

3. Creative Retailing

3.1 Shopping at Heal's between the Wars

The previous section of this thesis has examined the production of Heal furniture and demonstrated that its scope was more limited than has been previously thought and that A.H.'s reputation as the man who brought good furniture design to mechanised production, or vice versa, cannot be based on his work for his own factory alone. It has also demonstrated that, although in the earlier days of his career it is safe to ascribe designs to A.H. personally, after World War One this becomes much more problematic. Not only were others increasingly involved in the process, but also, A.H.'s responsibilities were extended over a much wider area. At this period he became much less a designer and much more a manager of design, a creative retailer.

This section of the thesis therefore will examine some of the qualities of the Creative Retailer in order to review A.H.'s broader stewardship of Heal's and its importance to the development of the business as a whole. It might be argued that these aspects combined with his design work proper represent no more than two sides of the same coin. However it will be seen that many of the significant decisions that helped build a strong brand identity were taken at the beginning of the century, laying the foundations for the growth of an increasingly complex, sophisticated yet distinctive firm. It will also be shown that A.H. was much more than just a furniture designer and was evidently a creative retailer from the start, who in addition, had absorbed wholeheartedly Ruskin's philosophy of the *ethical businessman*, as well as the Art Workers' Guild's ideal of *the 'unity of, the interdependence and the solidarity of all the arts.'*³⁹⁰ And it will be seen that these fundamental beliefs underlay all his activities. He also managed to blend these ideals with an element of discreet 'intellectual' showmanship (if that is not a contradiction) that a successful retailer must possess. Any assessment of his work needs to reflect this aspect of his role as impresario, co-ordinator, manager, facilitator and patron of the arts. Each of the areas

³⁹⁰ Selwyn Image, Art Workers' Guild, 1909.

examined could of itself provide the subject for extensive scholarly research so what follows are exemplary investigations into key areas in this connection.

A.H.'s skill as a shopkeeper becomes evident when one appreciates that the preoccupations of present-day retailers are very similar to those of the early twentieth century and in order to illustrate this interesting contemporary sources help to set the scene of what it was like to shop at Heal's between the wars. For example, although London did not have an Emile Zola to record life in one of its department stores in the eighteen-eighties, as he had for Paris, it did have Dodie Smith, playwright and novelist who wrote a play entitled *Service* that was set in a family-run department store in the depression of the nineteen-thirties.³⁹¹ In fact a reading of this play confirms that it was very closely based on the Heal business for which she had worked and so therefore it provides a vivid insight into the firm at this period.

The fictional owner Gabriel Service and his business resemble A.H. and the Heal shop in many details:

- Mr Service's office is hung with framed examples of tradesmen's cards – A.H. was a serious collector of such ephemera. In addition Service has a line in which he ruminates that he will *...probably become an intolerable old bore grubbing about in the eighteenth century* – A.H. was an enthusiast for and historian of Georgian furniture, architecture and other details of the period.
- The stage instructions specify *modern weathered oak furniture, beautifully designed* – weathered oak was Heal's speciality and the company actually loaned furniture for the original stage production.
- Service's office was set in the old part of the building and a new five-storied shop of *admirable architecture had been added in 1912* – A.H. had his office in the old part of the Heal shop which had been extended in 1916 with a shop front that was widely admired. The fictitious store is placed opposite the church of St. Mary's-in-the-Meadows, whilst 196 Tottenham Court Road is in reality in the parish of St. Giles-in-the-Fields opposite the site of the Whitfield tabernacle.
- Gabriel Service is portrayed as a 'hands-on' designer correcting details on plans

³⁹¹ C.L. Anthony, (nom de plume of Dodie Smith) *Service, a Play in three Acts*, published by Victor Gollancz, 1932. First produced at Wyndham's Theatre, London, W.1., 12.10.1932.

for new display stands – just like A.H.

- Service recalls how *thirty years ago my father laughed at my stuff – called it prison furniture. But it hasn't stopped it selling. And later remarks: I don't think I shall ever really like any steel furniture. Wood's so much easier to live with.* A.H.'s early furniture was described as 'prison furniture' and, although he later experimented with designing metal-framed furniture, at heart he remained predisposed to traditional materials.
- The play even includes a reflection of A.H.'s son Anthony who had entered the business just a few years before it was written having given up his dream of becoming an engineer. Gabriel Service's son is given exactly the same frustrated ambition.³⁹²

It is perhaps not surprising that there should be such similarity between fiction and fact as Dodie Smith not only worked at Heal's from 1923 to 1932 but also had had an affair with A.H. She had evidently absorbed many of his ideas and these are reflected in the play; such as his insistence on never referring to the establishment as a store, but always calling it a shop. She portrays the staff, despite paycuts and redundancies, remaining loyal to the firm and identifying with the predicament of the family and the need to maintain ethical standards despite the extremely difficult trading situation. Heal's staff had lived through this scenario in 1931. From the details given in the play and also in Dodie Smith's autobiography, *Look Back with Astonishment*, as well as other sources, a picture can be built up of the retail experience that a visit to Heal's between the Wars represented.

To begin with, Heal's was not like a normal department store. For example the shop windows were set back within a colonnade (in the new portion of the shopfront) so that the window displays could be admired at leisure whatever the weather. Once inside the glass doors there was a sense of calm in the uncluttered showrooms, lit by tall windows, with their highly polished wooden floors and rows of frosted glass lights hanging from the ceiling. Inside the entrance was the reception desk, occupied by a stately white-haired receptionist, Miss Goodison, assisted by her Irish cousin, Mrs Evans. It was their job to find out what customers were interested in and to direct them to the correct department or to call a senior 'general' salesman to assist.

³⁹² C.L. Anthony, *Service*, see pp 9,14,75,77,108,109.

These general salesmen, who could sell through all departments, were called out according to an equitable rota system operated by Miss Goodison. The salesmen's 'desk' was partitioned off behind a partially glazed wall against which was a row of high desks with very high stools at which the salesmen sat awaiting their next call and working on their paperwork. From there they could just see the reception desk and the arrival of potential customers.

Most stores, certainly in Edwardian times and even after, were staffed by obsequious shopwalkers, dressed in morning coats, who bowed and scraped to their clientele. Heal's, in contrast, was staffed by individualists dressed in the style they felt comfortable with.³⁹³ Interestingly Dodie Smith typically tested the boundaries of acceptable dress when she purchased an orange shawl with a border of magenta roses, to be worn with a magenta dress and flat green shoes. However even this it seems was deemed acceptable as A.H.'s verdict was reported to be: *If she wants to dress up as a Polish peasant there seems no reason to stop her.*³⁹⁴ Even the traditional subservient role of the shop-worker in relation to the customer appears to have been reversed. Smith wrote that at Heal's each assistant had a privilege which few customers achieved – a chair to sit on - and it was not uncommon to see a seated assistant chatting to a standing customer. As further evidence of the high standing of Heal's employees, at least within the firm, the story was told of Ambrose Heal senior ejecting Lady Randolph Churchill from the shop for being rude to a member of his staff.³⁹⁵

It should be remembered that Heal's was not a typical department store in that it did not have a Fashion Department (despite Dodie Smith trying to persuade A.H. to let her open a dress department), nor did it have either of those traditional crowd-pullers, the Jewellery and Perfume Departments. Instead it was a specialist furnishing shop that had established its reputation around the particular domain of the bedroom.

³⁹³ Noel Carrington, *Industrial Design in Britain*, Allen & Unwin, 1976, p 39.

³⁹⁴ Dodie Smith, *Look Back With Astonishment*, W.H. Allen, 1979, p 30.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid* pp 2 & 7. (As the author recalls a similar story being told about A.H. the whole thing may well be apocryphal.)



Fig. 3-1. Shopping for dining room furniture at Heal's in mid-thirties. Salesman is Arthur Allen, customers acted by John Thrower (Head salesman) and Miss Goodison (Receptionist). (AAD)



Fig. 3-2. shopping for bedroom furniture at Heal's in the mid-thirties. Salesman is Arthur Allen, customers acted by John Thrower (Head Salesman) and Miss Goodison (Receptionist) (AAD).



Fig. 3-3. The Mansard Gallery on the 4th floor devoted to a display of furniture (including some Signed Edition pieces) early thirties. (AAD).



Fig. 3-4. A room-setting in the Mansard Flat displaying lacquered furniture – probably mid twenties (large table and sideboard displayed at 1918 A & C exhibition) (AAD).



Fig. 3-5. View through Antiques department towards circular staircase probably early twenties (AAD).



Fig. 3-6. China & Glass department 1920s (AAD)

The ground floor still housed the bed and bedstead showroom, the traditional backbone of the business. Below in the basement were metal bedsteads, garden furniture and kitchen equipment, managed by Leonard Thoday. The first floor could be reached by the graceful, wide, gently rising circular staircase on which resided Heal's Mascot, a very tall bronze cat by the French sculptor Chassagne, to which Dodie Smith ascribed the power to grant wishes. The first floor featured bedroom furniture and the still growing section of dining room furniture as well as furnishing fabrics and upholstery.

The Furniture Departments were under the general control of J.F. Johnson who had joined the business in 1897, whilst fabrics (it was known then as the Cretonne Department) were the domain of Mr Macdermott, *a large pale man*. The floor above had a bustling china and glass department run by an elusive, small, dapper Cornishman, Harry Trethowan, who had a *tendency to be pompous*, and who was also responsible for the high standards of display throughout the building. In addition the second floor housed the Little Gallery, run by Dodie Smith herself, which sold toys and gifts next to an area where presumably Cottage furniture was displayed that Dodie describes as the *unpolished oak showroom*.

The third floor housed antiques, *of the simple, rather farmhouse type*, as well as carpets and rugs.³⁹⁶ However, the fourth floor was perhaps the one that set Heal's apart most from other furniture shops and attracted visitors from far and wide because it contained a fully furnished five-room flat and a widely renowned art gallery known as the Mansard Gallery. Reigning over the flat was *an unusually beautiful woman, tall, classically featured*. This was Prudence Maufe of course who was in charge of decorative schemes.

The Mansard Gallery with its barrel-vaulted ceiling was used for a number of significant shows of paintings (that will be detailed later), such as one of French art that included works by Picasso etc, and several of The London Group, which

³⁹⁶ Ibid pp 2, 5.

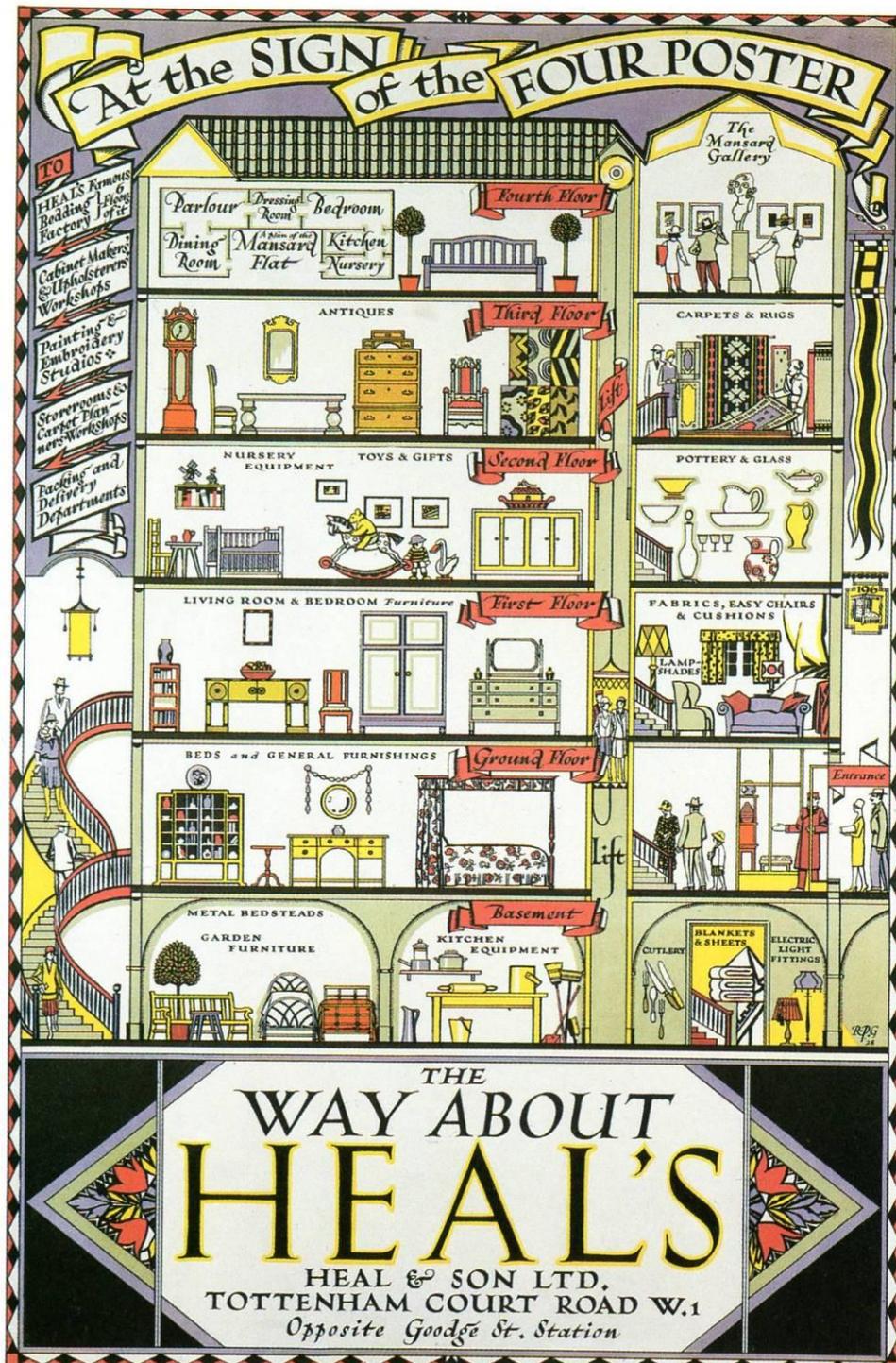


Fig. 3-7. Poster designed by R.P. Gossop, 1928. Note circular staircase, designed by Cecil Brewer along with new shop extension built in 1917, only serves basement, ground and first floors. It was extended up to the 4th floor in 1936 when the rest of the frontage was rebuilt. Mansard Gallery and Mansard Flat are on 4th floor. Beds are still on ground floor but antiques, which seem to have been on the ground floor in the early 1920s (see Fig. 3-5) have been moved up to third floor. (Goodden).

included prominent members of the Bloomsbury set. Such shows established the Gallery's reputation and drew in a particularly artistic clientele. However it was also used as an exhibition space for special displays of new merchandise such as Swedish glass or hand-woven fabrics and hand-made pottery, so that Heal's were (even then) promoting the crafts alongside machine made products. Prudence Maufe furnished the flat with fashionable colour themes or sometimes to particular price brackets as another way of stimulating interest and drawing customers up through the building.

Just behind the scenes and intricately linked with their respective retail departments were a number of workshops. Apart from the Cabinet Factory, which has already been examined, and the Bedding Factory, the core of the business, there were typical furnishing shop appurtenances, the upholstery, curtain and carpet workshops. More unusually there was also a studio for decorating furniture and yet another for embroidery, both *under the dynamic direction of Mrs Cook*.³⁹⁷ The Decorating Studio was run by Miss Hindshaw with the help of a number of assistants, most of whom she had taught herself at the Central School of Arts & Crafts, whilst Dorothy Dix was responsible for embroidery work.

It can be seen therefore that the Heal business was distinctively different from other furniture retailers and the major department stores. Its unique position in the market place is probably what built up the reputation that is far greater than its size would appear to justify but which has enabled it to survive, when all its other pre-war competitors (not to mention nineteenth century competitors) have vanished. That reputation was constructed with:

- A rigorous policy of merchandise selection that demanded stringent controls on design, quality and price.
- Adherence to a goal of specialisation in bedroom furniture that was slowly enlarged to take in all aspects of home furnishing.
- An employment and staffing policy, based on a respect for the individual that demanded competence and allowed experience to blossom.
- A subtle marketing strategy that spoke to potential customers as intelligent equals yet created excitement and curiosity with constant change and by blending fine

³⁹⁷ Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, Heal & Son, 1984. p 48.

art, crafts, and high design with down-to-earth commercialism.

All of this activity was framed by the consistent application of a distinctive house style – something we might refer to today as a distinctive ‘brand’. It is the formation of this brand which is examined next.



Fig. 3-8 *The Cat on the Stairs, Mascot of Heal's Shop*. Bronze Sculpture by Chassagne (from an original 1933 postcard)

3.2 Creating the Brand

3.2.1 Corporate Identity

For A.H., the creation of a corporate identity for the business was undoubtedly not just a marketing ploy but an expression of his attempts to put into practice the teachings of William Morris and Ruskin. It is noteworthy, that amongst the names he cited as having impressed him as a young man when he was introduced to the ‘fervent spirits’ of the Art Workers’ Guild, he mentioned Selwyn Image (1849-1930) who had been much influenced by Ruskin.³⁹⁸ Image was a typeface designer, illustrator, creator of stained glass and embroidery and later Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford, but here he is recalled for an article he wrote in *The Hobby Horse* entitled *On the Unity of Art* in which he *passionately argued that all forms of visual expression deserved the status of art.*³⁹⁹ A.H. adopted that philosophy and put as much care and attention into the typography and graphic layout of the printed output of his firm as he did into his furniture designs.

Graphic design historians have heralded the work of Peter Behrens for A.E.G. in Germany as representing *the first comprehensive visual identity program.*⁴⁰⁰ Behrens was appointed adviser to the Allgemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft by Emil Rathenau in 1907 in the same year that the Deutsche Werkbund was founded. Although the debt for the inspiration for this latter organisation to the British Arts & Crafts Movement is often acknowledged, the Werkbund (of which Behrens was a founder member) is then put forward as the precursor to the Design and Industries Association. In other words it took the Germans to reinterpret the Morrisian medievalist ideals of the arts and crafts movement and apply them to 20th century conditions and industry, and that subsequently this example was re-imported into Britain through the campaigns of the DIA founded in 1915. Certainly the DIA was quite successful in spreading the gospel of ‘fitness for purpose’ and it was partly prompted into action by the example of Germany, although things were reinterpreted in an ‘English’ fashion. Fiona MacCarthy described DIA-approved products between

³⁹⁸ A.H., mss of speech to RDIs, 1952.

³⁹⁹ Philip B. Maggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, J. Wiley & Sons, N.Y., 1998, p 166, cites *The Hobby Horse*, January 1887.

⁴⁰⁰ Philip B. Maggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, p 223.

the wars as follows:

*The feeling of the time is very even, very gentle. Compared with the stylistic idiosyncrasies of Arts and Crafts design, the recurring images of DIA design are altogether steady and predictable... such an understated homeliness, a pleasant kind of primness, very much related to the (DIA approved) reconstituted Georgian buildings of the era.*⁴⁰¹

This could be equally well applied to most of the printed output.

If the DIA is held up as England's response to the Deutscher Werkbund, then the London Underground is put forward as the English example of a large commercial organization having a unified visual identity after the example of A.E.G.. The significance and impact of the work of Frank Pick, who employed leading architects, artists and designers to produce work for the Underground, is undeniable and its influence on the public consciousness because of its sheer scale and longevity was enormous. But this explanation of cause and effect overlooks what was happening in England even before the creation of the Deutscher Werkbund or Behrens's appointment to AEG. One might hypothesize that the reasons for this oversight on behalf of design historians could be due to the fact that the developments were being pushed forward by advertising agents and shopkeepers and were therefore beneath acknowledgement. Perhaps Behrens gets the credit only because he was an architect and thus of particular interest to historians.

Observation of typography emitted by a number of English firms in the first decade of the twentieth century shows that material which might be considered as stylistically typical of the DIA, was already well established amongst design pioneers long before the DIA came into existence. The unsung hero that appears to be the common denominator amongst most of this work is the firm of W.H. Smith.

Although in recent years W.H. Smith has been in the news as a retail chain that was having difficulty finding its identity, at that period it had a very clear niche in the market and was well geared up to maximise it. In addition to its book stalls, it had set up in the 1850s, a Railway Advertising Department to let poster sites on LNWR

⁴⁰¹ Fiona MacCarthy, *British Design since 1880*, Lund Humphries, 1982, p 85.

stations and had subsequently built up a Printing Works so that it was

*...thus enabled... to give advertisers the double advantage of an attractively printed poster and a suitable place to display it where it could reach the eye of the travelling public.*⁴⁰²

Evidently having the technical and organizational structure is no guarantee of high aesthetic standards but the firm had the good fortune to count amongst its senior staff, individuals for whom good printing was not just a job but a passion. The first was one of the Partners in the firm, A.H.'s friend, C.H. St John Hornby who followed the example of William Morris, Emery Walker, Cobden-Sanderson and others for whom the type, layout and binding of a book were as important as the contents, and set up as a hobby his own Private Press, the Ashendene Press. The other was Herbert Morgan (later Sir Herbert), in charge of the advertising department from 1905, who had

*...a keen desire for the general improvement of printing, especially in connection with advertising. The latest machinery was installed and a highly skilled staff engaged. Mr Morgan, however, went farther; he realised that the whole conception of a piece of printed matter must be right before it goes to the works at all, and to secure this he gathered round him a little band of artists and literary men, all of them keen and enthusiastic, some of them brilliant...*⁴⁰³

The highly skilled staff included R.P. Gossop (1890-1962) who designed the WHS oval logo and later designed posters for Heal's. An indication of the importance of the WH Smith advertising department at the period may be deduced from the fact that when Gordon Selfridge opened his huge store on Oxford Street in 1909, he turned to *a young man named Herbert Morgan* of Smith's.⁴⁰⁴

Whilst the exact details of Smith's involvement in the development of the Heal corporate identity remain obscure (and key elements of it pre-date the appointment of Herbert Morgan as head of the advertising department) there are pieces of artwork in the archive which bear the WH Smith stamp, items printed by the Arden Press – a WHS subsidiary - and evidence that in the other direction, Heal's supplied Smith's

⁴⁰² G.R. Pocklington, *The Story of W.H.Smith*, W.H. Smith, 1921, p 13.

⁴⁰³ Ibid p 24.

⁴⁰⁴ Reginald Pound, *Selfridge, A Biography*, Heinemann, 1960, p 61.

with furniture for their shops and fitted out their new advertising ‘consulting rooms’ in Fetter Lane in 1906.⁴⁰⁵

What is clear is that from the point where A.H. took over responsibility for Heal’s advertising in 1900, things started to change. The firm’s typography improved; the Fourposter Bed (Fig. 3-8) was adopted as a trade mark – no doubt inspired by Ambrose’s fascination with the history of London traders which he later turned into a book, *The Signboards of Old London Shops*. In 1902 the chequered border for advertisements was invented which was a visual element that was consistently applied for many years and became a crucial part of the visual identity of the firm (Fig. 3-9). Derived from cabinet makers’ chequered stringing, it subtly recalled quality furniture as well as being a memorable visual device. In the same year A.H. introduced a number of ranges of furniture featuring the stringing, thereby underlining the connection. The fine lettering, the black and white colour scheme and the Fourposter logo, along with a discerning look at the whole visual identity of the business was applied throughout from advertisements, catalogues, letterheadings, even to the decoration of the horse-drawn vans and eventually the building itself. Although A.H. was a shopkeeper and not an architect, and although he was operating on a far smaller scale than the London Underground and A.E.G., it seems undeniable that he developed and consistently applied what would today be called a ‘visual corporate identity’ before both Behrens and Pick. It seems probable that he was not alone in this and that other firms such as Smith’s were equally pioneers.

⁴⁰⁵ See press cuttings album – Standard and Tribune 29.11.1906. AAD/1978/2/177.

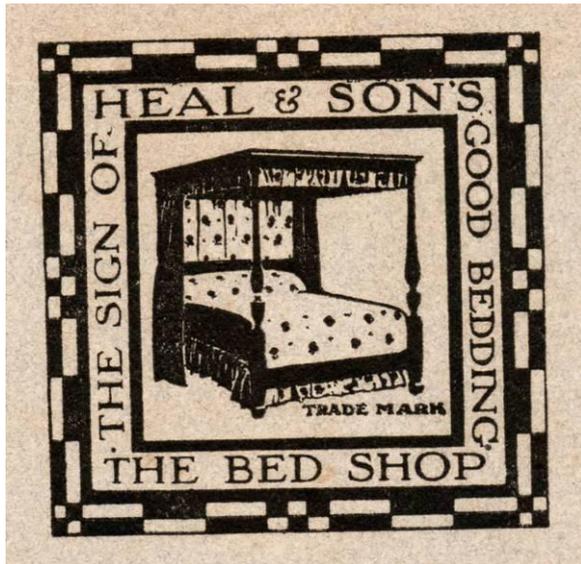


Fig. 3-9. The Heal fourposter bed Trade Mark with a chequer border surround from 1905. Note that although this is from a bedroom furniture catalogue the emphasis is still on bedding and beds. (H&S catalogue).



Fig. 3-10. Examples of pre-WWI Heal & Son publicity showing use of chequered borders and good lettering. The calligraphy on the top right advertisement was by Eric Gill. (Goodden).

3.2.2 Advertising

Looking back and reviewing the success of the chequered border and the whole publicity campaign in 1910 the trade journal *Printers Ink* noted how it had:

*suffered severely from the sincerest form of flattery...The somewhat formal chequer border and the general severity of the typography is part of the policy of continuity and accumulative effect, which, according to Mr Heal's experience, is particularly useful when the appeal is made to a constituency which is limited and which does not respond to advertising very readily.*⁴⁰⁶

An article in *The Lamp* in 1921 reviewing the Heal press advertising confirms that the image of the business was based on consistency of visual symbols and stated:

An invaluable continuity has been secured by the steady use of the chequer border.

Although written by the advertising agent, and therefore undoubtedly biased, the assessment seems likely to be true that

*The effectiveness of this advertising is out of all proportion to the expenditure...Heal advertising stands out in the memory out of all proportion to the space actually occupied.*⁴⁰⁷

Heal advertising was again held up as exemplary in an article entitled *Distinguished Advertising that Sells Distinctive Goods* by C.T. Williamson in 1922 which repeats the value of the chequer border in terms of consistency and highlights the classical simplicity of the typography – *not fussy or "arty" but dignified and...chaste*. This article goes further and examines how the advertisements had sought to sell without ever reverting to the "hard sell". The language used had been consistent with the visual image projected by the typography and layout as well as with the merchandise itself. Heal's advertising:

...sought to establish a definite association in the minds of a discriminating public between all that is best in furniture design and construction and the name Heal...It never talked of price. It emphasised the hundred and one qualities peculiar to Heal products...explained policy...described showrooms.

A clear understanding of their specific target market, its needs and foibles, is

⁴⁰⁶ See press cuttings album – *Printers Ink*, 16.03.1910.

⁴⁰⁷ Press cuttings album, *The Lamp*, 1921.

revealed:

...the size of the public appealed to is not regulated by the depth of its purse but rather by its appreciation of beauty...

Blatant salesmanship is avoided as it would be

...disastrous where the appeal is made to a cultured and discerning public

The article terminated with a glowing testimonial:

*The entire advertising is a superb example, in its beauty, its interest, its meticulous attention to detail, of the art of advertising fine products to people of cultured tastes.*⁴⁰⁸

What emerges is a picture of a clear approach to a visual identity that was firmly in place in the early years of the century, combined with a sophisticated approach to marketing that would be further refined over the years.

3.2.3 Other Marketing Means

3.2.3.1 Hoardings

In addition to press advertising there were examples of advertising hoardings which carried the message onto a longer lasting format. In 1907 an 85 feet long, 6 feet high, hoarding was erected at Finsbury Park Station and *The Sphere* commented:

*Slowly but surely the public is being educated in the art of beautiful lettering. Nobody has done more in this direction than the house of Heal at the Sign of the Fourposter Bed in Tottenham Ct Rd.*⁴⁰⁹

When the shop in Tottenham Court Road was rebuilt during World War One this went on behind a hoarding planned by R.P. Gossop and designed by Minnie McLeish which consisted of several panels painted in bright colours in a pseudo-cubist fashion.⁴¹⁰ When the building was extended again in 1936, Minnie McLeish was once again called upon to suggest a decorative treatment for the hoardings.⁴¹¹

3.2.3.2 Posters

Throughout the inter-war period posters were used consistently to announce special

⁴⁰⁸ Press cuttings album, C.T. Williamson, *Distinguished Advertising that Sells Distinctive Goods*, Advertisers' Weekly, 11.08.1922.

⁴⁰⁹ Press cuttings album, *The Sphere*, 22.06.1907.

⁴¹⁰ Press cuttings album, Advertisers Weekly, 13.06.1914.

⁴¹¹ Board minutes, 29.07.1936.

exhibitions and displays in the shop and Mansard Gallery. These were designed by many of the leading artists of the period such as E. Mcknight Kauffer, C. Lovat Fraser and a selection are reproduced in *A History of Heal's*. (Fig. 3-10)

3.2.3.3 Direct Mail

We know that the booklet *The Evolution of Fouracres* was mailed out in 1911 because copies of the covering letter survive (see Publications, Layout & Copy 3.3.1) but there is also evidence that later, more precisely targeted campaigns were attempted. In 1924, for example, new Members of Parliament at the House of Commons were sent a letter suggesting that what the *jaded legislator* needed to help him cope with the rigours of the House was a Heal bed.⁴¹²

Invitations to Mansard Gallery exhibitions were sent to between 15000 and 35000 customers on the mailing list. In 1932 Heal's 'Economy Furniture' booklet was mailed *to houses with a rental value of more than £50 and a telephone*.⁴¹³

3.2.4 Summary

To talk of the creation of the "Heal's brand", to make use of a contemporary term, at the beginning of the 20th century is perhaps to exaggerate it a little, for the firm had existed since 1810 and had a long established reputation for the quality of its beds. However examination of both the firm's advertising and its products of the time reveal no particular design consistency before the turn of the century. When A.H. took on responsibility for the publicity of the firm a distinctive look rapidly began to emerge that formed the basis of the brand that came to be familiar throughout the 20th century.

⁴¹² The first response came from the Conservative Candidate for Amersham who wrote: *I like your cheek in asking me to trade with the firm the head of which is an ardent radical opponent in my Constituency!!* He subsequently admitted he had already bought things from the shop. Original letter, author's collection.

⁴¹³ Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, p 80.



Fig. 3-11. Examples of Heal & Son posters shortly after WWI (apart from Garden Furniture Exhibition from 1938). (Goodden).

The most important visual elements, as has been seen, were the adoption of the chequered border and the use of the fourposter logo on printed matter. Both were a skilful blend of modernity (the graphic starkness) with tradition (fourposter beds and cabinet maker's stringing being reassuringly familiar and having connotations of quality). Both were used with consistency over many years – a fundamental element in building up a recognisable visual identity. As Wally Olins remarks:

*It is only the most powerful, ubiquitous, well-organized, heavily backed, visually appealing, effectively communicated corporate identity programmes that will break through into people's consciousness.*⁴¹⁴

The other fact that emerges is that Heal's used publicity in a way that would be quite familiar to retailers today. In addition to straightforward press advertising, use was made of posters and hoardings, catalogues and direct mail, in addition to seeking editorial coverage for new merchandise or special displays or events such as Christmas.

The art of providing journalists with a story and information in order to encourage them to write articles that promote your wares is no doubt as old as the profession. Editorial coverage is incomparably more effective than advertising and therefore greatly coveted. But, for a generation that laments the over-commercialisation of Christmas today, it is instructive to note that Heal's were evidently pushing their products (very gently and subtly of course) to journalists every year at Christmas-time from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. A wide selection of publications would carry mentions of Heal's Christmas gift ideas, which at the beginning concentrated mainly on individual chairs and occasional tables. As the merchandise range broadened over the years, so the scope for finding presents at Heal's grew to include china, glass, toys and even paintings. The commercialisation of Christmas is therefore definitely not a recent phenomenon.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁴ Wally Olins, *Corporate Identity*, Thames & Hudson, 1989, p 213.

⁴¹⁵ It is interesting to note that in 1926 both Heal's Christmas catalogue and the merchandise displays within the shop were arranged *in groups of graduated prices*.

Tottenham Court Road was not a smart street where potential customers would automatically go for what we now refer to as “retail therapy”. It had a reputation for shoddiness and poor design. A.H. was therefore faced with an uphill task of attracting the sort of customers he needed for his designs and concentrated all his means into projecting an image of quality but at the same time of value for money, - in short, modern design with a respect for tradition. Heal’s needed to stand out from the crowd and visually it succeeded in doing this by creating a distinctive brand image.

The messages carried by the advertising obviously helped to attract people to the shop but other methods were also employed, such as the Mansard Art Gallery and endorsement by impartial outsiders, and these are examined in the following sections.

3.3 Publications

3.3.1 Layout & Copy

A.H.'s fascination for books, and in particular those of the Private Presses inspired by William Morris, meant that he was very conscious of every detail of the printed output of his firm whether in advertising or catalogues. However, it was not just the visual impact that he was concerned with, but the words used were also vitally important. From the very earliest days he made use of 'independent' named writers to give supposedly un-biased comment on the products of the firm. This had the effect of raising the little publications issued from mere advertising puff to something with intellectual and aesthetic standing that would appeal to the targeted clientele which was independently minded and aesthetically aware. At the same time it had the effect of reassuring those less certain of their taste that this was a serious business, unafraid of submitting its wares to outside scrutiny. Tracey Potts, reviewing Heal's marketing strategies *refracted through the work of Pierre Bourdieu*, notes how this technique was part of a system for manufacturing *symbolic capital*. Objects could be endowed with a value beyond their immediate production cost through consecration by others: *Such endorsements served not only to nurture reputations but simultaneously to provide sources of euphemized marketing.*⁴¹⁶

A small series of booklets can be traced down the years, which stand apart from the Firm's series of general catalogues, and were publications worthy of note in their own right.

3.3.1.1 "A Note on Simplicity of Design in Furniture for Bedrooms with Special Reference to Some Recently Produced by Messrs. Heal and Son." By Gleeson White. (1898)

This was the somewhat verbose title of the very first publication by A.H. in 1898. It

⁴¹⁶ Tracey Potts, *Creating 'Modern Tendencies' – the Symbolic Economics of Furnishing.*, in D. Bell & J. Hollows (eds) *Historicizing Lifestyle*, Ashgate, 2006.

was in effect a catalogue of A.H.'s own, earliest bedroom furniture designs, but of its thirty-one pages, nineteen were devoted to the essay by Gleeson White (1851-1899). Gleeson White was a man with wide interests, connected with the publisher of art and architectural books George Bell & Sons, the owners of The Chiswick Press, and at the time of writing his contribution about Heal's furniture he was the editor of *The Studio*. Gleeson White died within a year of publication, aged forty-seven, from typhoid contracted in Italy and his obituary described him as

*The well-known writer on art and its applications...His wit was, perhaps, responsible for half the original "bons mots" and epigrams circulating in London, and he was never at a loss for fresh ones. He was one of the prime movers in the modern decorative movement, and knew its history, its development, and its occasional shams better than any man living.*⁴¹⁷

How he came to write about A. H.'s furniture is not recorded but they undoubtedly moved in the same Arts & Crafts circle and, as well as that, Ambrose shared with Gleeson White a passion for book collecting. This shared interest no doubt fed directly into the decisions about what the booklet should look like.⁴¹⁸

The booklet was printed (by the Chiswick Press) in an unmistakably 'Arts & Crafts' font based on Jensen's 15th century work that had inspired William Morris's 1890 Golden typeface. It featured quirky little ligatures between the c and t (in 'architect' for example) and the page layout with the very black typeface tightly wrapped around the illustrations is also reminiscent of Kelmscott Press publications although the margins are much more generous. It is printed on handmade paper. The illustrations are woodcuts by the architect and illustrator C.H.B. Quennell and their black backgrounds again echo the example of the Kelmscott Press but the feeling is altogether more modern and presages the layout of publications by the Doves Press that was founded in 1900. Some of its experimental layout is less than satisfactory such as where there is only room for lines of type containing just a couple of words

⁴¹⁷ Undated cutting from unknown newspaper, *Death of Mr Gleeson White, a useful artistic career*, author's collection.

⁴¹⁸ Gleeson White's library included books presented to him by the poet and playwright, John Todhunter, who was later to become A.H.'s father-in-law. Whether A.H. and Todhunter knew each other at that time is not known. See catalogue, Professor York Powell, *Gleeson White, In Piam Memoriam*, Preface to Catalogue of Books from the Library of the Late Gleeson White, Lionel Isaacs, 1899.

in length squeezed between illustration and margin, but it must have stood out at the time as very different to what other firms were doing.

It is worth noting that in 1898, A.H. was just 26 years old and a little-known designer, who had produced his first bedroom furniture designs the previous year for a company (his family business) that had absolutely no reputation in that sort of contemporary design. It seems likely therefore that Gleeson White was genuinely enthusiastic about his products and keen to help promote them. He was renowned for having

*set himself especially to encourage the young who were capable of doing well, who had thoughts of their own and wanted to be allowed to work them out in their own way. Also having spent a year in America, he learned the necessity of trained and sincere criticism as the only true and constant support of those who are doing honest work...*⁴¹⁹

He commenced his essay about A.H.'s furniture as follows:

Simplicity has been said to be the final refuge of the complex. Nor is this statement really a paradox. To be simple in decoration is always to be in good taste, and, as a rule, to fulfil the intended purpose more satisfactorily. Where simplicity is gained without needless austerity there can be little doubt but that it possesses a far more abiding charm than ornate decoration is likely to have...But scant furniture and mere utility does not represent altogether what we understand by true simplicity, which should include something of far higher quality; and prove elastic enough to allow of comfort and comeliness...

The furniture with which this note is concerned may be safely regarded as typical of the simplicity which provides comfort and comeliness as well as cleanliness. More than this, it satisfies those who are interested in good design and honest construction...

In short, the beauty which many of the pieces undoubtedly possess is due to well-chosen material, admirable proportion, harmonious design, and rigid economy of ornament. Without any wish to draw comparisons, it may be

⁴¹⁹ Professor York Powell, *Gleeson White, In Piam Memoriam*, Preface to Catalogue of Books from the Library of the Late Gleeson White, Lionel Isaacs, 1899.

doubted if furniture so admirably fitted for its purpose and so good in design has ever been kept for sale in the ordinary way of business.

Having discussed how taste had changed for the better since the days of Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, and the problems of getting furniture specially architect-designed and made, he continued:

A suspicion by no means baseless often prevents a critic noticing the work of any firm, because to do so savours of advertisement. But those who write on art are seldom too timid to express their appreciation of Mr. William Morris's wall-papers and fabrics, Mr. Benson's lamps, Mr. Powell's "Whitefriars' glass," and the rest; in fact, any work duly assigned to an individual, even if it be sold by a firm of which the designer is a member. Therefore, if in approving Mr. Ambrose Heal's admirable designs for bedroom furniture it also reflects praise on his firm, the charge of puffing commercial wares thereby may be risked lightly.

After thus installing A.H.'s name in the pantheon of the Arts & Crafts Movement, Gleeson White then proceeds to comment on the design of the various bedroom suites illustrated before terminating with a swipe at the continental fashion for eccentric, unsymmetrical grotesque shapes. Fortunately England had the new style of houses produced by the likes of Norman Shaw or Voysey for which A.H.'s furniture was eminently suitable.

Architects do not need to have their attention drawn to this furniture, they know it already, and, before long, one fancies that Messrs. Heal, who make no pretence at any mission or desire to pose as pioneers in the cause of Art, will be recognized as having done it stalwart service by all who are fighting for better things artistically.

After such an introduction, A.H. must have really felt he had made a mark in the design world and the booklet more than did his furniture justice but also demonstrated right from this early stage that for him design was not just about pieces of furniture but had to include the appropriate accompanying literature as well.

3.3.1.2 “Simple Bedroom Furniture” Illustrated by Woodcuts from Original Designs made by Heal & Son. (1899)

From a strictly commercial point of view the first, very artistic, publication may have gone a little too far, as it is notable that, when in the following year further items were added to the range and the catalogue had to be reprinted (with this somewhat briefer title), it was completely redesigned. Simpler line drawings (woodcuts again) of the furniture on a white ground replaced Quennell’s black backgrounds. Although still very nicely presented on hand-made paper, and including a reprint of the Gleeson White essay, it is a more prosaic production. On the back cover can be read *The woodcuts in this book are drawn and engraved, and the whole arranged and printed by The Guild Press, 45, Great Charles Street, Birmingham.* However the links with The Studio were not broken for the design of the cover – a simplified floral pattern with hand-cut lettering, white and red on a green ground – was used as a full page advertisement on the back of the special issue produced for that year’s Art Workers’ Guild pageant, *Beauty’s Awakening.*

3.3.1.3 “Simple Bedroom Furniture” in Oak Chestnut & “Colonial Mahogany”. With a Note on Bedroom Furniture by Egan Mew. (1905).

This soft-back book ran to more than eighty pages, illustrated with line drawings of furniture *designed by Ambrose Heal junior, Made and Sold by Heal & Son, at their Workshops and Showrooms.* This appears to be the last separate catalogue devoted to AH’s designs to be published and illustrates the second generation of his work which had moved on from the late nineteenth century, Arts & Crafts style, with hammered steel strap hinges, to the more restrained designs that represent his mature work. The typography too had moved on and the title on the front cover “Simple Bedroom Furniture” was very simply based on Roman carved lettering in stone that is noteworthy for the Us in the word furniture are ‘carved’ as Vs.

Egan Mew wrote for a number of publications on furnishings although the books he wrote later were particularly about the history of china manufacturing. It is interesting that in his introduction to this catalogue, he refers back to the work of Gleeson White but suggests that his “evangel” may have been too austere. Taste had moved on from the Medievalism of the early Arts and Crafts movement to an

appreciation of the examples of 17th and 18th century furniture:

When that excellent critic of the applied arts, the late Mr. Gleeson White, urged the advantages of simplicity, its comfort, comeliness, and cleanliness, especially in regard to household furniture, his evangel became so popular that we were in dread of a return to archaism and the bare boards of our rude forefathers. This danger passed, and the groundwork of severity and simplicity having been once more attained, wise study of the best periods of English furniture, the Tudor, Stuart and Georgian especially, has resulted in what may be considered a characteristic style of to-day. In no case is this more remarkable than in the sets of bedroom furniture which Mr Ambrose Heal has designed and Messrs. Heal & Son have manufactured.

He highlighted *influences of Stuart elegancies* in one chest and *what is called the colonial feeling – that is to say, the mode affected by our American cousins when George III began to reign* in another toilet table.

The overall impression was that

throughout all the pieces in these various sets that pleasing domesticity of 18th century country life is a marked characteristic. ...Both the rococo qualities and later classicism of the Georgian period may be discovered, sublimed and adjusted to new circumstances, in the detail of the bedsteads and the minor points of wardrobe and chest.

This confirms what has already been demonstrated in the examination of the output of the Heal Cabinet Factory, that A.H.'s philosophy of design was that a study of the past was crucial to producing good modern furniture.

Almost more interesting is Egan Mew's reference to machine production and the pricing philosophy of the firm, from which it is obvious that Heal & Son were intent on supplying the middle classes and not especially the rich, but that this represented a recent, but subtle, change of emphasis. Mew commented:

During the past ten years, no one has given more useful and intelligent study to the application of machinery in the manufacture of what is at once beautiful and useful than this firm... who have devoted their fully-instructed labour to perfecting a class of furniture which unites the many good qualities of the past with inexpensiveness and perfection which the latest inventions in machinery

can produce.

Of late the firm have set themselves the by no means easy task of providing the necessary articles for bedroom use at prices that shall come within the means of the modest man, and yet be well-constructed, simple, convenient and entirely satisfying to the senses.

In view of what is now known about the very limited nature of the machinery available in Heal's own Cabinet Factory the statement about *the latest inventions in machinery* must be open to question (see 2.3 The Cabinet Factory as a Business). Can Mew have really only intended to contrast Heal's work with that of the 'handwork-only' Cotswold school? Was the mass of machine-made furniture available at the time from manufacturers such as Lebus or even Shapland & Petter so bad that it could in no way be considered *beautiful and useful*? It seems likely that there were a number of factors that influenced Mew to write as he did.

- It was desirable to distinguish between Heal's machine-assisted production and the expensive and exclusive furniture made by Gimson and the Barnsleys, amongst others, who had completely rejected machinery. Heal's were keen to stress the reasonableness of their prices.
- The vast majority of machine-made furniture was not well-made, nor beautiful, and so Heal's devotion to these aims did make them stand apart from the rest of the trade.
- Heal's own publicity after the setting up of the Factory only about six or seven years earlier had stressed the modernity of its equipment and so, no doubt, this impression still remained.
- Although they are not represented in this particular catalogue A.H. was already working with manufacturers like Shapland and Petter who were more fully mechanised, to get well-designed, reasonably-priced bedrooms into production and thus make them available to his clientele.

3.3.1.4 "Cottage Furniture" (1907)

Although the Cottage Furniture catalogue, which followed a couple of years after the

Simple Furniture catalogue, does not include an essay by a named author, it is significant because its very existence signals a major change in emphasis provoked in part no doubt by the beginnings of the Garden City movement. The idea of the Garden City was to create better living conditions, away from polluted big cities, by conceiving new towns that would provide *Slumless Smokeless Cities*, surrounded by their own food-producing agricultural land, where workers could be housed in sunlit cottages with a view onto a garden, but close to industry and urban amenities as well.⁴²⁰ It was this movement that focused Heal & Son's mission to offer more reasonable furniture. The decision to furnish two cottages as part of the Letchworth Cheap Cottages Exhibition in 1905 must also have played a role in extending the merchandise range from simply bedrooms to include basic dining rooms as well and these are represented in this catalogue. Another interesting development is the use of sepia photographs instead of line drawings. Although it includes a few products made in Heal's own factory, most of the furniture was sourced elsewhere.

The introduction to the catalogue was headed *A Plea for Simplicity in Cottage Furniture* and firstly had to do some delicate repositioning of the term 'Cottage Furniture' previously used to describe basic furniture suitable for servants. Now it had to be made acceptable to the middle classes. It starts by making it clear that what Heal's are offering has nothing to do with the *unserviceable inanities of the ordinary artisan's cottage*, nor, on the other hand, with *the pretentious fussiness of suburban villadom of the weekender's cottage of gentility* that all too often contain a "new art" *overmantel smothered in rococo photograph frames, ineffable green grotesques of cats and other depressing forms of pottery*. Instead the impeccable genealogy of the Heal designs is established by stating that they are founded on *the good, plain, farmhouse furniture of the XVIIIth Century, which is always eminently serviceable and has a simple dignity of its own*.

It anticipates those who would find the designs too severe and replies:

It may be objected that our designs err on the side of excessive plainness. Our answer is that economy has been studied everywhere except at the expense of sound construction.

This style of furniture and the Garden City concept appealed to a deep-seated

⁴²⁰ See for example Peter Davey, *Arts & Crafts Architecture*, Phaidon, 1995, p 181.

middle-class English desire to adopt a ‘peasant-like’ lifestyle even if such a lifestyle remained unobtainable and probably undesired by the working classes. The middle-class ‘simple-lifers’ became an essential part of Heal’s clientele and although this furniture appealed to a broader cross section of the public than those caricatured by Armytage as the ‘typical garden citizen’, he gives us an idea of what these people were like:

*Clad in knickerbockers and, of course, sandals, a vegetarian and a member of the Theosophical Society, who kept two tortoises ‘which he polishes periodically with the best Lucca oil’. Over his mantelpiece was a large photo of Madame Blavatsky and on his library shelves were ‘Isis Unveiled’ and the works of William Morris, H.G. Wells and Tolstoy.*⁴²¹

3.3.1.5 “An Aesthetic Conversion”, being independent notes by Joseph Thorp (1909)

This publication is not a catalogue at all but a little gem of an ‘artistic’ booklet in hard covers around some two dozen, hand-made-paper pages containing an essay by Joseph Thorp, illustrated with black and white drawings.⁴²² The margins are very generous and the type face forms strong black rectangles, giving a page layout that would not have been out of place had it been produced by Emery Walker’s Doves Press. In fact it was printed by the Arden Press at Letchworth, a subsidiary of W. H. Smith. Joseph Thorp was a copywriter by profession but also an advocate of good typography, evidently on the same wavelength as A.H.. Thorp was responsible for much of Heal’s printed output at that period and this little booklet encapsulates the spirit of Heal’s manner of talking to its customers (and potential customers), and continues the theme of getting outsiders to comment on the business.⁴²³

⁴²¹ W.H.G. Armytage, *Heavens Below*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, pp 374-5 cited by Michael Young, *The Elmhursts of Dartington*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p 133.

⁴²² A less expensive version with soft paper covers and cut paper was also printed with otherwise the same contents. The drawings bear the initials F.C.

⁴²³ Noel Carrington, *Industrial Design in Britain*, Allen & Unwin, 1976, p 60, wrote that Thorp: *was an eccentric and rather proud of it, ...he never came to terms with the conservatism of his countrymen and was always striving to evoke those qualities which had made England great but which now seemed dormant...A committee attended by Thorp was never dull; but he was the despair of secretaries, since the bright ideas he interjected made a wreckage of any agenda.* Joseph Peter Thorp (1872-1962) was by nature a campaigner for a better life. Having initially studied theology, instead of going into the Church, he joined WH Smith in 1905. In 1909 he set himself up as an independent Advertising Consultant. Heal & Son took a small advertisement in the booklet he published to

In the Preface Thorp states:

It should give an added significance to these few notes if I state here that I have studied the work and methods of Messrs Heal and Son for some five years at first hand; that these notes are put together and published entirely at my own suggestion.

He begins by noting how some otherwise cultured people can remain

apparently insensible to the vulgarities and unseemliness of the most debased period of late and mid-Victorian upholstery. ...I have, for instance, listened to ravishing music, turned over portfolios of prints, rare and beautiful, handled the most exquisite ivories in rooms, the offence of whose furniture was of the rankest and smelt, emphatically, to heaven.

His own “conversion” he attributes to Heal’s shop:

I had heard of Heal’s as a sort of household word for bedding: at the Tottenham Court Road I had also heard taunts, vaguely scornful, levelled by some of the more discerning or pretentious of my friends.

I drifted in in search of a convenient upholsterer, and I found an artist-craftsman with a business-like air and method, and came gradually to distinguish a definite artistic purpose in the work of this house. I have not found any such evidence of consistent purpose, any such sense of personal first-hand inspiration in any other.

Thorp learnt:

...to appreciate the reasons which dictated the Heal reproductions from the antique, and further of the adaptations which took serious account of modern requirements and progressive standards of comfort and hygiene. No true

promote his services and commissioned him to write “An Aesthetic Conversion” in that year so Heal and Thorp were evidently known to each other already. But in addition to his publicity activities Thorp campaigned to improve society. In 1910 he founded the Agenda Club as a non-party-political reforming movement, that highlighted social injustices and sought to organise campaigns on subjects as diverse as *the prevention of expectoration, prison reform, or the problem of the segregation of the half-witted*. In the early years a report on the problem of the Golf Caddie was produced as well as proposals made to improve the accommodation of shop assistants. It seems that A.H. was a member of the Agenda Club. In 1917 Joseph Thorp created the Romney Street Group, *a forum for the meeting of like minds, mostly those loosely disposed to non-doctrinaire Christian socialism and whose efforts were directed initially to the task of developing practical schemes for post-war reconstruction*. (see Barberis, McHugh, Tyldesley, *Encyclopedia of British & Irish Political Organisations*, p 357). From 1916 to 1934 Thorp was drama critic for Punch.

craftsman could be content merely to reproduce without reflecting the influences and habits of his day.

And he also came to see that good modern work is inspired *by the best of what has gone before.*

I have tried to indicate from memories of my own experience that you will find Heal's shop not to be a modern store with wholesale and impersonal methods, but a shop of the old school with a rare and established standard of taste, and, what is no inconsiderable thing, with a trading code dating from a less aggressively commercial age.

Once again, the booklet *An Aesthetic Conversion* positioned the Heal business outside the normal run of retail practice through its layout and its text which sought, not to sell specific products, but to build an image of artistic sensibility and straight-forward dealing through 'independent' comment.

Another example of Thorp's skill as a copywriter that also elucidates what the Heal business was about may be quoted:

I should sum up Heal's as a shop with a well-defined purpose, personality and public – not attempting the role of emporium or universal provider; a shop always experimenting, originating, modifying; a shop that challenges you with an air of distinction.

And on another occasion he wrote:

What is interesting about Heal's is that you find not only the conscientious preservation of the great tradition of English furniture, but the courage and skill to help to carry it on by contributing new developments. There is, in fact, the creative as well as the conserving element. ...There is a standard; many saleable things are unobtainable at Heal's because they are not saleworthy.⁴²⁴

3.3.1.6 The Evolution of "Fouracres", September 1911

This thirty-two page booklet represents a change of style compared with the austerity

⁴²⁴ This quotation and the preceding one were cited in C.T. Williamson, *Distinguished Advertising that Sells Distinctive Goods*, Advertisers' Weekly, 11.08.1922.

of some of the previous publications because it is illustrated by colour reproductions of paintings by Fred Taylor, showing different bedroom settings which instantly convey a feeling of warmth and colour and bring it all to life.⁴²⁵ The bedrooms have carpets and rugs on the floor, curtains at the windows and wall papers on the walls that make them attractively bright and airy.

The Evolution of "Fouracres" was mailed out with a covering letter from the Company that commenced:

Dear Sir,

The fact that you have not put The Evolution of Four Acres in the waste paper basket with the "circulars" is probably due to its attractive appearance, and the care that has evidently been expended on it.

This is a fascinating revelation that proves that even one hundred years ago households were being bombarded with unwanted mailings and that this therefore is not a recent phenomenon.

Although the text of the booklet is not signed, it is the work of E.W. Gregory and tells the story of a couple seeking advice on how to furnish their new home, "*Fouracres*", rather differently from the ordinary house one goes into, making it less conventional and stereotyped. Written in a light conversational style, from the view point of a variety of fictional characters woven into the plot, it manages to convey subtly, yet with concrete details of prices etc., the reasons for shopping at Heal's and what one could obtain there.⁴²⁶

The underlying message is that Heal's could be relied upon to advise and furnish with taste yet at reasonable cost.

⁴²⁵ Fred Taylor (1875-1963) was "one of Britain's foremost poster artists from 1908 to the 1940s...best known for his posters of buildings and architectureHe was also a decorative painter, exhibiting regularly at the Royal Academy". See London Transport Museum www.ltmcollection.org

⁴²⁶ Although it is written in a style that is like that of Thorp it was advertised as being by E.W. Gregory at the time. In 1927 Joseph Thorp was editor of the Design & Industries Association Yearbook and used a similar technique of fictional correspondence to get across a message of good practice in typography. Susanna Goodden credits "*The Evolution of Fouracres*" to Joseph Thorp describing it as *a romantic booklet dreamed up by Joseph Thorp as an intelligent person's guide to furnishing a country house*. A History of Heal's, p 36.

3.3.1.7 “A Few Notes on Architects and Furniture by Sir Lawrence Weaver: but really an advertisement for Heal & Son”. (c 1926)

This little, twelve-page booklet is similar in its concept to Joseph Thorp’s *Aesthetic Conversion* in that it describes how Sir Lawrence Weaver saw the error of his ways and came to believe that *Heal furniture is no more costly than commoner stuff*.

Lawrence Weaver had been appointed architectural editor of *Country Life* in 1910 and was responsible for a number of books including *Small Country Houses of Today* and *The Houses & Gardens of Edwin Lutyens*. After the First World War (he was knighted for his work at the Ministry of Agriculture), particularly following a visit to Gothenburg in 1922, he became an active speaker and writer on *aesthetic ideals in industry*, and was appointed Director General of the UK exhibits at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. With his wife he had also founded the Ashted Pottery for the employment of disabled ex-service men. By 1927 he was President of the Design & Industries Association and of the Architecture Club, and had been made an honorary associate of the R.I.B.A. Christopher Hussey described his character as *a combination of strong religious, puritanical, and philanthropic convictions, ...with hard headedness, shrewdness and steadfast loyalty...*⁴²⁷ It can be seen therefore that to obtain his endorsement would have been powerfully influential at the time.

His introduction began by explaining how, despite his admiration for Heal furniture, he had thought it too expensive:

...because I wanted it and believed it beyond me, I never dared enter the splendid shop which is perhaps Cecil Brewer’s best monument. Last summer I was taken there by a friend to see a show in the Mansard Gallery and I strayed all over the floors. The obvious fact was that Heal furniture is no more costly than commoner stuff, and simple honesty drove me to confess my long heresy to Mr Heal. He asked me to do penance on a white sheet and I do it gladly.

This admittance in itself is interesting in that it demonstrates that the Mansard

⁴²⁷ Christopher Hussey, *Sir Lawrence Weaver (1876-1930)*, Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 1937.

Gallery was an attraction for just the sort of appreciative customer that Heal's were targeting with the ability to draw in those who might not otherwise cross the threshold.

In discussing the impact of the 1925 Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts, Weaver ponders on the respective roles of architect and craftsman and concludes that there was a need for close cooperation:

Abroad the architect plays the part of less than a dictator, yet more than "primus inter pares." This sound position grows slowly in Great Britain, and none has contributed more to the right atmosphere of co-operation, mutual trust and loyalty than the firm of Heal.

3.3.1.8 "Tradition and Modernity in Furnishing" by Sir Lawrence Weaver, K.B.E., F.S.A., Hon. A.R.I.B.A. (1928)

Heal's republished the text of this article written by Lawrence Weaver for *The Architectural Review* of June 1928 as it traces the history of the Heal business from its beginnings right up to that time.

On a matter of detail it should be noted that it contains errors about the Letchworth Garden City which have subsequently been perpetuated by other historians. Weaver wrote:

In 1907, at the first Letchworth Exhibition, another landmark, Heal's furnished the cottage designed by F.W. Troup.

In fact the first exhibition was held in 1905 and Heal's furnished two cottages – one by the architect Lionel Crane and the other by Smith & Brewer. For the 1907 exhibition they furnished "The Concrete Cottage" by the architect Gilbert Fraser.

Having examined the history of the firm and observed changes in furniture construction, Weaver comments,

In all these developments the House of Heal has played an honourable and effective part, and led the way, not only as manufacturers of work of their own design, but in collaborating loyally with architects in giving effect to their ideas, throwing their practical experience into the common pot.

He summarises Heal's unusual blend of workshop, selective retailing and fine art promotion as follows:

No. 196 Tottenham Court Road is both office and workshop, but it is primarily a shop, and Ambrose Heal and his staff have done very much to make shopkeeping both jolly and helpful to the customer. In all the plenishings of the house, beyond its essential furniture – in carpets, fabrics, pottery and glass – he assembles the best of what Europe has to offer as well as of what England provides. And he does not stop there. Many painters, engravers, and sculptors have made their first acquaintance with the buying public in the pleasant Mansard Gallery which Cecil Brewer put at the top of his new building. Without making any fuss about it, Heal's are exercising a function badly wanted in this country, and much more widely exercised by foreign shopkeepers of vision. They are bringing significant works of art to the notice of a public that is not so stupid as we are apt to think, but ready rather to accept good things and essentially modern things, if they can see them in a shop.

Such an endorsement can only have been beneficial to the company's reputation.

3.3.1.9 “A Matter of Taste in Furniture”, with an introduction by Noel Carrington (1930)

In 1928 the cover of *Tradition & Modernity in Furnishing* had been printed in Caslon Openface type but the typeface used for the text was more classical. For this latest booklet, however, *A Matter of Taste in Furniture*, Caslon Openface was used in a larger size throughout the thirty two pages giving a more modern feeling to the whole which was appropriate in that Carrington's introduction was headed *The Case for Contemporary Furniture*. Noel Carrington, who worked in publishing and printing and had established a reputation as a designer and expert on book production, was elected Chairman of the Design & Industries Association in 1930, representing the next generation of crusaders for good design.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁸ Noel Carrington (1894-1989) publisher, book designer and champion of auto-lithography, is best remembered for creating the war-time Puffin Picture Books for children. Daily Telegraph obituary, 15.04.1989.

However, although Carrington was arguing in favour of modern furniture, this was by no means a wholehearted embrace of Modernism (no metal furniture is shown for example) but an argument in favour of Heal furniture:

...because it is so obviously in the English tradition and not just a fashion wafted across from the Continent.

...We in England ought to be grateful to craftsmen like Heal's, who have kept alive the English tradition...Otherwise we should be in some danger of succumbing breathlessly to the wave of Continental fashion. Contemporary French and German furniture has excellent qualities, but also runs to extravagant follies. We are now in the process of adapting and moulding to our national tradition the essential improvements of contemporary design. There is indeed every reason to foresee the bursting into flower of one of the finest periods of English Furniture.

The booklet must have been planned before the real effects of the economic crisis had become evident for it illustrates some of the more exotic products such as bedsteads covered in vellum and hand-decorated, a dining room in macassar ebony inlaid with ivory and a “signed edition” writing table.

3.3.2 Conclusion

The publications mentioned above have been described and quoted from for a number of reasons:

- Simply to record their existence, when much of such ephemera no longer survives, as an illustration of an out-of-the-ordinary approach to marketing.
- To provide examples of the type of writing used by different authors to communicate in a mature, often understated manner, their perception of the Heal business.
- To demonstrate that A.H.'s approach to business was all-inclusive and insisted on the same high standards in words, layout and illustration, as he did to the making of furniture.

To quote Potts again:

The formation of ...a 'reputation' can be seen to rest upon the degree of regard granted by other players in the field. If the cultural businessman's trade is revealed

to be reliant upon a power of consecration – a capacity to bless, recommend and endow objects with a value beyond their immediate production cost – then ‘the more consecrated he personally is, the more strongly he consecrates the work’ (Bourdieu, 1993:77).⁴²⁹

The charm of Heal publicity of the period is encapsulated in a quotation from a leaflet (1913) on children’s cots entitled *The Child Asleep*:

Can one be too careful in ensuring the best environment for a child? A pebble at the beginning of a stream’s course will influence the direction of the stream more than a boulder later.

The whole philosophy of the importance of good design, the evangelical nature of the crusade to spread the word and the passionate belief in the rightness of the ‘design gospel’ as a whole way of life shines through this one sentence.

⁴²⁹ Tracey Potts, *Creating ‘Modern Tendencies’*, p 167.

3.4 Fine Art as a Magnet - “The Mansard Gallery”

Heal’s new shop building, commenced just before the 1914-18 War broke out and completed with some difficulty in 1916, was more than just a functional shell for housing a retail operation. It represented an expression of the latest developments in design as understood by the architect Cecil Brewer in association with A.H., with its display windows set back under a colonnade and the floors above lit by generous tall metal-frame windows. At the top of the building on the fourth floor under a mansard roof, they planned a large open space for exhibitions linked to a showroom decorated as a flat to display furniture and furnishings in context. Both of these served to draw customers up to the top of the building with the hope that on their way down again they would also visit the other departments and spend their money.

The exhibition space, baptised the “Mansard Gallery”, was not simply a commercial exercise – in fact it appears not to have made money at all, so from that point of view it was distinctly uncommercial – but a reflection of A.H.’s attempts to put into practice Art Workers’ Guild beliefs in the unity and interdependence of all the arts by bringing them together under this one roof. A.H. himself lived the lifestyle that he presented to his customers. His links to the architectural and design world have already been covered but there is evidence that he also had close ties to the world of artists and painters. His library contained copies of catalogues for exhibitions that he had visited, such as those for the 1898 Edward Burne-Jones exhibition and perhaps more significantly, in view of the Mansard Gallery’s future, ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ at the Grafton Galleries in 1910-11, as well as the ‘Italian Futurist Painters’ at the Sackville Gallery in 1912. Some biographers have suggested that he was a student at the Slade School of Art but this was something he never claimed himself and it has not proved possible to find any evidence to support the suggestion.⁴³⁰ His name does not appear in the Slade School records and, although he sketched a little in his notebooks, no more substantial artistic works are known to

⁴³⁰ Alan Crawford in the Dictionary of National Biography and Simon Jervis, Dictionary of Design & Designers.

survive, so it seems unlikely that he was an art student. However there is plenty of evidence that he mixed with the milieu of the Slade School students around the turn of the century. His cousin Cecil Brewer had been a student there as had another cousin, Carlton Burwood Heal in the early '90s. A.H. himself actually took part in an open air performance of Milton's *Comus*, with Nigel Playfair in the lead role, in Regents Park in 1903. His wife-to-be, Edith Todhunter, was also part of the cast and she and many of their friends taking part were Slade students. Edith was at the school in 1901-2 (and possibly earlier as well) so may have overlapped with the likes of Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis who also attended at this period when the Slade was directed by Frederick Brown and Henry Tonks.⁴³¹

Another artistic contact from the same period was Christine Angus. She designed inlay patterns that A.H. used on furniture and he designed a high backed child's chair for her to give to her little sister.⁴³² In 1911 Christine Angus became the second wife of the painter Walter Sickert, whose studio in Fitzroy Street (parallel to Tottenham Court Road) was the focal point for avant-garde artists who formed the Camden Town Group that year. In 1915 A.H. took a flat in Fitzroy Street and his diaries record; *Tea Sickert Fitzroy Street* on 2 March 1916 and the *Private View of Sickert's show at the Carfax Gallery* on 17 November 1916, so there was undoubtedly social contact with key personalities in the artistic world of the time.⁴³³

Around the same period he also got to know Claud Lovat Fraser, who had studied under Sickert, and although they had a professional relationship they also became personal friends as his wife recorded that his one-man show:

*Was the outcome of a very happy friendship with Ambrose Heal whom we had met shortly after our marriage and who had, since then, been a frequent and stimulating visitor.*⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ Information from Wendy Butler, UCL Records Office, 04.10.2006.

Interestingly Edith Todhunter had an indirect and rather tenuous link to a previous generation of avant-garde artists. Reg Winfield records in *A Tendency to Grace* that the staging, in 1886, of Edith's father's adaptation of a Sophocles' play '*Helena in Troas*' was designed by E.W. Godwin shortly before his death in 1886.

⁴³² On one of his designs for a large sideboard (c. 1900) AH included spaces for: *4 tablets for inlay*, and then noted: *to be designed – preferably by Miss Angus*. See drawing AAD/1994/16/784. The chair for Joan Drummond Angus also featured inlay by Christine, 1899.

⁴³³ A.H. pocket appointments diaries, author's collection.

⁴³⁴ Grace Lovat Fraser, *In the Days of My Youth*, Cassell, 1970, p 260.

Fitzroy Street at the time was a vibrant centre of artistic life and it seems highly probable that A.H. frequented The Eiffel Tower restaurant just round the corner in Percy Street, that was used by Sickert, Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis amongst others. Sarah Bradford in her biography of Sacheverell Sitwell called it

*the epicentre of London artistic Bohemian life...run by its Austrian proprietor named Stulik on Robin Hood lines: he allowed his needier clients an almost unlimited degree of credit while overcharging the rich. It had genuine artistic ambience: its walls were covered with paintings by Stulik's clients, many of whom were extremely talented, and Wyndham Lewis and his assistant, William Roberts, had created a Vorticist Room on an upper floor.*⁴³⁵

Fitzroy Square, at the opposite end of Charlotte Street and Fitzroy Street, was home to the Bloomsbury Group's Omega Workshops during the First World War. No record has been found of A.H.'s opinions of their painted furniture but one cannot help feeling that he probably did not approve. Isabelle Anscombe records that C.R. Ashbee hated the production of Omega and cites a letter from one of his friends who describes the work as

*Too awful, simply a crime against truth and beauty...hot muddy and chalky colours, pink, acrid mauve, lemon and a sort of cocoa colour – I am sure you would loathe it all.*⁴³⁶

It seems likely that A.H. would have shared similar sentiments as his own designs were much more structured and his background was, like Ashbee's, practical rather than purely artistic, but he was doubtless aware of what was going on almost in his backyard. Omega closed in 1919 but individual artists from it were to be closely involved in shows at Heal's (and Virginia Woolf attended a private view) as is described below so further artistic links undoubtedly existed.

Against this background it is less surprising that the London Group chose to use the Mansard Gallery, an unknown space in a furniture shop, for its exhibitions between

⁴³⁵ Sarah Bradford, *Sacheverell Sitwell, Splendours & Miseries*, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, p 72.

The very first meeting of Heal & Son's staff consultative committee, The Fourposter Committee, was held at the Eiffel Tower Hotel on 17.09.1918. see Fourposter Committee minute book AAD/1994/16/25

⁴³⁶ Isabelle Anscombe, *Omega and After*, Thames & Hudson, 1993, p 31.

1917 and 1924 and that other artistic groupings followed their example. The very first exhibition held in the Mansard Gallery, in April 1917, was the sixth London Group show.

3.4.1. The London Group

The London Group of artists was not fixated on a single style, nor was the number of members fixed, but it sought to be in the avant-garde of the artistic movements of the time. Its predecessor was the Camden Town Group which in turn had grown from a frustration amongst young artists at the conservatism of the Royal Academy. The Camden Town Group had been formed in 1911 by sixteen artists bound together by *their knowledge and appreciation of the modern French painters, principally Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh*. They were the small core of *predominantly young progressive artists who had gathered at Sickert's 19, Fitzroy Street studio since the early 1900s* and who were prompted to group together following the 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' exhibition organised by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries in 1910. This exhibition had *finally confronted (London) with the vanguard of modern painting. The fiercely uncompromising modernity of this exhibition, at least by English standards, caused a critical furore and outraged the public at large*. The Group included Harold Gilman, Spencer Gore, Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis, Lucien Pissarro, William Ratcliffe and Walter Sickert.

After two years and three financially disastrous exhibitions at the Carfax Gallery, it became necessary for the Camden Town Group to find a new home and advisable to rejuvenate the group's image by enlarging it and changing its name. Thus was born, towards the end of 1913, the London Group with the aim of *providing a home for all forms of modernism, from Post-Impressionism to Cubism and Abstraction*. There were 32 founder members, and new members could only be admitted by election, but it was the stylistic enlargement that immediately sowed the seeds of dissension and two of the founder members of the Camden Town Group, Sickert and Pissarro, resigned as they disliked the Vorticism that Wyndham Lewis and others were then

developing.

However the Group went ahead and exhibitions were organised under a democratically elected hanging committee that initially consisted of Jacob Epstein, Renée Finch, Harold Gilman, Spencer Gore, Wyndham Lewis, J.B. Manson and Edward Wadsworth.

*The London Group was, in 1914, unchallenged as the spearhead of modernism in Britain and in many ways it was the Group's finest hour. There was a ground-breaking vitality about the Group's earliest exhibitions.*⁴³⁷

During the first two years of war exhibitions were held at the Goupil Gallery, despite some members having joined up, until the fifth exhibition in the Autumn of 1916.

By November 1916 the devastation of war had reached a peak with the battle of the Somme. Pacifists and conscientious objectors were actively despised and William Marchant, owner of the Goupil Gallery, felt it necessary to present the group with an ultimatum. ...No enemy aliens, conscientious objectors or sympathizers with the enemy were permitted to exhibit. ...At a special meeting it was unanimously decided that politics should be kept out of the domain of Art.

As a result of this decision to stick to liberal fair-minded principles, the London Group, of which some members were pacifists and conscientious objectors, was once more homeless.⁴³⁸

Conveniently Heal's were just completing the building of their new premises at 196 Tottenham Court Road which included a large gallery space on the fourth floor with an arched ceiling under the mansard roof that they called the Mansard Gallery. *The Daily Chronicle* described it as *being near to the sky, it is light and airy; being the work of the Heal firm it is alluringly austere.*⁴³⁹ According to Adrian Allinson, a member of the Group at the time, *A.H. was less susceptible to passions raised by*

⁴³⁷ Denys J. Wilcox, *The London Group 1913-1939*, Scolar Press, 1995, p 6.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, p 11.

⁴³⁹ *The Daily Chronicle*, *A New Picture Gallery*, 10.05.1917. Cited in *The London Group* by D.J. Wilcox, p 12.

*war. He offered us the hospitality of his Mansard Gallery, which thus became our home for some years to come.*⁴⁴⁰

The sixth London Group exhibition that took place in April 1917 was the first exhibition ever to be held in the Mansard Gallery space. A.H.'s views about war are not known. His younger brother had volunteered to serve in the army and was still away at war, but the most acute impact on A.H. was the loss of his eldest son, killed by stray shrapnel a few days after arriving at the front, aged only eighteen, in 1915.⁴⁴¹ This devastating personal event had no doubt paved the way for him to understand and accept the paintings of some members of the Group that conveyed the brutality and inhumanity of war. Perhaps the Quaker roots of his wife's family gave him more understanding of the pacifists' position as well, but the most likely reason for accepting the London Group under his roof would have been the firm conviction, shared with them, that politics have no place in art or commerce.

The break with the Goupil Gallery had injected some new vitality into the London Group and the exhibition at the Mansard Gallery outraged the more conservative quarters of the Press with the works of Edward McKnight Kauffer and Mark Gertler attracting particular comment.

*Despite the absence of many formidable Group members the Press perception of the London Group remained much the same as it had always been. The London Group was still the only venue where modern work could be seen and the society still stood apart from the Royal Academy and the New English Art Club as a genuine challenge to conservatism. The destruction and discord of the War began to make some critics feel that the London Group was the only place where the troubles were aptly reflected in paint.*⁴⁴²

Over the following couple of years the London Group underwent a subtle transformation with the election of a strong faction from the Bloomsbury Group such

⁴⁴⁰ Cited in *The London Group* by D.J. Wilcox, p 11.

⁴⁴¹ Cecil Ambrose Heal (1896-1915) went straight from school at Marlborough into the 3rd Wiltshire Regiment in 1914. After training he was sent to France in 1915 and after only two days at the front line, was wounded at Poperinghe near Ypres. Four days later, on 7 July 1915, he died.

⁴⁴² D.J. Wilcox, *The London Group*, p 13.

as Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Keith Baynes, and Bernard Meninsky. Following the death of the Group's then President, Harold Gilman, and the subsequent resignations of Frederick Etchells, Wyndham Lewis, and William Roberts, effectively the most important Cubist elements departed and the Group was dominated by those who shared Fry's admiration for Cézanne. According to Wilcox,

*The London Group no longer possessed an adequate cross-section of different styles and techniques. Fry's emphasis on Cézanne-inspired landscapes and still-lives was highly restrictive and artists who did not conform to this specific aesthetic became alienated and disheartened. The Group was no longer a home for all modern methods and it no longer sparkled with the excitement of experiment.*⁴⁴³

Heal's ledger of the Mansard Gallery exhibitions confirms that the London Group bi-annual shows were a considerable draw and initially attracted around 1300 visitors prepared to pay 8d for admission and a catalogue, and that usually around a dozen works were sold. The most successful show was that held in April 1919 which attracted 1362 visitors and 32 works were sold. This level of interest was maintained over the six shows held from 1917 through to the end of 1919. Thereafter attendances at the following 10 shows, held in the Gallery until 1924, whilst Roger Fry was fully in control, declined to about half the earlier level.

3.4.2. Group X

Group X was formed by Wyndham Lewis in March 1920 after he had left the London Group. Always a provocative personality, Wyndham Lewis had caused dissent within the London Group from its earliest days as *his doctrine of Vorticism was loud and intimidating and he was volatile and uncompromising*. In particular he disliked Roger Fry and it was inevitable that when he returned from the War to find Fry effectively in control of the London Group that a division would come about. Added to their personal enmity *was the old combatants disdain for and resentment of*

⁴⁴³ Denys J. Wilcox, *The London Group*, p 19.

*Bloomsbury's pacifism.*⁴⁴⁴

*Lewis's attitude towards the Bloomsbury artists and writers amounted to a loathing; an intensity of feeling beyond the rational...Lewis's own Vorticist doctrine was strictly opposed to Fry's Post-Impressionist leanings. Since Fry had taken hold of the London Group, Wyndham Lewis felt it necessary to create a new modernist group and one that would steal the limelight away from the already damaged London Group.*⁴⁴⁵

One Group X exhibition of painting and sculpture was held at the Mansard Gallery from 26 March to 24 April 1920 and that included work by Dismorr, Dobson, Etchells, Ginner, Hamilton, W. Lewis, Kauffer, Roberts, Turnbull and Wadsworth, which suggests that the modernist credentials of the site itself were not in question and neither was A.H.'s stewardship partial or partisan in this regard.⁴⁴⁶ It attracted 765 paying visitors and six works were sold, which in view of the uncompromising nature of the work must have been very satisfactory. But the group disbanded after the exhibition and there were no more shows, so that if the London Group's limelight was stolen for a while, Group X can hardly have been responsible for its longer term problems.

3.4.3. Other Exhibitions

Interspersed with the regular London Group shows were other one-off exhibitions. Straight after the first London Group show a sale of posters was held in June 1917 to raise money for the Royal Navy Comforts Fund. The posters were supplied free by London Underground with Heal's providing the Gallery and staff. £60 was raised in this way. That this might have been an attempt to balance out the London Group's anti-war stance is suggested by the fact that after the group's 1918 exhibition Heal's again were moved to put on an exhibition entitled *Efforts & Ideals in the Great War*

⁴⁴⁴ Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis, painter & writer*, Yale University Press, 2000.

⁴⁴⁵ Denys J. Wilcox. p 15.

⁴⁴⁶ See poster in archive, AAD/1986/1/7

at the beginning of 1919. This showed lithographs by eighteen different artists including Frank Brangwyn, Muirhead Bone, Augustus John and Ernest Jackson. Another one-off exhibition held in April 1921 was the 'Friday Club' show. Although the Friday Club had been organised in 1905 by Vanessa Bell, she had long since withdrawn, but in 1921 members replied to the call for artists to apply their skills to the 'things of everyday life' and put on an applied art display that included *Bernard Leach Pottery, painted tiles by MacDonald Gill, silk designs by C.R. Mackintosh, label and poster designs by Albert Rutherston, textile designs by Paul Nash and... a group of posters by Kauffer*.⁴⁴⁷ It attracted over one thousand visitors and twenty-eight works were sold.

3.4.4. Claud Lovat Fraser

A one-man show was mounted by A.H.'s friend, painter, illustrator and stage designer, Claud Lovat Fraser at the end of September 1919, attracting 735 visitors who acquired a total of 46 of his works. It included his designs for the stage set of *As You Like It*, prepared for another of A.H.'s friends, Nigel Playfair of the Hammersmith Lyric Theatre, *as well as other theatrical work, a few large paintings, black and white book decorations, drawings worked up from his Field Service notebooks, a few 'nervous cottages' and, for the first time, some nudes*.⁴⁴⁸ This exhibition could not be repeated as sadly Fraser died in 1921 aged 31. But before that, it did lead to Grace Lovat Fraser (his wife) organising a show of toys at the Gallery for Christmas 1920 for which her husband designed a bright, primary-coloured, poster.

3.4.5. French Art 1914-1919

However the highlight of 1919 was undoubtedly the Modern French Art exhibition which was the first post-war exhibition in England of works that were still profoundly shocking to the public at large. The idea for this exhibition came from

⁴⁴⁷ Mark Howarth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer a designer and his public*, V&A Publications, 2005, p 25.

⁴⁴⁸ Grace Lovat Fraser, *In The Days of my Youth*, p 260.

Sacheverell Sitwell who had met with Georges Braque and Amedeo Modigliani and seen the latest modern paintings in Paris in March 1919. Leopold Zborowski, who acted as agent for the artists, came to London at the end of May at Sachie's instigation and Zborowski, together with Sachie and his brother Osbert Sitwell, were responsible for the organisation of the show which was held in August. According to Sarah Bradford:

It was a hectic, last-minute operation; The paintings arrived in London by mid-July, but as Sachie told Arnold Bennett on 26 July ...there was a shortage of labour at the Gallery and they had not yet been unpacked. The hanging of the pictures became a social occasion in the Bloomsbury-Sitwell circle. Sachie, Osbert and Zborowski, helped by Roger Fry, sponsor of the two great Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912, supervised the hanging of the paintings; after dinner on the hot late July evenings, friends came in to watch from the Eiffel Tower and studios in Fitzroy Street nearby.⁴⁴⁹

There were works on display by Archipenko, Derain, Favory, Kisling, Krog, L'Hote, Matisse, Modigliani, Othon Friesz, Picasso, M. Russell, Utrillo, Valadon, Vlaminck, Wassilievna and Zadkine. A Modigliani drawing for example could have been bought for 2s 6d.⁴⁵⁰

Heal's sent out 4000 circulars and produced 550 posters to publicise the event (similarly for the Lovat Fraser exhibition that followed afterwards 5000 circulars and 600 posters were printed) but it seems most likely that it was the press coverage that resulted in an unprecedented influx of visitors to see what all the fuss was about.

The Times reviewer wrote a very acid review describing how he tottered from one 'ghastly' picture to another, and when he finally came to the end of the exhibition he looked up to see a notice that announced 'NO ESCAPE BY WAY OF ROOF'. Before panic set in, he realised the advice referred to fire and not artistic emergencies.⁴⁵¹

A total of 2453 people paid 1s 3d for a catalogue and to look at the show, in view of which the figure of eighteen works sold (for a total sum of £377) seems

⁴⁴⁹ Sarah Bradford, *Sacheverell Sitwell*, p 94. Was there really a shortage of labour or is this simply the result of a misunderstanding and an upper class assumption that doing the physical work was somebody else's job that would be carried out by minions?

⁴⁵⁰ Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, p 63.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*, p 63.

disappointing, particularly with the benefit of hindsight that assures us that any purchase made then would have been an exceptionally good investment!

3.4.6. Conclusion

It is noteworthy that after 1925 the exhibitions leaned increasingly towards the applied arts and thus more closely to Heal's usual merchandise. However fine art was still displayed and sometimes quirky shows were held (such as "Old Maps & Drinking Vessels" and "Old London Pots & Prints") that reflected A.H.'s antiquarian interests.⁴⁵² Even when the exhibitions were merchandise linked they still sought to show the out-of-the-ordinary, such as "Handwoven Textiles & Pots" and the latest developments in interior decorating at what became an annual show, entitled "Modern Tendencies". The Gallery was also the setting for the 1936 "Seven Architects" Modernist furniture exhibition. (These 'commercial' exhibitions are covered in more detail in a later section).

The financial arrangements for the exhibitions held by artists or groups of artists in the Mansard Gallery are not clear from the ledger. What seems to have happened is that, provided Heal recovered the publicity costs involved in producing leaflets and posters, he was satisfied. What is clear is that these exhibitions, which usually lasted a month, brought through the front door, and right up to the fourth floor of the shop, approximately a thousand people who might not otherwise have had any reason to enter a furniture shop.⁴⁵³ More importantly, because of the kind of art on display, they were probably discerning, forward-thinking people to whom Heal's modern furniture might well appeal. But the exhibitions did more than just draw in new potential customers. Because of the avant-garde nature of the art, Heal's image as the place for ground-breaking design was reinforced in the public perception. It was yet another demonstration of what the Heal lifestyle was about and formed another step in that blurring of the distinction between a retail shop that exists to sell you something and a museum or gallery, in which you are invited to browse without obligation for the purpose of education or entertainment. As Potts has observed the Mansard Gallery drew

⁴⁵² A.H. wrote an introduction entitled "Old Map Makers" for the map exhibition catalogue.

⁴⁵³ Sir Lawrence Weaver, admitted that although he had long known of Heal's and admired the products he had never entered the shop until taken by a friend to see an exhibition at the Mansard Gallery. See 3.3.1.7 Catalogues, Copy & Layout.

*commodities into the orbit of the art world and temporarily out of the commodity sphere. It was ostensibly a refuge to indulge in the illusion of further freedom from obligation. A further step in that process by which the whole shop, and not just the Gallery, was transmuted from commercial to art space.*⁴⁵⁴

Although some department stores had started to introduce picture galleries at the same period, the Mansard Gallery was unique in establishing such a strong reputation, in a highly critical milieu, that it was able to be perceived as an ‘independent’ art gallery and not just as a department within a furniture shop. This is surely a testimony to its standing at the time.

⁴⁵⁴ Tracey Potts, *Creating ‘Modern Tendencies’, the Symbolic Economics of Furnishing*, pp 168, 169.

3.5. Design Management – Democracy & Autocracy

3.5.1 Building the Team

To describe A.H. as a *benign dictator*⁴⁵⁵ is probably a fairly accurate assessment of the man, but at the same time an over-simplification of the management style applied at Tottenham Court Road before World War Two. Although it is known that he kept an eye on everything and would not tolerate slovenly work, it is obvious that there was scope for individual initiative resulting in a strong feeling of team spirit and corporate loyalty. Many of the staff shared his belief that the shop was more than just a place where goods were exchanged for money. They too believed it fulfilled an important didactic function and had a duty to improve the design of goods in our homes in line with the William Morris dictum. For his part A.H. demonstrated a liberal approach to his employees through a respect for the individual that was reflected for example in the introduction of democratic staff committees and plans for profit sharing before such ideas were commonplace. He understood that to sell expensive furniture to discerning well-to-do customers he needed staff who were equally intelligent and cultivated, capable of sharing his ideals. His Buyers and other senior staff were encouraged to be involved in trade bodies and committees outside the business and were thus trusted to represent the firm externally. Building the management team through key appointments was a crucial element in the firm's success; it was as important as the innovative design policy, and is therefore important to record. It also serves as a reminder that, although this study is entitled "A Review of the Work of Sir Ambrose Heal", he was not working alone but was the captain of a talented team whose contribution should not be ignored.

No records of his employment policies survive as hiring and firing was a personal matter. However, Dodie Smith has left a description of her job interview with A.H. in 1924, from which it is evident that personal chemistry was more important than knowledge and relevant experience:

⁴⁵⁵ Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, p 111.

Gradually I noticed the conversation was settling into a pattern. If I showed eagerness for the job, he retreated, said it really didn't seem as if I had the necessary qualifications; whereas if I expressed doubts of myself, he assured me they could be overcome. Thus, when we were discussing the making out of bills for customers, I said I wasn't good at arithmetic and he instantly countered with, 'Well, I could instruct the cashier to check your addition for you.'

Eventually he called his colleague, Hamilton Temple Smith, to come and *take a look at her* and whilst this inspection was taking place A.H. assured HTS

*That I had practically none of the qualifications needed for the job, that engaging me was the barest possibility...He was still continuing in this strain when he courteously showed me out of the shop. But I was ninety per cent certain the job would be offered to me, as it was. I received the offer two days later.*⁴⁵⁶

It was only much later that staff handbooks were developed as in the early days there was no equivalent of the modern Human Resources department (surely A.H. would have guffawed at such a euphemism!). The early employment records that survive are incomplete but they suffice to give a glimpse of the sort of paternalistic attitude of the Victorian era with which A.H. would have been raised. For example the staff record book (circa 1865-1890) notes dryly a number of employees *discharged* by Mr Brewer for no given reason in 1869 although one, Chas. Chaplin, packer, was discharged for slackness, to which a note has been added – *but rather inclined to drink*. Whoever kept the ledger occasionally added such comments of their own that give a human touch to the harsh reality of employment at those times. Another employee, Isaac Karr, who was discharged in 1867 *for having a piece of damask found on him* was thought to have *evidently gone queer in his mind*. But the dismissal of two employees, Huggins and Sullivan, by John Harris Heal junior in 1866 *for being found idle in flock loft* attracted open criticism as the clerk has *noted but I think rather a hasty judgement as they could not get to work.*⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁶ Dodie Smith, *Look Back with Mixed Feelings*, W.H. Allen, 1978, p 275.

⁴⁵⁷ Staff Record Book ca 1865-1890-1906, AAD/1994/16/1198.

3.5.2. Management Appointments

Ambrose Heal senior, A.H.'s father, who played a key role in the resuscitation of the business following the retirement of Alfred Brewer in 1894, was evidently a shrewd business man and a good judge of character. He acquired the British patent rights developed by John Staples to improve the support of springs in upholstery in 1895 and put his second son Harold in charge of building up an independent bedding factory using these patents – Staples & Co. Around this, Harold, despite apparently being an awkward character, created a very successful business.

3.5.2.1. J.F. Johnson (1874-1957)



Fig. 3-12. J.F. Johnson, furniture buyer in old age.

Another of Ambrose senior's good decisions was the appointment of J.F. Johnson as bedroom furniture buyer in 1897 (at a salary of £6 per month). This was evidently a deliberate long-term decision to rebuild the firm's trade in cabinet furniture and to invest in the necessary stock and staff to make it work. The results were spectacular with cabinet furniture sales increasing by four and a half times between 1895 and 1900. The other equally significant part of this decision was the recruitment, in the same year, of C.V. Adams to set up and run the Cabinet Factory (at a salary of £10 per month) whose role has already been discussed earlier (see Chapter 2.2).

Johnson stayed on running the retail cabinet furniture department for many years, developing his own designs partly in a style inspired by Ruhlman after the 1925 Paris exhibition, and interpreting the Heal philosophy to furniture manufacturers keen to sell their wares through Tottenham Court Road. Born in Leicestershire he had been apprenticed to a cabinet maker in the West of England aged fourteen. There he had also taken evening classes in design at the local art school, and later he had learned the retail side of the trade in Plymouth before moving North to Hull to gain more experience. This practical experience in all aspects of the trade made him well suited for the crucial role of cabinet furniture buyer and he worked alongside A.H. until they were both old men.⁴⁵⁸

Dodie Smith wrote of her first meeting with him:

*Mr Johnson's attitude towards his chief seemed to me a mixture of affection, admiration and amused irritation. 'Can't keep a thing away from him. Turns up when you least expect him and you never hear him coming. And hard to please! Never satisfied.' ...Mr Johnson told various stories in which Mr Heal emerged as far more formidable than I had imagined him to be.*⁴⁵⁹

David Joel records that Johnson was *universally respected as the doyen of London buyers. His knowledge and taste did much for the development of well-designed furniture.*⁴⁶⁰ In the 1920s he was the highest-paid member of staff and the only one who could afford to run a motorcar.⁴⁶¹ He appears to have carried on working in some capacity until he died in 1957 after 59 years service.

An indication of the respect that A.H. had for his employees may be inferred from the fact that Johnson's furniture designs were credited to him publicly at the time. Most companies even today would not credit by name an employee who was a designer but hide his identity as part of an in-house design team. Examples of JFJ's work can be seen in fig.s 2-153, 2-156, 2-166, 2-167, 2-176, 2-229.

⁴⁵⁸ Interview with J.F. Johnson, *The Furniture Journal*, 15.03.1923.

⁴⁵⁹ Dodie Smith, *Look Back in Astonishment*, p 7.

⁴⁶⁰ David Joel, *Furniture Design Set Free*, Dent, 1969, p 92.

⁴⁶¹ Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, p 56.

3.5.2.2. Ralph Heal (1882 -1931)

Following the death of Harris Heal (A.H.'s uncle and at the time senior partner in the firm) in 1906 the business was turned from a Partnership to a Private Limited Company of which Ambrose Heal senior was the first chairman with his sons, A.H. and Ralph, as joint-managing directors. Ralph's responsibilities would appear to have been for the maintenance of the premises, the despatch department and the running of the traditional heart of the business, the Bedding Factory.

Ambrose Heal senior died in 1913, and Ralph took a Commission in the Army in 1915 leaving A.H., who had become Chairman on his father's death, as the only full-time working Director, supported on a part-time basis by his cousin Maurice Brewer, a chartered accountant. It is understandable therefore that at this juncture, when they were also busy rebuilding and expanding the business, that A.H. felt the need to strengthen the management team by recruiting from outside. Two key appointments were made which provided A.H. with his closest collaborators for the rest of his career – Hamilton Temple Smith and Prudence Maufe.

Although Ralph returned to the firm in 1919 he died in 1931 before reaching the age of fifty, suggesting he was weakened by the war, and Maurice Brewer committed suicide in 1925, so that these new appointments became even more crucial to A.H.

3.5.2.3. Hamilton Temple Smith (1883 – 1961)

HTS as he was known in the firm was a skilled cabinet maker and furniture designer who was working at 110 Chenies Mews, just a couple of blocks away from Tottenham Court Road, before World War One. A.H. and he probably got to know each other through the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society where they had both displayed furniture. In 1912 for example HTS exhibited a walnut sideboard and an oak cabinet at the Society's 10th exhibition. Following the financial failure of that exhibition, they both were involved with Harold Stabler in putting forward proposals to *reconstruct the Arts & Crafts* in late 1913 that *grew out of the irritating self satisfaction & conservatism of the Arts & Crafts Society*. Their intention was to cut

the artiness out of our Craft Education & get down to the sounder essentials...demanded by commerce. These proposals were turned down but led, in due course, to the setting up of the Design & Industries Association.⁴⁶²

Although HTS joined Heal's in 1915 it seems probable that he had been collaborating with A.H. before this for, as early as 12th March 1915, they submitted a joint patent application for their unit furniture system (see Key Suppliers, Shapland & Petter). For it to have been fully developed by this stage suggests that initial design work and discussions to resolve the problems must have commenced in 1914. Judging from the photographs of the resulting furniture Smith's design input was considerable. Evidently A.H. discovered in HTS someone with similar ideas to himself with whom he could work closely.

HTS joined the business as Sales Manager but was elected a Director, still responsible for sales management, in January 1919, a position he held until he retired in 1954. He seems to have complemented a rather gruff, antisocial A.H. perfectly, becoming his right hand man. Within Heal's he was the link between the staff and the Directors, being the first chairman of the Fourposter Committee in 1918 when this body was set up at his initiative to encourage staff input on day-to-day problems. But he also played a major role outside the confines of the business becoming in a number of instances its public face to the trade.

He was elected a member of the Art Workers Guild in 1915 and served on its committee for a number of years, even becoming Master in 1939. He was in at the birth of the Design & Industries Association for as Harold Stabler wrote, when he started trying to lobby for the establishment of such an organisation in 1914: *The first person I went to see was HTS & I asked him if he would act as Secretary. The next was Ambrose...*⁴⁶³ As is known HTS and Cecil Brewer (A.H.'s architect cousin) became joint secretaries of the new body whilst A.H. was its first treasurer. This concentration of influence seems to have led to disquiet, or jealousy, elsewhere that must have been particularly voiced by Harry Peach. What Peach wrote is not known

⁴⁶² Harold Stabler letter to Peach *Story of Foundation of DIA*, 29.11.1925, RIBA Archive, Peach Papers.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

but HTS's reply was furiously indignant about the *twaddle you have written* and states that he was determined to keep politics out of the DIA . He continued:

*You are completely ignorant of what my political views may be, because I have always kept them out of the way, and whatever influence I have in the DIA is going to be devoted to seeing that other people keep this out of the way too. He ended the letter: I don't think you need be so despairing about the DIA. Some of us are putting in a good deal of constructive work of several kinds; as I said before I wish to God you'd let us get on with it, instead of standing around sneering at our supposed shortcomings.*⁴⁶⁴

Peach was evidently inclined to complain as a few years later H.P. Shapland (by then Chairman of the DIA) was moved to write to him:

*The habit you have of writing to correspondents bewailing the fact that everything is bad is in itself a very bad habit...A constant voicing of the fact that everything in England is beneath contempt and the suggestion that the DIA is not very flourishing is, I think, dangerous.*⁴⁶⁵

But in that immediate post-war period Peach found a powerful ally in Frank Pick who pushed through a plan to reorganise the DIA. Pick proposed to Peach that HTS should become Vice-Chairman because:

- a) *He has worked very hard.*
- b) *He belongs to the group most critical of our reorganisation.*
- c) *He seems a hardworking person.*

Peach's reply reveals that his underlying concern is really the concentration of power at Heal's (even though by that stage Cecil Brewer had died) as he states bluntly:

*I feel DIA wants to be a little further away from Tottenham Ct Rd excellent though HTS is.*⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Hamilton Temple Smith letter to Harry Peach, 17.02.1919. RIBA archive, Peach papers.

⁴⁶⁵ H.P. Shapland letter to Harry Peach, 26.11.1923. RIBA archive, Peach papers.

⁴⁶⁶ F. Pick letter to H. Peach, 09.10.1920, and reply H. Peach to F. Pick, 11.10.1920. RIBA archive, Peach papers.

Despite this, by 1922 HTS was Vice-Chairman of the DIA, under the Chairmanship of Frank Pick, and although A.H. remained on the Committee he was no longer Hon. Treasurer as C.H. St. John Hornby had taken his place. So Peach partially got his way.

Under the Chairmanship of Percy Best from Shoolbreds, HTS was elected to the Council of the Association of Retail Distributors in 1924, thereby representing Heal's amongst the department and multiple store professionals and confirming the Company's high standing by then. In 1936 he was elected to the Council of the Retail Trading Standards Association.

His personality can be glimpsed from the report of a lecture he gave at Caxton Hall in 1922 entitled 'The Curse of Work' in which he stated that

*Work was one of the very few forms of pleasure which do not have to be paid for very dearly in the long run.*⁴⁶⁷

Much the same slightly puritanical outlook can be found in his reaction to the 1925 Paris Exhibition which may be taken to reflect Heal's policy towards furnishing at that time. He suggested that the French were designing impractical furniture only suitable for millionaires, in implied contrast to Heal's who were supplying practical furniture for the middle-classes. He wrote of the French furniture:

... the imagination boggles at the amount of money making it and...the variety of artistic skill, fresh vigorous and capable...the French is a school of designers of almost diabolical cleverness, supported by workman of great manual dexterity.

*Gimson and Barnsley designed in wood, Ruhlmann and Maurice Dufresne design on paper.*⁴⁶⁸

In an article published in *The Times* some eleven years later, under the title

⁴⁶⁷ Report in *The Cabinet Maker*, 04.02.1922.

⁴⁶⁸ Hamilton Temple Smith, *The Paris Exhibition*, Furnishing Trades Organiser, October 1925.

Craftsmanship in Furniture, the Snare of False Values, he reflected on design developments of the period from which one can see the same Heal policy of integrity and practical need continued to be paramount. He wrote:

*...any self conscious striving to evolve a style in one's own time is sentimental and futile...by observing the degree of integrity which a designer brings to their solution (to the problem they are confronting) we stand the best chance of guessing what will be his standing in the eyes of posterity. ... "sham modern" is now as plentiful as "sham antique" was twenty years ago.*⁴⁶⁹

His precise and analytical mind was applied constantly to the day-to-day problems of running a furnishing business and finding practical solutions. As all letters from customers concerning faults in merchandise had to cross his desk he devised a number of standard replies for salesmen to use so that a consistently high level was maintained. *That dealing with 'sticky drawers' was a classic and much in demand. He was a brilliant letter writer. Along with A.H. he was particularly punctilious in insisting on good grammar and conciseness. Beware the split infinitive, the unrelated participle and ending the sentence with a preposition.*⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Hamilton Temple Smith, *Craftsmanship in Furniture, the Snare of False Values*, The Times, 03.03.1936.

⁴⁷⁰ Reg B. Higgs, *Memories of Heal's*, undated, unpublished typescript, author's collection.

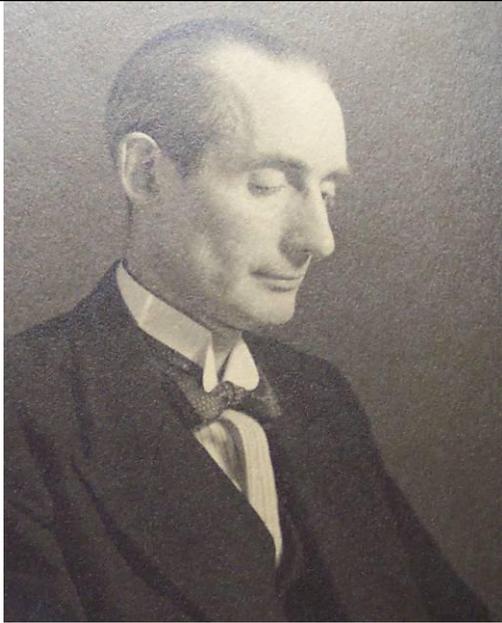


Fig. 3-13. HTS, Master of the Art Workers' Guild 1939 (AWG Library collection)



Fig. 3-14. Chair in English walnut with rosewood edgings by HTS. (AWG Library collection)



Fig. 3-15. Cabinet designed by HTS (unidentified cutting AWG collection)



Fig. 3-16. Stationery cabinet in English walnut and English cedar by HTS (AWG Library collection)

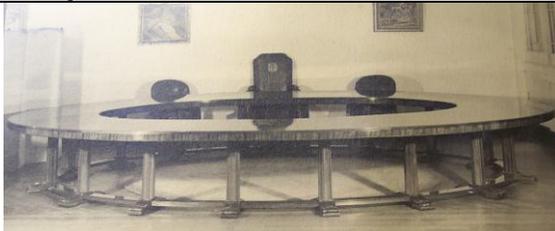


Fig. 3-17. Designed by HTS for Heal's, in Lagos mahogany to divide into 6 separate tables (AWG Library collection)

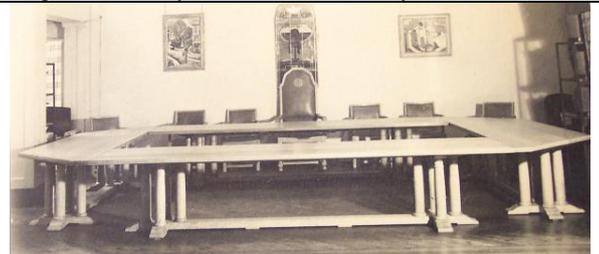


Fig. 3-18. Designed by HTS for Heal's. Set of four tables in English oak. (AWG Library collection)

3.5.2.4. Prudence Maufe (1884 – 1976)

If Hamilton Temple Smith was A.H.'s right hand man, then Prudence Maufe was his right hand woman. Her influence was perhaps more discreet but her closeness to him made it all the more powerful. She became A.H.'s lover soon after joining the business.

She joined the firm in 1915 as Adviser on Interior Decoration, a role that she fulfilled until 1939 when she was appointed as the first female Director of the Company. As an Interior Decorator she not only assisted the General Salesmen with advice to customers but also she was responsible for the furnishings displayed in the Mansard Flat on the top floor of the Heal's building and was therefore intimately involved in the promotional image projected by the firm. Many of the special displays mounted there were no doubt instigated and organised by her.

Born Gladys Evelyn Prudence Stutchbury she married the architect Edward Maufe (later Sir Edward) in 1910. Dodie Smith, who worked with her in the 1920s, described her as

*... an unusually beautiful woman, tall, classically featured, with fair hair but untinged by gold, which she wore parted down the middle and twice swathed round her head before being made into an enormous bun. I once saw it down and it actually reached the floor. She dressed in a style of her own, but that so often fatal phrase does not mean she looked arty. Her clothes were too good for that. Like mine they were tight-bodied and full-skirted but, unlike mine, they reached to the ground. Also unlike mine, they were of beautiful materials and very well made, often by Parisian houses which specialised in "robes de style". They were perfect for her...From the beginning she was extremely kind to me.*⁴⁷¹

The memories of another member of staff, Reg Higgs, portray her as slightly more

⁴⁷¹ Dodie Smith, *Look Back with Astonishment*, p 5.

frightening:

*Mrs Maufe was a formidable lady who wore distinctive black clothes and high heeled buckled shoes (she was short in stature). ...She was the arbiter of good taste and design. She could be appealed to in devising a colour scheme and sometimes she entertained customers passing them over to a salesman to execute any order forthcoming. As a newcomer to Heal's she would freeze one with an icy stare if she had the slightest cause to disapprove of one. When she eventually accepted you as a worthy member of the staff she could be very gracious and kindness itself.*⁴⁷²

As an Interior Decorator she was active well before the two major influential females of that trade, Syrie Maugham and Lady Sybil Colefax.⁴⁷³ She was amongst the finalists for a DIA printed fabric design competition in 1918. She had views about everything but little record of these has survived.⁴⁷⁴ However she did write an article for *The English Review* (c 1922) entitled *The Modern Home – Colour and Decoration*, from which her views on decoration can be gleaned:

The function of modern house decoration is to allow us to live with our surroundings on terms of intimacy, peace, efficiency, and beauty, and not on terms of subservience. Thus nearly all modern decoration consists of the art of selection and arrangement, not of ornament applied or devised.

In pleading for simplicity and the use of *colour in plain masses* she paraphrased Adolf Loos who had argued, *as long ago as 1909, ...that as a rough generalization, the further people advanced in civilization, the less need they had for ornament.* Prudence Maufe's view on colour was that lightness was paramount yet

to use white paint now, indiscriminately, in our post-war houses is very often an error...to have to sleep in a perfectly white bedroom is most disconcerting, and it is found more comfortable to have a darkish ceiling and unreflective paint...Doors should be treated as far as possible as parts of the walls, not as holes or pieces of furniture...Skirtings seem best in dark colours or a good

⁴⁷² Reginald B. Higgs, *Memories of Heal's*, undated typescript, author's collection.

⁴⁷³ According to Anne Massey, Colefax had turned from life as London hostess to become a professional decorator in 1933, after losing money in the Wall Street crash. A. Massey, *Interior Design of the 20th Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2001, p133.

⁴⁷⁴ In a conversation with the author about Prudence Maufe, Anthony Heal recalled that she had told him that as a child she had been encouraged to contribute to adult conversations and been expected to have a sound opinion about all sorts of topics.

black.

From the viewpoint of the twenty-first century where collector's are delighted by the charms of Arts & Crafts furniture it is instructive to note how out of fashion certain of the more quaint elements had become by the 1920s. Maufe wrote:

So the principle is evolved that the things which last the longest should be the best and the simplest. Furniture lasts for many generations; it should be chosen with great care and it should have no marked eccentricities such as characterized so many otherwise good pieces of furniture only twenty years ago. Most people can remember a perfect epidemic of hollow hearts fretted in the sustaining splats of chairs and bedsteads. After the hearts there came the diamonds, and there are still many examples to be seen of otherwise excellent, craftsman-like furniture riddled with these tokens. ...what a curious state of sentimentality our parents must have passed through to tolerate these ridiculous ornaments. Let us avoid these traps.

In view of the fact A.H. had used both hearts and diamonds as decorative features this was quite strong criticism.

Because of the relatively short lifespan of curtains this was an area where: *...we may well depart from austerity – allow ourselves to be frivolous even. ...a certain amount of latitude can be given to one's tastes or eccentricities.*

She concluded by explaining that as one considered all the possibilities of an interior decoration scheme by taking into account the personality of the client, the character of the house, the relationship of the different rooms and what could and what could not be changed, combined with the budget allocated;

*one realizes that there is really very little doubt as to how to treat the house, inevitableness settles over one. This inevitableness is stronger than oneself; it possesses the decorator...Originality comes naturally into existence by the fact that no two houses can be alike...to search for originality is deliberately to avoid doing the best obviously possible. ...Our aim should rather be, in its largest sense, the efficiency of beauty, the beauty of efficiency, in the arrangement and colour of our houses.*⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁵ G.S.M. *The Modern Home II – Colour and Decoration*, The English Review, reprinted by the

Although it is not known what training Prudence Maufe had had, she was interviewed by *Pall Mall* about the job of the Woman House Decorator at which point she recommended that women considering the position should have: *two years in trade school learning the practical side then experience in an architect's office.*

It was a job that required more than just good taste:

*Psychology is an important factor in house decorating...the work is suited for a well-educated woman, one who is accustomed to a good standard of living and having beautiful things about her.*⁴⁷⁶

If some of the inspiration for the appointment of Prudence Maufe may have resulted from the creation by the French fashion designer, Paul Poiret, of an interior decoration studio in Paris in 1912, it would appear that her appointment pre-dated the setting up of interior decorating departments in the big Parisian department stores Bon Marché and Galeries Lafayette in the early twenties. However the idea of the 'ensemblier' was coming to the fore at this period and *in the years preceding the First World War interior decoration emerged as an acceptable new profession for women*, led by the American pioneers Elsie de Wolfe and Nancy McClelland (who established the decorating section for Wanamakers department store, New York, in 1913).⁴⁷⁷

As can be seen from Maufe's writing she was more inclined to austerity than excesses of luxury and she was responsible for giving a 'Heal look' to the Art Deco and Moderne tendencies of the times. Remaining mostly behind the scenes she did not have the society profile of Syrie Maugham but responded to the latter's influential 'All White' interior (c 1929-30) with Heal's 'White and Off-White' exhibition in 1933, having already produced a 'Silver & Green' theme in 1930, followed by 'Greens of the Earth' in 1934 and the 'Silver Theme in Furnishing & Decoration' in 1935.

As her husband's reputation as an architect of churches grew, so she was able to complement his buildings with altar cloths, kneelers etc., and these ecclesiastical

Design & Industries Association, c1922.

⁴⁷⁶ *Pall Mall* magazine, *Mrs Maufe – The Woman House Decorator*, 25.04.1922.

⁴⁷⁷ Anne Massey, *Interior Design of 20th Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2001, pp 96, 123, 131.

contracts provided a useful, if little-known, adjunct to Heal's trade. Whilst because of this background and her responsibility for glamorous exhibitions such as "White and Off-White" she is not thought of as having embraced Modernism when it arrived. However it is perhaps noteworthy that she was the only representative of the Heal firm to attend the farewell dinner organised for Walter Gropius in 1937.⁴⁷⁸

But Prudence Maufe's contribution to the Heal business was not only as a decorator. Her interest in the welfare of the staff was a key motivating factor and an area where she is known to have made notable contributions. She was involved with the Fourposter Committee acting as Secretary for a period but she was also behind a scheme to permit staff to buy shares in the firm on advantageous terms in 1932. A.H. in announcing this scheme to the staff said that its existence was entirely due to her *perception and pertinacity*.⁴⁷⁹

She finally retired as a Director in 1961 after 45 years' service. Anthony Heal remarked at the time: *Through her taste and discernment she has left her mark upon our business*.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁸ Farewell dinner for W. Gropius, 09.03.1937. at Trocadero restaurant. Guest list (each paid 25s) reproduced in David Dean, *The Thirties: Recalling the English Architectural Scene*, Trefoil Books, 1983, p 136.

⁴⁷⁹ A.H. statement to employee applicants for H&S shares January 1932. £1 shares could be purchased for 11s 3d with payment spread over three years. AAD/1994/16/1481.

⁴⁸⁰ Anthony Heal, report to shareholders, AGM 1962.



Fig. 3-19. Prudence Maufe photographed for an article in *The Queen* , 10 February 1926, in “The Mansard Flat” on the 4th floor of the Heal shop which she decorated regularly. The article was entitled *Colour in the Home, The Views of an Expert*. Note sideboard no. ‘670’ in background first designed in 1912 still available for sale in 1926.(AAD).



Fig. 3-20. Close up of PM from *The Queen*, 10.02.1926. (AAD).

3.5.2.5. Arthur Greenwood (c.1900-1990)

Arthur Greenwood joined Heal's as a young man in 1916 and worked there for his entire career as a furniture designer. Although not one of the front line members of staff his close involvement with the development of A.H.'s designs means that his contribution was crucial, but largely unrecognized.

Reg Higgs who worked as a general salesman at Heal's, explained the vital role played by the Drawing Office, in the person of Arthur Greenwood, in obtaining orders from clients. The salesman's success depended on his ability to understand his customer's needs and if those could not be met immediately from existing models he had to have the experience and knowledge to be able to suggest creating something especially to fit the bill. This was the point at which he would call on Greenwood.

Greenwood was a superb designer and a most accomplished draughtsman. He also had a complete understanding of the techniques of cabinet making. He would listen sympathetically to one's suggestion of a particular design, possibly a variant of an existing design or an adaptation of several. Unlike many talented people he manifested no resentment as well he might, at developing someone else's ideas, or a new concept.

He would make a rough sketch, often in one's presence and would pass this to the Cabinet Office who would send it to the factory, or an outside manufacturer for an estimate. Within 3 or 4 days the salesman would receive a finished drawing and an estimate to send to the customer while matters were fresh in all minds. I would hazard that as much as 25% of a general salesman's return resulted from this procedure. ...In my opinion Arthur Greenwood was a genius to whom Heal's owes a great deal.⁴⁸¹

A.H. used Greenwood's skill to develop his own designs. Charles Gage, who worked with Greenwood after WWII, recorded Greenwood's memories of how they operated and Greenwood's feeling that, even if according to Higgs he showed no resentment,

⁴⁸¹ Reginald B. Higgs, *Memories of Heal's*, undated typescript, author's collection.

he clearly felt his contribution was undervalued by the business:

*He would tell us often how Ambrose would produce tiny neat little drawings, often on the backs of envelopes, for the Greenwood pencil to resolve into the working drawings necessary for the furniture to be made. ...A.G. always resented that all the credit was given to Ambrose and little if any to Arthur!*⁴⁸²

Although it is now not possible to judge what input to A.H.'s designs Arthur Greenwood made, there were however a number of pieces of furniture where he is credited as designer, so his contribution was not entirely unrecognized. (See Figs 2-170 & 2-171.)

3.5.2.6. Harry Trethowan (1884 – 1960)

Trethowan was responsible over many years, not only for running the china and glass department as the buyer, but also for display throughout the shop.

A Cornishman by birth, he had been apprenticed to Criddle & Smith, the “Complete House Furnishers” of Truro, where he stayed for 16 years, before moving to London to join Heal's.⁴⁸³ He arrived in 1913, some three years after the China department had been set up as a separate section within the firm. When the “Fourposter Committee”, the staff consultative body, was set up in 1918, he was a founding member and the first Honorary Secretary. After WWII he was appointed a Director of Heal's Wholesale & Export Ltd.

Dodie Smith who knew him in the mid-twenties commented that although

*... he had a tendency to be pompous. ...as well as being a clever Buyer, he had a staggering talent for display. He did all the shop windows and, indeed, the display all over the whole building*⁴⁸⁴

Outside the business he was elected Vice-President of the China & Glass Retailers Association in 1927 and in 1938 became President of the National Display Association. He had been a member of the display committee for the first Dorland

⁴⁸² See Charles Gage, *Arthur Greenwood, (c. 1900-1990), An Evocation*, Heal's People in Retirement, June 1990.

⁴⁸³ Furnishing Trades Organizer, May 1927.

⁴⁸⁴ Dodie Smith, *Look Back in Astonishment*, W.H. Allen, 1979.

Hall Exhibition of industrial art along with Wells Coates, Oliver Hill and Oswald Milne in 1933. *The Furniture Record* reported that in a speech entitled *Selling Through the Window*, he put forward some of his favourite maxims, such as:

- *Do not fill your windows as though they were warehouses.*
- *Do not use fatuous trade phrases which the public can see through.*
- *Do not have a lure in your window which cannot be backed up by merchandise inside.*

He concluded that windowdressers should *speak plainly, speak truthfully and speak often!*⁴⁸⁵

He retired to Cornwall in 1953 where he died, aged 76, in 1960.

3.5.3 Consultation, Shared Aims & Loyalty

Hamilton Temple Smith, Prudence Maufe, J.F. Johnson, Harry Trethowan, and Arthur Greenwood were key contributors to the success of Heal's before WWII and formed the top of the staff pyramid, no doubt influencing, to a greater or lesser extent A.H.'s management policies. But within the business there were many others who were also equally committed to the ideals that A.H. was pursuing and it is interesting to examine what staff policies contributed to the creation of this corporate loyalty. No doubt much of the feeling of a common sense of purpose stemmed from a shared belief in the desire to improve the design of goods in people's homes during that period and this merchandise policy is examined in a subsequent chapter. However the Heal business was also out of the ordinary because of its approach to its employees as well. The Fourposter Committee was set up in September 1918 (at the instigation of Hamilton Temple Smith) and met monthly *to discuss simplification of work and any other matters appertaining to the general conduct and welfare of the staff*. This was at a period when, elsewhere, the old autocratic style of management still survived. John Lewis, for example, faced with a strike of four-fifths of his staff demanding *more pay, for permission to leave the shop during meal breaks, and for more democracy in living-in arrangements*, in 1920, promptly sacked them and the

⁴⁸⁵ Furniture Record, 28.08.1936, report of lecture by Mr Harry Trethowan at Balliol Hall.

jobs were re-filled by others.⁴⁸⁶ The idea that employees might contribute to the way in which the business was run was still strange to many employers who still shared the beliefs of Blundell Maple, whose political philosophy was described as *his inflexible faith in the government of the masses by Gentlemen*, and they no doubt ran their businesses in a similar fashion.⁴⁸⁷

At Heal's the Fourposter Committee was initially limited to senior members of staff but in early 1924 a Staff Committee was formed to represent all selling and administrative staff through annually elected members of different constituencies. This was the basis for ensuring all staff had a voice in the way the business was run and encouraged the feeling of identification with the firm.

A few years later profit sharing schemes were under consideration but these do not appear to have come to fruition as the economic crisis of the early thirties then hit home. Susanna Goodden records that by 1931 things had got so bad that A.H. had to reduce all staff salaries by 10%. As he sat down at the end of the meeting with the entire staff to announce that, unless salaries were cut, there would have to be redundancies: *all the staff rose and clapped – clapped the prospect of a pay cut!*⁴⁸⁸ This may be seen as a measure of the extent to which staff felt a common destiny with the health of the business. However the archives reveal that he addressed the whole staff on 7th November 1938 to propose economy measures and referred then to *all of us (except the lowest scales) having taken a 10% cut in salaries* in July of that year so it seems more probable that, what Goodden refers to, happened at this later meeting. A.H. explained then that sales had dropped badly in 1937 and dropped further in 1938: *we have got to pay our way and this cannot be done at present expenditure levels...I do not forget how we have pulled through difficult times before.* This time it seems that in order to avoid redundancies, four weeks unpaid holidays

⁴⁸⁶ Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in Style*, Thames & Hudson, 1979, p 179.

It should be noted however that at the same time, John Lewis's son, Spedan Lewis was running Peter Jones, then a separate business, where he was already putting into practice some of his ideas, such as profit sharing, that would lead to the John Lewis Partnership being set up in 1929 after the death of John Lewis.

⁴⁸⁷ Hugh Barty-King, *Maples – Fine Furnishers*, Quiller Press, 1992 p 41, quoting from *Vanity Fair*.

⁴⁸⁸ Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, Heal & Son, 1984, p 76. Goodden also relates how *a messenger appeared in the middle of the meeting with a telegram for Ambrose announcing that his mother had died.* This cannot be correct as his mother did not die until 1938 and the story must relate to the later meeting, which tends to confirm the 1931 date is incorrect.

were to be taken.⁴⁸⁹

Ralph Heal, AH's brother, died in 1931 and, at the suggestion of Prudence Maufe, employees were given the opportunity to acquire his shareholding on advantageous terms in 1932 (the price of the shares had slumped and they were given the facility to pay over three years), thereby making a number of them not only employees but part proprietors as well and reinforcing the feeling of shared destiny. Applications for a total of £4000 worth of shares were received, which AH remarked was a *very fine sum considering the hard times we are going through...we are all in it together, according to our means, sink or swim.*⁴⁹⁰

This chapter seeks to demonstrate that part of the success of the Heal business was due to an unusual approach to man management that was out of the ordinary for the period. In order to sell unusual products to a discerning public A.H. had understood that the traditional servility of shop staff was an inadequate response. What was required were individuals of intelligence and initiative in order to provide the necessary degree of commitment and share a sense of purpose. Although there is no doubt that Ambrose Heal senior had also been a caring employer in a paternalistic way and that A.H. followed in this tradition, it appears that the development of management through care and respect for individuals was strongly influenced between the Wars by both Hamilton Temple Smith and Prudence Maufe. The three of them were responsible for creating a sense of corporate unity in which individuals were valued. The outward expression of this was that they were allowed to dress as they thought fit and were not constrained to the then traditional shopwalkers' dress of tailcoat and striped trousers. *The Drapers Organizer* reporting on the opening of the new shop building in 1917 was struck by the difference to normal stores by remarking on:

...a curious and interesting feature of this business is the apparent absence of salesmen and saleswomen. They are there to be sure but engagingly

⁴⁸⁹ A.H., manuscript of address to the whole staff, 07.11.1938. AAD/1994/16/1481.

⁴⁹⁰ A.H., manuscript of statement to employee applicants for shares in Heal & Son, January 1932. AAD/1994/16/1481.

*unobtrusive*⁴⁹¹

Anthony Heal later summed up the essence of the policy when addressing new buyers, instructing them to:

*Treat all your staff as intelligent people, don't talk down to them, be prepared always to listen to their problems and suggestions, and, do as you would be done by. A Manager is in a position where he will gain respect only if he deserves it. ...Keep your staff informed, consult them on matters that effect them, respect their point of view and give them the lead they require.*⁴⁹²

However it is clear that, at the same time, the directing triumvirate of Heal, Smith and Maufe were slightly intimidating characters who were held in respect and awe. This was not a cosy, democratic, cooperative. As Arthur Greenwood made clear, A.H. was quite capable of being ruthless and rude to get his way and Reg Higgs recalled the punctiliousness of A.H. and H.T.S.⁴⁹³ Even J.F. Johnson pointed out that A.H. was *hard to please! Never satisfied*. And therefore a hard task master. In order to achieve the standards they required to set the Heal business apart and impose their views on design they needed to be singularly determined.

⁴⁹¹ Press cuttings book, Drapers Organizer, 1917.

⁴⁹² Anthony S. Heal, *Talk to New Buyers/Managers*, undated typescript, author's collection.

⁴⁹³ See Introduction, *Who was Ambrose Heal?* p 2.

3.6 Middle Class Merchandise – the Philosophy & Practice

This section examines the philosophy that lay behind the work of A.H. in building up a unique, very distinctive, furnishing emporium, and also traces some of the merchandising and promotional activities that helped to create the strength of its reputation.

3.6.1. Design & Trading Philosophy

Although A.H. wrote little about his own work there are two published documents that appear to have been overlooked so far by historians which do give a guide to his personal design philosophy. The first, entitled *Fitness in Furniture* was written in the early years of the Design and Industries Association when it was run by a little group of people around A.H.'s office. The second was published in the *Furnishing Trades Organiser* in July 1920 under the title *On Furnishing a Small House*. A third, previously unpublished document adds further detail.

Fitness in Furniture appeared in the D.I.A. Journal (April 1918) and underlined A.H.'s belief that the public should insist on buying well-made furniture and not be fobbed off with a style based on *picturesqueness...custom and sentiment*:

There is a demand for the plain, straightforward, stoutly made, properly planned and thoroughly useful in furniture and the shopman must be brought to see that we will no longer be satisfied with a style if that style does not conform first and foremost to our ideas of fitness for use. If we get that essential, pleasant proportion and beauty of line will follow...it will be found that simple design and plain shapes will demand good workmanship and sound materials.

He sought to define in practical terms how “fitness” could be judged:

...ask whether the sideboards are of the right dimensions to hold our belongings. Are the drawers and cupboards of a convenient size? Do they accommodate the folded table cloth and the wine bottle? Do our bookcase doors keep out dust – are the shelves at the right height? Are our tables rigid and do they give plenty of leg room? Are the wardrobes planned to take our

dresses and shirts, do washstands permit of reasonable ablutions?

He argued that if the public were to insist on these functional standards and also to demand

*That the making should show an honest pride of workmanship and the materials [be] carefully selected for their purpose. Our furniture will then look right and be right.*⁴⁹⁴

It is evident from any study of A.H.'s furniture that he was inspired by historical precedents so it is interesting that he confirmed, in an article entitled *On Furnishing a Small House*, the importance of the past to his work, albeit in a convoluted sentence with a triple negative:

...on the question of design, I would like to make it clear I am not in favour of neglecting the experience of past ages and I would not suggest that the careful study of seventeenth and eighteenth century work should not be followed by those trying to improve the furniture in our houses. I would go even further than that and say that any straining after originality is almost more to be deprecated than a humble reliance on old and well-tried methods. Design in furniture, it appears to me, should be based upon a clear realisation of modern conditions and requirements and upon this essential forms should be built up.

Although he himself had long been committed to the use of machinery and had by that time developed ranges of furniture specifically for production in highly mechanised factories he still felt it was necessary to write in 1920:

One has to recognise, of course, that this is an age of machine-made production. It is necessary...to accept the principle of mechanical production by modern factory methods, and to design accordingly.

The power of some Arts & Crafts 'medievalist' arguments in favour of a return to handwork only, to save the souls of the workers, was evidently still to be felt even post-World War One and still required counterbalancing. But A.H. also warned against an indiscriminate use of machinery:

The danger comes when it is sought to introduce machine made ornament for... [it]...is rarely inoffensive, and is more commonly bad.

⁴⁹⁴ Ambrose Heal, *Fitness in Furniture*, D.I.A. Journal No.7, April 1918, pp 14-17.

The shortage and expense of good quality timber after the War, but also the increasing fashion for colour in the home in which A.H. played an influential role, come through in the following comments:

Expensive wood means expensive furniture, and to keep prices down to a point at which the bulk of the middle classes can be expected to purchase, it is necessary to use material which does not impose too heavy a first charge on the processes of manufacture. Deal and three-ply may have to be used, but each must have some finish...I have myself a strong liking for treating such furniture with paint...it gives such an unrivalled opportunity for the employment of colours which would be otherwise impossible in furniture.

A.H. reveals a little of his personal taste by stating:

I am strongly of the opinion that English homes should be furnished with English furniture.

One can see that his design inspirations are modelled on exclusively English precedents but the remark is revealing in that it comes from a man who travelled extensively and even imported Continental and Scandinavian furnishings to this country so was evidently open to other cultural influences. His conclusion however was still that English furniture suited English homes and this is unlikely to have been just an outbreak of post-war nationalism but much more likely to have been inspired by the Arts and Crafts ideal of developing a truly English design style that had been one of the earliest aims of the Movement.

He cannot resist an attack, perhaps with a rare trace of humour, on the typical Victorian interior, the effects of which must have lingered on here and there:

*It is... merely as a gentle suggestion that I would point out the inadvisability of including in a furnishing scheme a collection of bric-a-brac...Personally I do not like dead animals and dead fish in a living-room.*⁴⁹⁵

A further, unpublished and undated manuscript document exists which is interesting because it highlights A.H.'s respect for the Cotswold school of the Arts and Crafts

⁴⁹⁵ Ambrose Heal, *On Furnishing a Small House*, Furnishing Trades Organiser, July 1920.

Movement whilst at the same time documenting his view on the use of machinery. On the assumption that this was written before World War One, a comparison of this text with the foregoing articles confirms that as time went on he accepted machinery more and more, yet still insisted on the importance of pride in workmanship. He wrote:

*The best of modern furniture here in England is being done by little groups of men for the most part living apart in country villages themselves often the actual makers carrying on the very best of the old traditions carefully selecting each piece of timber for its particular place and use, eschewing, as some of us think almost to a fanatical degree, the insidious use of all machines even for the roughest and most preliminary work – nothing but the very best workmanship is put into their furniture, infinite care and labour being expended on each piece. The result, real furniture full of interest and personality – each piece bearing the undoubted imprint of its maker and made under ideal conditions. Naturally this class of work is not cheap...I think we can have too much of handwork. Where the machine can be used to do “donkey work” ripping up and rough planing large timber I would always use it - it seems to me a waste of good craftsmanship to put a cabinet maker on to rough work of this sort. The other extreme though is worse – to shoot your joints, dovetail or finish your surfaces by machine is not only to produce bad work but work without any sort of human interest... May not something between the two extremes be the solution? Furniture well put together by hand but designed on simple lines so that it is not expensive to make, well constructed and let “art” take care of its self.*⁴⁹⁶

Yet another unpublished document which summarizes the Heal philosophy is the transcript of a talk given to new buyers and managers by A.H.’s son, Anthony. This is interesting because it not only repeats the need for ‘Fitness for Purpose’ in the goods sold but also covers other areas of a shopkeeper’s responsibilities, and,

⁴⁹⁶ Ambrose Heal, *untitled manuscript*. Written in AH’s hand on three sheets of ‘The Fives Court’ headed note paper (which tends to suggest a date between 1900 and 1915) it is as though it was intended to be a draft of an interview or a conversation between several people. Author’s collection.

although of later date, is no doubt an accurate reflection of A.H.'s thinking. Anthony's purpose was to communicate to the buyers the underlying aims of the business to ensure all shared the same convictions and a unity of purpose, and to stress that the qualitative aspects of their function were just as important as the quantitative results by which most businesses measured their results. From this it is clear that the way the business was run was not about following fashions or trying to make a *quick buck* but based on strongly held convictions about trying to improve the goods available for a discerning public. He stressed:

You also have a responsibility for ethics as well as aesthetics, and for dealing fairly and honestly with customers, suppliers and staff. ...The setting and maintaining of high standards of design and quality is not easy. It calls for imagination, conviction and a good deal of guts. ...You must have a 'concern' in the Quaker sense of the word; a sense of mission and the conviction of a just cause.

The retailer has responsibilities, not only to the public but also to the trade in which he works and must become an expert in his business. The buyer must:

...act as a filter, to select the best, to protect the public from meretricious, shoddy merchandise. As a professional you are better informed than the customer, you are better equipped to make an informed judgement. So be critical, independent and knowledgeable in making your selection. ...We should use our buying power to improve the design, colour, quality and fitness for purpose of the things which we handle...encourage original thought: new designs, new production methods, new materials. ...Always avoid the bogus and the sham. ...do not accept the shoddy or the chi-chi. ...do not handle copies. It is our duty to discourage plagiarism.

In view of the fact that furnishings have to last for years, if not generations, it was important that they should not quickly look dated or become obsolescent:

So avoid design for obsolescence. Apply the tests: is it fit for its purpose? Is it decently made? Is it good sound material? And is it worth the price that is asked?

In dealing with both suppliers and customers, the young buyers were encouraged to adopt a straightforward, fair, reasonable and civil approach.

Never denigrate the work of other people. It does not add to our stature to run down the work of others....When dealing with customers' problems, deal with

*them speedily, fairly, generously and intelligently.*⁴⁹⁷

From the foregoing it can be seen that the Heal family had wholeheartedly adopted the business ethics propounded by John Ruskin and William Morris which, it will be recalled, were summarized as follows:

The first thing demanded of businessmen by Ruskin was that they should recognise the true social purpose of business. Individual gain, or profit, should never be a goal in itself; rather the businessman has the vital function of supplying the public with goods of the highest quality and utility, and at prices which fairly reflect the cost of production.

*...Ruskin's vision of the socially responsible businessman, as one who put purpose before profit and education before convenience, was accepted as an ideal by William Morris: he set for himself the very highest standards in design and manufacturer.*⁴⁹⁸

3.6.2. Business Development

The merchandise range at Heal's had been enlarged from just mattresses and bedsteads to include bedroom furniture by 1852. By 1875 sales were analyzed under the following department headings: bedding, cabinet furniture, iron and brass bedsteads, upholstery and carpets, blankets, and these were the headings still used in 1900, although blankets were no longer analyzed out separately but included with bedding, and upholstery included both fabrics and carpets. At that point, (1900), bedding accounted for 33%, cabinet furniture for 36%, iron and brass bedsteads for 13%, upholstery and carpets 15%, of the company's turnover. The decline of the business as a whole between 1875 and 1895 has already been covered as has the spectacular recovery of the Cabinet department from its low point in 1895 to 1900, during which period its sales increased four and a half times. Over the same period the total turnover of the business had doubled from £37,000 to £75,000, (this latter figure would today be equivalent to around £5.6m). Over the next decade the carpet

⁴⁹⁷ Anthony S. Heal, *Talk to new buyers/managers*, undated typescript, author's collection.

⁴⁹⁸ Charles Harvey & Jon Press, *William Morris, Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain*, Manchester University Press, 1991, pp 150, 151.

business expanded enough to warrant it becoming a separate department and a china and glass department was opened but the main growth came from expansion of the two major departments, Bedding and Cabinets, whose turnover was half as big again by 1910. The business continued to expand until the First World War with total sales peaking in 1913 at £142,000 (or around £10m in today's money). During the early years of the War sales dropped by about one third before inflation started to take hold and prices spiralled upwards out of control.

In 1920 total sales were in excess of £425,000, a 200% increase on the pre-war figures (and 340% higher than the 1915 trough), but the full impact of the inflationary problems of the time is brought home when this is converted to the 2007 equivalent of £11.6m which reveals that in real terms 1920 sales were only around 16% higher than those of 1913. What is particularly notable about the 1920 results is that the Cabinet Department far outstripped the Bedding Department in size, becoming the largest single department overall and accounting for 36% of sales whilst Bedding was down to 21%. The other notable change was the growth in Upholstery and Carpets which then made up 27% of the turnover. China & Glass was securely established with 5% of sales and 'Blankets and Sheeting' (later the Linen department) was once again separated out from Bedding with 3% of sales.

Figures for the rest of the 1920s and until the mid-1930s are perhaps even more difficult to interpret as the Pound actually regained value and the price of goods fell. The firm's total sales for 1925 were around £370,000 (13% less than in 1920) but translated into 2007 prices this would be £13.7m (or an 18% increase), which would suggest the volume of business was actually rising. In 1929 sales peaked at £415,000 which, although in actual pounds was still below the 1920 figure, represents at current prices some £16m (38% above 1920 and 17% above 1925), or considerable growth in volume. However this is a fairly simplistic overview of general inflationary and deflationary pressures of the period with figures arrived at by applying standard retail price indices to contemporary results. To present a more reliable indication of what happened would require more research into how Heal's applied their pricing policy at the period and how cost prices for furniture and wages

really moved.⁴⁹⁹

During the twenties the Cabinet department remained the largest department and at that time included bedroom furniture and wooden bedsteads, as well as dining room furniture and antiques. The strongest growth came from 'U' department that incorporated both upholstery and fabrics, so that by the end of the decade this had overtaken the Bedding department to become the second largest department within the business, a position it still held by the Second World War. In 1930 Bedding represented 19%, Cabinets 30%, Iron & brass (by then Metalware dept.) 5%, Upholstery and Fabrics 23%, Carpets 11%, China & Glass 7%, Blankets & Sheeting 2% and the Little Gallery (selling toys and gifts started around 1924) 1% of sales.

The onslaught of the Great Depression had the effect of knocking the business back severely whichever way the figures are looked at. Turnover was reduced by about a third and although in the mid-thirties things recovered a little they were again hit by the recession from 1937 onwards. In 1932 sales had been down to £263,000, (£11.6m at 2007 prices), recovering to £328,000 (£14.3m equivalent) in 1935, but declining again to £263,000 (£10.8m equivalent) in 1938. The thirties were a difficult trading decade for the Heal business and sales of all departments declined at about the same rate. One new department selling Electrical goods was introduced in 1931 (managed by Anthony Heal) and a Contract department (managed by Mr Wallington), operating on a very low margin, was started in 1937 although it was not recorded separately until 1939. Then the beginning of World War Two completely changed the business again, a story beyond the confines of this study.

What these figures confirm is that the development of the business was still very much affected by external economic factors, however good the internal management might have been.

⁴⁹⁹ There would appear to be indications that cabinet prices in some instances were reduced but the reasons are not recorded and they might not constitute a trend. However in July 1921 it was reported to the Board that in view of the depression it had been necessary to reduce prices on upholstered furniture by an average of 13%. See BM 27.07.21. All conversions to 2007 prices were calculated using www.whatsthecost.com inflation calculator.

3.6.3. Merchandise ranges

The previous paragraphs reveal that there was little change to the managerial structure of the business during the period under consideration. Although the figures confirm that spectacular growth in cabinet furniture sales took place, followed by expansion of the soft furnishing side of the trade, these changes were accommodated within the existing management structure. New departments were created (China & Glass, Little Gallery, Electrical) or analysed out separately when their size warranted it (Carpets, Blankets etc.) but these remained almost peripheral to the main core of the business which was that of selling cabinet furniture, beds and upholstery (including fabrics). It is noteworthy that the Mansard Gallery does not appear at all in the ledgers that record departmental performance – it is perhaps included in the China & Glass dept figures.

Throughout AH's career there does not appear to be any trace that consideration was given to expanding beyond Tottenham Court Road. However, Alan Crawford drew my attention to a fascinating detail recorded in Mrs Benson's diaries that could have lead to some exciting developments, had it come off. In November 1902 discussions were held between Morris & Co and Heal & Son about the possibility of opening a joint shop in the Rue Halevy in Paris. After some initial discussions between Mr Marillier and A.H., W.A.S. Benson held a meeting with: *Mr Marillier, Mr Powell, Morris & Co. (i.e. bros Smith) & 2 Ambrose Heals...They concluded against the whole scheme.*⁵⁰⁰ Perhaps these two leading furnishing firms realized that their very English view on interiors would not have had sufficient attraction to be a commercial success in France.

So, within the relatively static departmental structure at Tottenham Court. Road., developments in the merchandise assortment took place and some of these are recorded here. For example, whereas the earliest cabinet furniture stockbooks, before the turn of the century, simply record lists of bedroom suites and other individual items of bedroom furniture, anything else came briefly under the heading of

⁵⁰⁰ From the diaries of Venetia Benson, wife of W.A.S. Benson, 10 & 18th November 1902, in the possession of the Benson family. Email from Alan Crawford, 21.07.2003.

‘Sundries’. An idea of the selection available (under the heading Cabinet Furniture) in the early nineteen-twenties, and the extent to which it had expanded, in addition to bedroom suites, may be gained from the list of headings under which they were then recorded:

*Press bedsteads, wardrobes, linen presses, chest of drawers, dressing chests, toilet tables, washstands, pedestals, towel horses, boot cupboards, dress stands, bidets, portmanteau stands, commodes, linen baskets, wicker washstand backs, chair screens, waste paper baskets, sponge baskets, log baskets, bottle cupboards, bookshelves, bookcases, wall mirrors, overmantels, toilet glasses, cheval glasses, shaving glasses, lavatory glasses, kitchen furniture, nursery furniture, dining tables, kitchen tables, occasional tables, invalid tables, writing tables, Windsor chairs, cane seat chairs, nursery chairs, bentwood chairs, rush seat chairs, wood seat chairs, fumed oak sundries, candlesticks, bedroom sundries*⁵⁰¹.

Whilst A.H. started by designing his own furniture in the 1890s to form part of the firm’s collection it would appear that he wished to improve the rest of the range as well. It was not possible for the Heal factory to make everything and anyway a selection of different styles and types of furniture was required. He worked with other manufacturers so that ranges of simplified reproductions of 18th century bedroom furniture were introduced in 1903 and featured in their own separate catalogue. No drawings for these have survived so it seems unlikely that A.H. actually designed the collections but rather would have worked with the manufacturers suggesting modifications to obtain an exclusive product in the traditional manner. *The Gentlewoman* reported:

*Strip Chippendale of his rococo vulgarities, remove much of the painted ornament of Hepplewhite and Sheraton and take away the more pettifogging detail of the brothers Adam, and the good qualities of beautiful proportion, perfect craftsmanship, delicacy of shape and moulding, will be found characteristic of each period.*⁵⁰²

⁵⁰¹ Cabinet Furniture Stockbook, 1922/23, AAD/1978/2/87

⁵⁰² Press cuttings album, *The Gentlewoman*, 04.07.1903.

The extension of the selection from 1905 onwards to include “Cottage Furniture” has already been covered (3.3.1.4). Another area within the cabinet furniture department was the inclusion of genuine antique furniture which had formed part of the range from before the turn of the century (antiques were included in the catalogues from 1897) as it was a real fashion phenomenon at the time. However a one-off exercise was the sale in 1906 of the Guild of Handicraft’s furniture stock, taken on when they closed down their showroom. Heal’s disposed of all of it at much reduced prices within the year.

Heal’s developed something of a specialist reputation for Nursery furniture, focusing on this from 1908 onwards, and publishing *The Nursery Book* in 1912, the year in which they furnished a children’s floor at the *Children’s Welfare Exhibition* at Olympia. In 1921 the company moved for the first time into the area of garden furniture which became another area of specialisation. Perhaps the fact that the sales of the Metalware department held up in the early thirties could be put down to the introduction of chromium-plated tubular steel furniture at that time (Metalware, previously Iron & Brass bedsteads, had incorporated kitchen furniture, previously included with Cabinets, since 1925). As far as the Cabinet Department was concerned the next major addition came in 1934 when Finmar imported Aalto’s birch furniture from Finland and under this same heading of ‘Finnish Furniture’ Heal’s also sold the products of Gerald Summers’ new firm ‘Makers of Simple Furniture’, manufactured much closer to home in Charlotte Street.⁵⁰³

An analysis of bedroom suite finishes offered by the firm, from the turn of the century to the mid-thirties, reveals how fashions and technology changed during that period. (see Appendix iii). Although stained ash or stained oak finishes were a fashion at the end of the 19th century, by 1910 these were no longer offered. Painted finishes were popular throughout the period (as they had been in earlier times) but the large number of plain white bedrooms (19% of the selection) available pre-First World War was gradually replaced by other colours and different decorative finishes in the twenties and thirties (white; 5%. Other colours and decorative finishes; 16%,

⁵⁰³ According to Edgar Mantz, *Holding Things Together*, unpublished PhD Thesis, BCUC/Brunel University, 2005, p 114, Gerald Summers set up his firm in late 1931 or early 1932 and produced his first sales brochure in 1933 but production does not seem to have started until 1934.

1936). Mahogany was popular prior to 1914 and many of the suites were also decoratively inlaid, however in the twenties the fashion for inlay faded and in the thirties the numbers of mahogany suites available slumped dramatically (1910 nearly 40% of selection, 1936 only 7%). Oak, as we have seen, was the timber of choice for the Heal Factory and it is now thought of as the archetypal Arts and Crafts timber. Therefore it is particularly interesting that in 1900 only a small proportion of the bedroom suites available from Heal's retail bedroom furniture department were offered in oak (8%), but by 1910 this had risen to 24% and it then retained this leading position right through into the thirties. However, as has already been commented, the appearance of the oak evolved over the period from being fumed, to being left natural, to being "weathered", so it moved with the times. The other timber used in significant quantities was walnut, which in 1900 represented 20% of the selection but this declined to around 7% through the nineteen-tens and twenties before coming strongly back into fashion in the thirties (back to 19% of the selection).

A notable feature of the nineteen thirties is the extension of the range into exotic timber finishes that included suites in Betula, Macassar Ebony, Peroba and Zebrano. This was in part no doubt simply a reflection of technical developments in furniture making. In 1900 most, if not all the suites, would have been constructed from solid timbers, with the result that the finishes could be analyzed under just eight different categories. Through the 1910s and 1920s this situation did not change significantly. It was not until the 1930s, when most suites were no longer made from solid timber but finished with veneers applied to blockboard (or even plywood), that timber stocking problems were simplified (veneers needed much less space) and the constructional substrate could remain unchanged under a variety of surfaces. A thin, if expensive and exotic, surface veneer glued to a less expensive, but relatively stable support, meant that unusual timbers could be used in situations where, if used in the solid, they would either be too expensive or technically unsuitable. The result was not only the revival of walnut but an explosion onto the market of interesting and unusual timbers and combinations of timbers.

From the earliest days the names of famous designers have been used to help promote merchandise. Already in 1902 the *3ply, closely woven wool* carpets designed

exclusively for Heal's by C.F.A. Voysey were attracting press comment as did the clock by the same designer who was described as *that inimitable student of the quaint and beautiful*. The clock was available either in oak inlaid with pewter or in mahogany inlaid, with an ivory face.⁵⁰⁴ Gradually the selection of smaller items was expanded, and although the China & Glass department was not opened officially until 1910, the company was selling china toilet wares as early as 1906 in traditional patterns and by 1908 were suggesting Willow Pattern and Green Parrot tea sets as *Yuletide gifts of an Exclusive Character*. In 1908 the slogan *Presents a little different from those found elsewhere* was used, which was amended to *Presents for People of Taste* in 1911 and later still to *Presents for Particular People*, which was then used for many years. In 1909 the suggestions for Christmas presents included a fluted black basalt Wedgwood bowl. One of the stories told regularly within the firm concerned a Wedgwood self-coloured tableware known as 'Honeybuff'. A.H. is said to have seen an antique sample of this ware, darker than their normal creamware, and asked Wedgwood to reproduce it for Heal's. Frank Wedgwood later appeared in Heal's office carrying an envelope from which he poured some brown powder, explaining that this was the best they could manage and that they no longer knew how to produce that particular ware. Heal appealed to Wedgwood's family pride, saying that surely Wedgwood's in the eighteenth century could not have been technically superior to Wedgwood's in the twentieth century, and pushed him to have another attempt. Eventually after much experimentation Wedgwood succeeded and the range became a successful standard product at Heal's from 1916 onwards (Fig. 3-21).

3.6.4. Imports & Continental Influences

Although Heal's in the second half of the twentieth century was renowned for importing furniture and other goods from Europe it is remarkable, by contrast, how little of the selection was imported in the earlier years. A.H. travelled extensively and kept continuously abreast of trade developments, purchasing the occasional item in passing, but one is left with the impression that, at least in the early days, these were

⁵⁰⁴ Press cuttings album, *Tatler*, 03.12.1902.



Fig. 3-21. Heal's *Honey-Buff* ware by Wedgwood (top) with another exclusive Heal pattern *Blue Leaf* (below) from an advertisement for *Jolly Breakfast & Tea Services* c 1921, (AAD).

just samples to be used in inspiring British manufacturers to do better. Although at the end of the 19th century Heal's were already selling Austrian bentwood chairs, these were not bought direct but came through an importer. As a single retail outlet the volume of trade was so small that direct imports could not be justified when consideration was given to the costs of transport, duties, the problems of damage etc., so, in the absence of wholesale importers but also as a result of conviction, Heal's furniture ranges were almost entirely English made. (One assumes that conversely, china and glass would have been ordered in some quantity thereby making a shipment worthwhile).

In 1910, on his way back from Italy, A.H. visited Vereinigte Werkstätten in Munich (*much interesting furniture and fabrics – made some purchases*) and also came back with a catalogue of the Deutsche Werkstätten in Hellerau that included furniture by Riemerschmidt as well as Baillie Scott.⁵⁰⁵ In 1914 he attended the Deutsche Werkbund exhibition at Cologne, with Cecil Brewer and Harry Peach, placing a number of orders for small items.⁵⁰⁶ In 1916 whilst in Paris he placed an order with the Daum glassworks. At about the same time, and in contrast to what one would assume would have been such modernising influences, the company introduced a selection of reproduction French bedroom furniture made by Erard but this was not very successful.

After the First World War Italian and French glass was displayed before a serious trading relationship with Sweden began to develop. In 1923 following a visit to factories and showrooms in Gothenburg, Stockholm and Copenhagen a second display of Swedish glass was mounted in the Tottenham Court Road shop, following the first in 1922. Many of the glass and porcelain manufacturers' names are still familiar today – Rorstrand, Kosta, Orrefors, Gustavsberg. Whilst in Stockholm AH visited the still relatively new Nordiska department store building, designed by the leading Swedish architect Ferdinand Boberg, that had been completed in 1915, and no doubt made comparisons with his own new building. He noted in passing some birch furniture (well before Alvar Aalto started using that timber), and ordered some electrical fittings. He also visited the offices of the Svenska Slöjdföreningen (the

⁵⁰⁵ AH notebook, AAD/1978/2/374.

⁵⁰⁶ AH notebook, AAD/1978/2/380.

Swedish Society of Industrial Design) and obtained copies of their journal.⁵⁰⁷

Heal's continued to keep abreast of Continental developments, buying in pieces of occasional furniture from France and Germany, before the 1925 Paris exhibition, for examination and perhaps emulation. Amongst the names of the suppliers can be found L'Atelier Français, Printemps, Magasins Réunis, and Deutsche Werkstätten. Amongst the more exotic pieces was a prime example of French Art-Deco: a sideboard in macassar ebony inlaid with ebony and ivory, with a top covered in shagreen. This was imported in 1926 from *Décoration Intérieure Moderne* (D.I.M.), the company responsible for furnishing a French Embassy dining room at the Paris Exhibition. (H&S stock no. 921). Anne Massey's statement that *French progressive furniture was first seen in London in 1928 when the decorating firm of Shoobredts held an exhibition of work by D.I.M.*, is therefore not strictly true. But it is probably true that Heal's did not develop this style of furniture in as much depth as Waring & Gillow and Chermayeff did in 1928.⁵⁰⁸

In 1926 an 'Artistic Glass' exhibition was mounted which was more international than the previous glass exhibitions, including more Swedish glass, but also work by Lalique, Bimini and of course English glass from Powell. In the same year A.H. made a trip through Germany, visiting Leipzig, Munich and Dusseldorf, even calling at the Rosenthal porcelain factory in Selb. In Munich he ordered some carpets from the craft weavers Von Weech to whom his son would later be sent for training. It seems that whilst on holiday in Sicily in 1929 he was so taken with the peasant wood carvings they used to decorate their carts and ward off evil spirits that he bought a stock of them for sale in the shop.

In contrast in 1930 he went back to Stockholm to see the exhibition that "brought Modernism to Sweden" but no furniture was imported from Scandinavia at that time. That had to wait until 1934 when the Finmar Company was set up to import Alvar Aalto's designs and Heal's were amongst the first customers. An exhibition of pottery and glass from Finland was mounted in 1937 as well as a display of items

⁵⁰⁷ AH notebook, AAD/1978/2/381.

⁵⁰⁸ Anne Massey, *Interior Design of 20th Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2001, p 102.

In addition one should note that England was made aware of what was happening in France even before this as the 1923 Studio Year Book includes pictures of Art Deco furniture by Follot, Sue et Mare, MAM and Fabre.

that had been shown at the Paris Exhibition of that year. Finally in 1939 a show of Danish table settings was put on.

3.6.5. Exhibitions, Displays & Interior Decoration

Our conception today of early twentieth century interiors tends to be based on surviving pieces of furniture which are no longer in their original contexts or black and white photographs of rooms that render them monotone. Plain oak furniture on plain oak floorboards against whitewashed walls, presented today in houses like Blackwell, in the Lake District, for example, reinforce the image of austerity to be seen in contemporary pictures of Barnsley's cottage or Voysey's own house at Chorleywood. Heal's reputation at the time was equally severe but this has to be seen against the context of what had gone before and not compared to today's 'minimalist' fashion influenced by years of Modernism. The simplicity of the early twentieth century should instead be compared to the bric-a-brac-laden, Victorian interior and even the 'pattern-rich', eclectic William Morris interior, such as that which can still be seen in Emery Walker's house in Hammersmith Terrace, London. Although simpler than these, the Heal interior was far from being monotone. Descriptions of exhibition interiors in contemporary press reports permit one to gain an impression of how vivid they were.

Perhaps the earliest useful description of a Heal's interior scheme is the report of Heal's 1900 Paris Exhibition Stand. Designed by Cecil Brewer the stand had a strong architectural feel to it with classical columns supporting an arched cornice over the entrance picked out in green and white with blue tiles below. The interior had white painted woodwork, framing panels covered with a Voysey-designed printed linen in apple-green and white. The cherry coloured carpets and curtains were also Voysey designs for Heal's and the tiles in the hearth were purple.⁵⁰⁹ Despite an old French woman remarking, *Tiens, tiens, n'est ce pas un peu triste pour les jeunes gens*, this description on the other hand makes it sound distinctly jolly.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁹ See booklet *A Bedroom by Heal & Son, Paris Exhibition, 1900*, Heal & Son, also Wendy Hitchmough, *C.F.A. Voysey*, Phaidon, 1995, p 145.

⁵¹⁰ Cited by Sir Lawrence Weaver, *Tradition & Modernity in Furnishing*, p 9.

By 1907, at the same time that simple Cottage Furniture was gaining momentum, Heal's were displaying more luxurious bedrooms in room-sets, or model rooms, and the *Colonial Adam* bedroom is described as having walls *hung with silk fibre paper of a quiet tone of vellum colour and curtains of pink Jaspé cotton with a trellis border*. The glazed trelliswork wardrobe doors were also draped with pink cloth.⁵¹¹

Interiors became much more arresting when Heal's furnished a children's floor at the Children's Welfare Exhibition at Olympia in 1912. This raised some eyebrows as the *Daily News* commented that it:

*...is likely to arouse a good deal of discussion and possibly some hostile criticism. Particularly challenging is the scheme of colour that has been chosen...by a school which believes in gay, downright, sometimes even gorgeous colouring.*⁵¹²

The Governess's room had black curtains and carpet, both with brightly coloured borders, and a floor stained orange red. All the furniture was grey. The children's rooms were furnished with unpolished oak furniture, carefully designed with no sharp corners, and the walls were papered with a *small but gay floral design*.

As already explained, A.H. turned increasingly to painted and decorated furniture from this period onwards, so it is no surprise to find after the First World War the bedroom displayed at the British Institute of Industrial Art exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1922 described as *flaunting colours of green and yellow, the furniture painted with the inevitable pattern of small bright flowers*. This was contrasted with the plain living room displayed by Spooner. Although not a great deal of this painted and decorated furniture was sold at least one interior was carried out in 1922 that included a blue painted fourposter bed and chest of drawers as well as a painted drawing room table for Lord Beaverbrook's house in Putney.⁵¹³

At the 1924 British Empire Exhibition Heal's were responsible for furnishing the Gas Exhibit which included a dining room furnished with *exceptionally attractive*

⁵¹¹ Ladies Pictorial, 30.03.1907.

⁵¹² Press cuttings album, *Daily News*, 19.12.1912.

⁵¹³ Illustrated London News, 01.02.1922 and House & Garden, May 1922.

walnut furniture, and a nursery in unstained oak. But more remarkable still was the bedroom with *gilded walls of a slightly greenish tinge*, equipped with green lacquer furniture decorated in a Chinese manner, and the boudoir with its black furniture *with lines of silver and a curious dull pink*.⁵¹⁴ At the same exhibition there was a bedroom designed by H. Palmer Jones, carried out by Heal & Son that had silver walls, a domed ceiling, and a soft blue floor on which was laid a circular, parchment-coloured, carpet with a dark border. The walnut beds were relieved by fine gilt lines.

By the mid-twenties some of the more exotic furniture was being finished in silver gilt and before the end of the decade the silver was also being decorated with brightly coloured flowers or lines. A black bureau bookcase displayed in 1928 was highlighted with puce lines. But, if the suggestions of *Womans Journal* are an accurate reflection of taste at the time, the colours were getting less clear by the end of the twenties. To go with mahogany they recommended the soft tones of *green, maize, sovereign gold, warm beige, cornelian and silver-mulberry*.⁵¹⁵

Heal's 1930 living room 'silver and green' scheme, no doubt put together by Prudence Maufe, still sounds purer, lighter, slightly ethereal: *walls pale green, silvered ceiling and freize – paintwork silver tone broken by green, - curtains sapphire blue*.

By this time there was evidently a fairly clear public perception of what a typical Heal interior was like. Already in 1917 reference had been made to the interior of the Mansard Gallery: being *the work of the Heal firm it is alluringly austere*.⁵¹⁶ In 1928 Maxwell Fry summed it up as follows:

*A "Healish" room is quite a definite conception. The term connotes simplicity, order, sanity and a quiet beauty. It implies a sparing use of good, full colour and a wholehearted reliance on the beauties inherent in the texture of woods treated lightly or not at all.*⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁴ Cabinet Maker & Complete House Furnisher, 30.05.1924.

⁵¹⁵ *Womans Journal*, February 1929.

⁵¹⁶ *The Daily Chronicle, A New Picture Gallery*, 10.05.1917.

⁵¹⁷ E. Maxwell Fry, *Mr Ambrose Heal's House*, *The Architects Journal*, 27.06.1928, p 909.

From 1926 to the early thirties, Heal's held an annual exhibition entitled *Modern Tendencies in Furniture and Decorations* to show the latest developments.⁵¹⁸

The 1930s were punctuated by internal exhibitions mounted in the Mansard Gallery around fashionable colour themes such as "White and Off-White" in 1933, "Greens of the Earth" in 1934 and the "Silver Theme in Furnishing & Decoration" in 1935 to coincide with the firm's 125th anniversary and King George V's Silver Jubilee. There were also, however, more down-to-earth displays such as that of "Economy Furniture" in 1932, "Economy with a Difference" in 1933 and "Better Furniture for Better Times" in 1934, showing Heal's ability to trim their sails according to the economic winds blowing at the time.

Other shows mounted in the Mansard Gallery included the Wedgwood bicentenary show in 1930 and perhaps most surprisingly a Victorian Furniture display in 1931. This was not a purified pastiche of Victorian taste but a full-bodied attempt to put Victorian furnishing back in the limelight by assembling a collection of genuine period furnishings at a time when, presumably, the prices of such goods would not have been excessive. Thirty years after the end of Victoria's reign, taste had moved on so much that Victorian furniture was no longer reviled as it had been, but could be put into a historical context and purchased as 'antiques'.

3.6.5.1. Seven Architects Exhibition 1936

In complete opposition to a revival in interest in Victoriana was the growth of Modernism in Britain. Although Heal's were selling chromium-plated bent tubular metal furniture by 1930 they were at the same time presenting furnishings that would lead Herbert Read in 1935 to accuse A.H. of being: *modish and Mayfairish ...at the expense of logical design.*⁵¹⁹ It was apparently the idea of John Gloag, then working for Heal's advertising agency, that Heal's should mount an exhibition of furniture designed by leading Modernist architects to counteract this perception and to demonstrate that the firm was still in contact with the latest architectural

⁵¹⁸ *Modern Tendencies 1932*, included flat for £195, see Goodden pg 59.

⁵¹⁹ Herbert Read, *Architectural Review*, cited in Susanna Goodden, *A History of Heal's*, p 85.

developments.⁵²⁰ The ‘**Contemporary Furniture by Seven Architects**’ exhibition was arranged on the fourth floor of the shop in Spring 1936 to show small ranges of furniture designed especially for the occasion by the following architects: Maxwell Fry, Marcel Breuer, Christopher Heal, Jack Howe, Raymond McGrath, Christopher Nicholson and Brian O’Rorke. An examination of the organisation of this exhibition is instructive as it demonstrates how experimental the whole thing was and how far the firm was prepared to go to set up out-of-the-ordinary displays. Given the Modernist ethos of the architects, this exercise might have been expected to produce relatively inexpensive furniture based on the machine aesthetic for mass production, but instead it produced quite exotic pieces of furniture that would effectively remain one-offs or only be produced in very small quantities. The fact that it has found its way into histories of the Modernist movement suggests that, even if its commercial success was limited, it achieved its aim of linking Heal’s with the latest design developments of the time.

Maxwell Fry (1899-1987), who was engaged in the Autumn of 1935 to act as co-ordinator and to design the setting into which the furniture would be placed, was the ideal candidate to pull the whole thing together. He was a member of the DIA, co-founder of the MARS group (Modern Architectural Research Group, of which he was vice-chairman. Gloag, (1896-1981), was also a member) and also, at that time, a member of the RIBA Council. David Dean wrote of him that he

...was a dominant figure in English modern architecture. Liverpool trained, he had started his career with Neo-Georgian and gentle vernacular buildings, but he was always casting around for the architecture which would express an industrialised society. His membership of the DIA... had opened his eyes to the work of Gropius... ‘Suddenly I saw this comprehensive new architecture accepting the full range of possibilities open to it, the answer to years of doubt and hesitation’ (RIBA Journal December 1979) and he turned his back ‘on the whole medley of styles and mannerisms’.

It was Maxwell Fry’s office that Walter Gropius joined for a couple of years in 1934

⁵²⁰ John Gloag (1896-1981) was a member of MARS, had been assistant-editor of the trade journal *The Cabinet Maker*, was a leading member of the DIA editing its yearbook, a prolific writer on furniture and design history, and a novelist.

when he left Nazi Germany before going to America. Fry's *lively sense of pleasure in architecture formed an ideal counterbalance to the commitment of Gropius.*⁵²¹

Fry was already very familiar with Heal's as he had written about the Edward Maufe extension to A.H.'s own house, for the *Architectural Review* in 1928, and one senses in that article his respect for the Heal interior.

*Mr Heal, whose convictions on the subject of furniture design, interior decoration and, one might nearly say, mode of living, have become the accepted taste of a wide class of intelligent people.*⁵²²

Fry conceived a very discreet setting for the exhibition about which the reviewer for *Architects Journal* remarked that it was: *not until I was on my way down in the lift did I realise I had not noticed Mr Maxwell Fry's setting for the whole show. A pretty clear proof that it is exactly what a setting should be.*⁵²³ Fry himself wrote: *I have tried to suggest ...something of the lightness, freedom and simplicity of the modern house.*⁵²⁴ This involved installing a false ceiling in the Mansard Gallery for the first time. Fry held a meeting of the architects involved in October 1935 to brief them and by mid-November was putting forward plans and specifications for approval. By mid-January 1936 A.H. was able to report to his colleagues that he had received some of the drawings for the furniture, which was just as well as he then went away for most of February and March, so Fry and Prudence Maufe must have managed most of the detail of getting the furniture made in time for the opening in April in his absence.

The layout was conceived basically to represent a flat with hall, living room, bedroom, study bedroom and terrace but the concept was not strictly adhered to in order to incorporate two dining rooms.

Of the architects retained to produce designs the most celebrated today is the Bauhaus furniture designer, **Marcel Breuer (1902-1981)**. Like Gropius he had left

⁵²¹ David Dean, *The Thirties: Recalling the English Architectural Scene*, Trefoil Books, 1983, p 26.

⁵²² E. Maxwell Fry, *Mr Ambrose Heal's House*, *The Architects Journal*, 27.06.1928, p 909.

⁵²³ *Architects Journal*, 23.04.1936.

⁵²⁴ Maxwell Fry, *Seven Architects Exhibition*, *Trend in Design*, Summer 1936.

Germany and had just started working in partnership with F.R.S. Yorke. He carried out the renovation of a house for the Bristol furnisher, Crofton Gane, as his first job in England, for which he designed some furniture. Shortly thereafter, at the end of 1935, he designed the so-called 'long chair' for Jack Pritchard and his Isokon company. Breuer's work for Heal's in late 1935/early 1936 was therefore amongst the earliest jobs he undertook during his relatively brief, but very productive and influential stay in England from 1935 to 1937.⁵²⁵ The living room furniture he designed for the Heal exhibition was based on work he had done before - notably the single line of wall-hung units which he had incorporated in flats in Berlin and Wiesbaden as early as 1927. However, for Heal's, instead of the cabinets being mounted on white painted plaster walls, the whole wall was panelled out in matching sycamore veneered plywood giving a greater visual unity. The backs of the cabinets were fitted with L shaped battens that hooked over similarly shaped battens screwed to the wall so that they could be lifted off easily and rearranged.⁵²⁶ From the fall fronts of the cabinets hang, what appear to be chromium-plated trapezes, but are in fact external counter balance weights, that presumably could be adjusted to suit individual requirements. They permitted various things, such as a gramophone or a *heavy slab of black glass* for serving to be fixed on the interior.

Breuer himself declared *that it is surely wrong to expect an architect always to design something radically different from what has gone before*. He explained that for some time he had felt that cupboards mounted just below eye level and off the floor to give an impression of more space were the best solution.⁵²⁷ In addition he designed a lounge chair, a sofa, a reclining chair and a coffee table, all in plywood, for the living room setting. The reclining chair, covered in red washable hide (model no S823, priced at £33 6s 0d – about £1630 today - plus 2 yards of fabric) had a tendency to tip those trying to get in or out, onto the floor and subsequently had to be modified. Christopher Wilk wrote of this chair that it

showed the direction toward which Breuer's furniture designs were tending: toward free-form cut out plywood constructions that seem to have little to do

⁵²⁵ Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer, Furniture & Interiors*, Architectural Press, 1981, pp 126-146.

⁵²⁶ See sketch by J. C. Heal on back of photo in archive. AAD

⁵²⁷ Marcel Breuer, *Seven Architects*, *Trend in Design*, Summer 1936. Christopher Wilk records that the tubular balance weights were filled with lead shot. *Marcel Breuer furniture & interiors*, p 136.



Fig. 3-22. Chaise longue, sofa and coffee table designed by Marcel Breuer in sycamore with red 'washable' hide upholstery. (AAD)



Fig. 3-23. Wall units and chair designed by Marcel Breuer in sycamore. Note metal sculpture fixed to plywood panel and chromium plated counterweight on fall flap. (AAD)

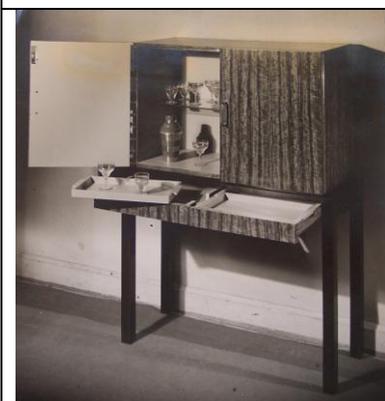


Fig. 3-24. Cocktail cabinet designed by Maxwell Fry and Jack Howe in Indian laurel on ebonized underframe. Interior cellulosed blue with scarlet serving trays. (AAD)



Fig. 3-25. Dining room designed by Maxwell Fry and Jack Howe in Indian laurel with bright chromium plated legs. Sideboard D1208 4ft 6in £35 (Factory), dining table MW 3583 £13 10s 0d, chairs D1281 £6 6s 0d. (AAD)



Fig. 3-26. Dining room in pear and sycamore designed by Brian O'Rourke. Table is unusually low, tub chairs have moulded plywood backs, sideboard has plate glass top and built in switch sockets. The light fittings are also by O'Rourke in chromium plate with matt chromium reflectors. (AAD)



Fig. 3-27. Study designed by Raymond McGrath in polished dark Cuban mahogany with grey cellulosed tops. The chair is presumably the one that caused PEL to complain that their patents had been infringed. (AAD)

*with his earlier furniture...Heal's apparently sold a modest number of Breuer's chairs, at least for two years, for Breuer was paid royalties in 1937 and 1938.*⁵²⁸

Wilk refers to “*metal plastic*” *wall panelling* which has led others to assume this was some sort of unusual treatment to the plywood. In fact the original catalogue refers to *an interesting metal plastic on the wall* which is no doubt the unusual tubular sculpture hung above the cabinets that is visible in the photographs and nothing to do with the panelling itself (in German ‘Plastik’ means sculpture). Whether this was also designed by Breuer does not emerge.

Christopher Heal (1911-1985) was the youngest and least experienced member of the group. A.H.’s youngest son had joined the family business in September 1934 having read Economics and Architecture at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, during which time he had had a number of fabric designs accepted by Turnbull & Stockdale and Morton Sundour. For the ‘Seven Architects’ exhibition he designed, appropriately enough for a member of the Heal family, a bedroom and a dressing room. The bedroom was veneered in light pigmented birch outlined with contrasting zebrano crossbanding which, he pointed out, *was not as ornament but only where ends of blockboard have to be closed anyhow.*⁵²⁹ The wardrobe doors were made up of square panels of plywood linked to each other by loose tongue joints. This achieved a decorative effect but seems to have been primarily motivated by a desire to overcome the technical problem of twisting that large plywood surfaces such as wardrobe doors were prone to, as a result of the surface veneers exerting unequal pulls due to unequal atmospheric conditions inside and out. The solution attained its objective as Christopher noted: *a door was hung over a glue pot for three days and came to no harm.* (In those days cabinet makers used animal glue from pots that had to be kept constantly heated with hot water).⁵³⁰

The carcasses for the dressing room furniture were made in blackbean whilst the fronts were of pacific maple.

⁵²⁸ Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer, furniture & interiors*, Architectural Press, 1981, p 136.

⁵²⁹ Christopher Heal, *Trend in Design*, D.I.A., Summer 1936.

⁵³⁰ J. Christopher Heal, pencil note to back of photograph of wardrobe C1079.

Jack Howe (1911-2003) at the time of the exhibition was assistant to Maxwell Fry and Walter Gropius and the same age as Christopher Heal, yet having worked for Emberton before joining Fry in 1934 had a little more experience in the design world than Christopher.⁵³¹ The hall furniture and the dining/living room for the exhibition were credited jointly to Max Fry and Howe but as Howe's name appears as one of the seven contributing architects it seems probable that he did most of the work. The hall furniture was made in Indian rosewood whilst the dining room (both sets were made by Heal's own Cabinet Factory) was in Indian laurel. The veneers used on the latter were very 'busy', set off by bright chromium-plated metal and contrasting with brightly cellulosed interiors to the cabinets. The chairs had ebonised bentwood frames with latex rubber cushions. He wrote that the designs *although made in the first case by hand, have been considered as models for quantity production.*⁵³²

Raymond McGrath (1903-1977) came to England from Australia in 1926 and had come to prominence within the profession when he was appointed, in 1929, to coordinate the design of studios for Broadcasting House. His subsequent experience of interior design also included the reception for National Flying Services in Trafalgar Square, the interior of the Atlanta aircraft for Imperial Airways and a fashionable Bond Street restaurant.⁵³³ So it is not surprising that his design for Heal's study and bedroom reflected some of this sumptuousness by combining rich dark highly polished Cuban mahogany with light primrose-coloured walls and grey cellulosed tops and wardrobe doors.

Christopher Nicholson (1904-1948), an early Modernist, had taught architecture at Cambridge where one of his pupils had been Hugh Casson (1910-1999). The terrace furniture in ash and teak made for the 'Seven Architects' exhibition was designed by Christopher Nicholson in collaboration with his friend and, soon to be partner, Hugh Casson and was amongst the most interesting of the products on display. An adjustable chair had a teak underframe with the seat and back made of interlaced ash strips whilst a chaise longue gave the same effect through interwoven canvas strips.

⁵³¹ Alan Powers, *Jack Howe*, obituary, The Independent 10.12.2003.

⁵³² Jack Howe, *Trend in Design*, Summer 1936.

⁵³³ David Dean, *The thirties: recalling the English architectural scene*, p 72.



Fig. 3-28. Bedroom in light pigmented birch with zebrawood crossbanding designed by Christopher Heal. Note construction of wardrobe doors. (AAD)



Fig. 3-29. Dressing room in black beech with maple doors designed by Christopher Heal. (AAD)



Fig. 3-30. Chaise longue on tubular metal cantilevered frame with interlaced ash strip seat designed by Christopher Nicholson with Hugh Casson. (AAD)



Fig. 3-31. Chaise longue on wheels with interlaced canvas strip seat, designed by Christopher Nicholson with Hugh Casson. (AAD)



Fig. 3-32. Arm chair on teak frame with adjustable seat of interlaced ash strips designed by Christopher Nicholson with Hugh Casson. (AAD)



Fig. 3-33. The entrance to the exhibition included a historical review of chairs by architects amongst which are examples by Thonet, Aalto, Williams-Ellis and Stamm. The pictures behind illustrate changes in fashion, motor cars and interiors during the first third of the 20th century. (AAD)

Heal's investigated the possibility of patenting or registering this latter design with a view to having it mass produced. Patent agents advised that trying to patent the design was not practicable but even so working drawings were sent to Messrs Fuimar (sic – perhaps Finmar?) for quotation and as the furniture appears in Heal garden furniture catalogues it seems some of it was made.⁵³⁴

Brian O'Rorke (1901-1974), a Cambridge-trained New Zealander best known for interiors of luxury liners and trains, designed for the exhibition a dining room in sycamore and pear tree. The tub chairs had curved plywood backs and were upholstered in blue grey washable hide (*The Times* singled them out as possibly the most elegant pieces...faintly "Empire"),⁵³⁵ whilst the underframe of the circular dining table was reminiscent of the work of Aalto. O'Rorke also designed the lightfittings used and even the sideboard (table and sideboard made by Cohen, sold in 1938, not repeated) with its clear armour plate glass top had built-in switch sockets, handy for a hot plate or toaster. He commented that the whole had been designed with series production in mind and could be made: *in blockboard or ply veneered in a plastic material (Roanoid) – a good wearing surface, proof against spirits and cigarette burns. An attractive edging can be formed by veneering the edge of this material and machining away the surface to leave a thin metallic lamination as an inlaid silver line.*⁵³⁶

These then were the Modernist architects retained to express their ideas about interior furnishing, with a brief description of what they produced. The Seven Architects exhibition does not appear to have produced much reaction amongst the public if the dearth of press cuttings is a reliable measure. *The Times* was complimentary:

*At once one is aware of a combination of taste and practical efficiency. ...a sense of proportion and an appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of material.*⁵³⁷

So this was not shocking material any more but elegant, and expensive, furniture. The reviewer for the *Architects Journal* wrote that

⁵³⁴ H&S Board Minutes, June 1936.

⁵³⁵ *The Times*, *Seven Architects*, 27.04.1936.

⁵³⁶ Brian O'Rorke, *Trend in Design*, Summer 1936.

⁵³⁷ *The Times*, *Seven Architects*, 27.04.1936.

*The show now on at Heal's provides plenty of useful stuff (for architects assembling interiors). Expensive, yes, but most of it very restrained in design: colour seems much less strident than only a few years ago.*⁵³⁸

Even if the show was not a great commercial success and (deliberately) lacking in razzmatazz as a crowd puller, it undoubtedly fulfilled its aim of getting leading architects involved with the business. Eight architects (if Casson is counted) had been given the opportunity by A.H. to express their ideas of modern furniture relatively freely in a situation where there was no end-user seeking to impose their desires or limitations. It seems likely however that A.H. would have insisted on keeping their feet on the ground during the exercise. It no doubt provided valuable experience for the youngest and useful contacts for all involved including those within the Heal business. That it did not meet the ideals of producing inexpensive furniture was recognised at the time as Maxwell Fry commented:

We have some way to go yet before the immense markets of black-coated and manual classes are opened to well-designed modern furniture. There is room for expansion within the better-off strata by means of rational designing for hand and semi-machine workshop, as a prelude to the complete mastery of the machine for the benefit of the mass of the people.

*If this exhibition is the first step in a continuous application to the problem, then it will be something more than a matter of seasonal interest.*⁵³⁹

Although meetings were held to consider Maxwell Fry's suggestion that a group of designers should be formed to *consider the production of modern furniture on mass production lines* the company decided that mass-production and mass-distribution was beyond their capability.⁵⁴⁰ The furniture remained therefore essentially the expression of ideas about what a Modernist interior should look like, realised in prototype form.

However, what the exhibition confirmed (if such confirmation were needed) was that A.H. remained alert to every possibility to explore and promote good art and design from whatever quarter – from history and from the avant-garde.

⁵³⁸ Architects Journal, 23.04.1936.

⁵³⁹ Maxwell Fry, *Trend in Design*, Summer 1936.

⁵⁴⁰ See board minutes 29.04.1936, 14.05.1936, 22.07.1936 and *Trend in Design* Summer 1936.

3.7. Creative Retailing Conclusion

Although this section has only investigated some of the areas crucial to the success of the Heal furnishing business in the earlier part of the twentieth century, it confirms that A.H. was not a man who just happened to exploit a fashion for a particular style of furniture for commercial benefit, but someone for whom, in the words of Sir Gordon Russell, *It was a deeply-felt way of life with him and affected everything he did.*⁵⁴¹

The ideas inherited from the Arts & Crafts Movement of making a better world by improving the design of the things that surround us in everyday life were pursued with pertinacity in all his activities. What sets A.H. apart from other disciples of the Arts & Crafts Movement was that these activities were not just applied in a workshop situation but in the running of a sizeable retail business that demanded, in addition, skills in man management and marketing.

His success was due, not just to his skilful use of marketing techniques, but to his ability to fashion those techniques to fit in with his whole business ethos. Advertising was never 'hard sell' but projected the company's ideas within a consistent visual identity. Publications contained not mere descriptive 'copywriter's' texts but thoughtful reflections on design by respected commentators that were then beautifully typeset, illustrated and printed on appropriate carefully selected paper. Posters were designed by leading artists of the time.

The shows mounted in the Mansard Gallery were a means of attracting visitors to Tottenham Court Road, but it was not a venue for pure showmanship in the way of displays at Selfridges, but for thought-provoking, often didactic, exhibitions that are a testimony to AH's tastes and therefore those of his customers. The later exhibitions, incorporating Modernist furnishings and culminating in the Seven Architects exhibition, demonstrate that, even if personally these were less to his taste,

⁵⁴¹ Gordon Russell, *Ambrose Heal*, *Mobilia*, September-October 1964, p 44.

he was aware of the need to move with the times and was willing to adapt his own work accordingly.

What is known of the philosophy behind his work has been recorded here for the first time and an attempt has been made to draw out of his shadow the key figures who assisted him in this work. What was achieved was done by a team of people and it is appropriate that the key members should not be forgotten as a result of history's predilection for simplifying the narrative to credit the headman with everything done by the firm. But it is evident that his contribution at the centre of all this activity was what held it all together and it was as a result of his vision and single-mindedness that the reputation of the Heal business was established.

The development of the business and the types of merchandise it offered (with dates where possible) have been briefly outlined, as have the various 'foreign' influences. To try to permit the reader to imagine the furniture in its original setting, information has been recorded about exhibitions, displays and interior decoration, culminating with a more detailed examination of the 1936 Seven Architects Exhibition.

The conclusion which follows seeks to draw together again all aspects of A.H.'s career.