

TAKE A SEAT

The story of Parker Knoll 1834 - 1994

The 1830s brought change; gone was the age of elegance. Furniture was still handmade, often traditional, but population growth and more disposable wealth boosted demand, which mechanisation and mass production could satisfy. Developments like coiled springs for comfort and spirit varnish for finish spawned an abundance of styles and ornament, in which good taste and high quality were often sacrificed.

In that vacuum, in London town, a young apprentice learnt his trade, and launched an enterprise that put another term in household use a century later: Parker Knoll, synonymous with quality, comfort and good design. This is the story of a family, a firm, a product and an insight into social, industrial and design change in British society.

In 1834 William Parker emerged from indentures a Master Cabinet Maker, setting up business in Finsbury. By 1860 he employed fifty craftsmen; that firm continued until the 1950s. In 1870 his son Frederick started up in his father's stables, moved to London Wall in 1871, Wenlock Street in '75 with brother Walter, Curtain Road in 1880 and Hampstead Road in 1889. In 1892 his son Harry joined him in Euston Road. Parkers dealt in antiques as well as manufacture, and in 1898 moved to Wycombe, opening new premises in 1900.

There they made furniture for the first Royal Yacht, and in 1901 father and three sons formed Frederick Parker & Sons Ltd. In 1903 the Newman Street showrooms opened, near Oxford Circus — Bourne & Hollingworth leased the upper floors. The sons were Harry, William and Tom. In 1910 a young designer joined — Ercolani, a year after new factory space was added near Uxbridge. Business expanded to Berlin in 1912, but two years later Parkers furnished the Cunarder *Aquitania* — and made a loss. War came, and the firm turned out wartime woodware by the millions — kettle stands, tent pegs, ammunition boxes, plus parts for the Sopwith Camel and Pup.

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In 1919 peace brought diversification — into Cowley Garage Ltd and a canalside dock business. The '20s brought expansion at Wycombe, Belgian imports, and a little noticed patent from Germany — no 322638, registered by one Willi Knoll for a new form of spring upholstery. In 1931 Ambrose Heal introduced Willi to an old acquaintance — Tom Parker (TCP), and three days later they agreed to make 200 chairs a month under licence with Knoll's patent. The new chair was labelled Parker Knoll.

The Thirties brought business from India's Viceroy and Haile Selassie; 'tension suspension' took off when adman Vernon started a 50 year campaign that made Parker Knoll a household name. In 1935 the *Queen Mary* was fitted out, but with war, materials dried up; Newman Street closed in '41 after air raid damage, Parker Knoll Ltd was created in '42, its war effort devoted to A frames, wooden boxes, airplane wings and glider repairs. Then came Utility Furniture, and George Parker put the business up for sale — for £110,000. Back from retirement came TCP, making his sons-in-law Alpe and Jourdan joint MDs. Parkers were back in business.

Post-war Board of Trade controls led to conflict until 1948 when designers regained their freedom; a year later Parker Knoll Textiles was born, in 1950, and Sieges Parker in France. In the fifties, strikes and litigation against US Knoll International sapped energies, and in 1961 TCP died. To cope with increased sales in 1962 a new factory opened at Chipping Norton and by 1968 1,603,378 chairs had been made in one decade.

In 1967 Parkers bought Dancer & Hearne, which included a pub — the Hit and Miss — on 967 years' lease. Two years after that the last Parker died — William, aged 90. In 1970 the group comprised Cornwell Norton, Dancer & Hearne, Parker Knoll France, Parker Knoll Textiles and G.P. & J. Baker. That was the year of Wycombe's worst-ever fire, when the factory went up in smoke and production returned to the Penn Street premises of Dancer & Hearne — closed 18 days before. A year later better facilities emerged at Wycombe and at Chipping Norton, and Penn Street went; in 1972/3 profits topped £1m.

In 1976 the next generation took charge — Martin and Tom Jourdan and John Arnold — all grandsons of Tom Parker. Lancs weavers K. Raymakers and Nathan Furniture joined the Group by '81 and within five years E. Lock and Monkwell too. In 1988 Parker Knoll became Cornwell Parker plc and later moved deeper into Europe with Fardis of France and Vibeltext in Belgium. 1995 marks a major milestone — this remarkable family firm will be 125 years old, as readers of the Parker Knoll story will learn.

Today Parker Knoll is more than just a product and a name — it is a symbol of excellence, style and good taste in the best of British homes. This is the story of how that happened.



TAKE A SEAT has been researched and written by one of Parker Knoll's longest-serving managers — now retired — from Company and other records and the memories of colleagues. It is lavishly illustrated from the archives, and independently edited by one of Bucks' leading local historians, less as a 'Company book' than as an objective record of a significant player in the country's domestic industry. The book will be presented in large format on fine paper within a jacketed case binding. Pre-publication subscribers will find their names listed in the back of each book, which will be individually hand-numbered. The Limited Edition will be available to subscribers for £20 collected from Parker Knoll, Wycombe (£22.50 mailed direct) and copies will be on sale at a retail net price of £25 after publication, provisionally planned for early 1995.

Author STEVE BLAND joined Parker Knoll at Newman Street from school in 1936. After wartime RAF service, he returned as Sales Manager. He pioneered the Contracts Division, instigated market research, acted as a troubleshooter, handled training and then moved to buying. On retirement after 49 years and nine months' service, Steve Bland took over the Company's antique chair collection, researched and catalogued 350 pieces — and then wrote this book.



TAKE A SEAT

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The story of Parker Knoll
1834 - 1994

by Stephen Bland



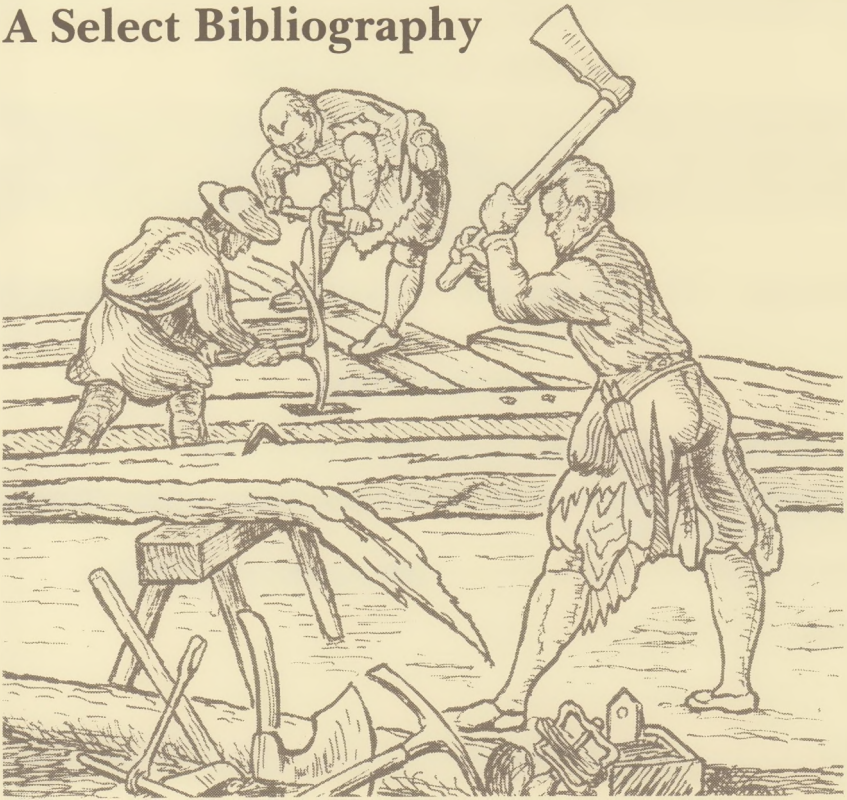
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