the individualistic tendency of the monograph and in order to make it clear that this was a team effort.

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that it is beyond the scope of this present thesis to consider in depth other merchandise much beyond furniture retailed by the Heal business or to comprehensively examine the work of A.H. as, for example, historical researcher, bibliophile and author. There is, of course, a great deal of scope for further research here.<sup>46</sup>

It is perhaps also worth noting that in the Appendices there are, in addition to the main appendix recording the output of the Heal Cabinet Factory, analyses of the factories from which Heal's bought bedroom suites, providing a record of many forgotten names, and of the 'finishes' of those suites that provides an indication of changing fashions over the period. The sales and profit figures of both the Cabinet Factory and the Heal & Son business as a whole are recorded.

### The Contribution to Knowledge

The thesis seeks to add to our overall knowledge and understanding of the period in question. Through the example of the work of one man the thesis seeks to inform broader discussions of changes in taste, the development of the furniture trade, the role of the retail furnisher as a pivotal point between the consumer on the one hand and the manufacturer on the other, and the potential of an in-house manufacturing capacity. Social, economic and cultural trends of the times are all reflected in the products designed by A.H. and sold by Heal's.

By putting in place a reliable chronology, the thesis shows how A.H.'s most innovative work, both as a designer of very simple furniture and as the man

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<sup>46</sup> Heal & Son Ltd as complete house furnishers sold furnishing fabrics, floorcoverings, china and glass, as well as fine art (covered in this thesis under the section on the Mansard Gallery). The standards of design applied to the selection of these other types of merchandise was just as stringent as those applied to the furniture and so these items also reflect changing tastes of the times and record the work of prominent artists and craftsmen.

responsible for a 'corporate identity', was achieved in the very early years of the century and was therefore particularly advanced for its time. By contrast it also demonstrates how much more difficult it is to assign responsibility for designs in the later years. However, finally, the thesis reminds us of the complexity of business management that required no less skill a century ago than it does today.

In summary this thesis offers a contribution to knowledge in terms of a closer understanding of A.H.'s particular contribution to furniture design as well as a much more richly informed understanding of his contribution to the culture of consumption in the early twentieth century through the philosophy and direction he introduced to Heal's and the influential role it came to play under his leadership.