



Fig. 10  
Uriah Alsop's  
Stamp Mark

## MR URIAH ALSOP'S STEAM CABINET WORKS - AN EXTRACT FROM THE BRISTOL TIMES AND MIRROR 'WORK IN BRISTOL', 1883

Twenty or more years ago house furniture, of whatever quality, was produced at the cost of very much labour and time, every portion of a chair, table, chest of drawers, or sofa, having to go through a hand process in their construction, thus making the price which had to be paid for any article necessarily high, and in many cases goods were of an inferior quality. Now, thanks to the introduction of machinery, household furniture is more rapidly made, and a better finish is ensured. Mr Alsop, we believe, was the first to introduce machinery into his works, over twenty years ago. Before that time if a log had to be opened it had to be cut through by two men at a saw pit, the character of the labour of doing which might be understood by those who saw the perspiration that poured from the sawyers; in the shops the rip saw, hand saw, and tenon saw were used to cut boards into shorter lengths and sizes; curves were cut by means of a bow saw, lathes were turned by the feet, and a variety of planes were repaired to smooth wood, and in all joinery work there was a large amount of shaving, squaring, ruling etc., before sides or edges were made sufficiently true to be glued. In every department the labour was enormous, but the introduction of machinery did away with all this, and steam was gradually made to saw, to plane, to adjust, and to turn. When Mr Alsop introduced machinery to lighten the toil of his workmen, he was abused and decried by all in the trade, who said he was about to ruin the cabinet business; but only time served to prove that the course he adopted (in which he was followed by other employers) was an enormous boon, and that instead of the trade being ruined it was the era of a great development, for where then one or two hundred hands found employment a thousand find occupation now. The end sought by machinery is the greatest possible economy of time and labour, and men now do not work half as hard and yet earn considerably more money. A visitor to the works of Mr Alsop who opens his premises for inspection every Wednesday, would derive much valuable information concerning the manufacture of furniture, and be exceedingly interested in what will come before his observation, and be astonished at the speedy and effective manner in which the various parts of chairs, sofas, etc are turned, shaped and fitted. The premises have a considerable frontage to Broadmead, but a still more extensive one to Fairfax Street, where are situated the entrances to the manufactory. There are four entrances, viz, one for workmen, one to the sawmill, one to the stabling, and one to the packing shed. Logs (some very huge) are deposited outside the

works, and after being opened, are taken to the circular saws, of which there are several, and cut into boards, to lengths and sizes. In this state the wood is carried to the lower work shops, where there are fifteen lathes, three band saws, rabbeting, tenoning, morticing, moulding, planing, and other machines (driven by an engine of 50 horse power) and by them the wood is turned, planed, curved, moulded, and prepared to pass into the hands of the cabinet makers. In an extensive vault under the front premises is a large store of veneer of the choicest wood, some of which is beautifully figured, several of the most handsome being Hungarian ash, St. Domingo mahogany, English, Porto Rico, Amercian, Black Sea, and Italian walnut. Amongst other wood either cut into veneer or used in solid state are satin wood, American Whitewood, Wainscot oak, Bahia rosewood, ash, Ceylon and African ebony, birch, mahogany, Georgia pitch pine etc. The materials having been cut and prepared, they are placed in the hands of the cabinet makers to convert into articles of furniture in the numerous shops, which are set apart for the various classes of work. Aided by mechanical appliances for veneering and fitting, the parts are quickly and truly adjusted, and in a little time legs, backs, sides, bodies, and other parts which were sent into the shops assume the forms of sideboards, wardrobes, chests of drawers, tables, handsome chairs, couches, sofas etc. In these workshops the men have everything in their hands, their convenience being studied as far as possible in their labour. According to the quality and nature of the goods the classes of material are used in their make. The best of course is made of the finest timber, which has stood for various periods (in some instances for over twenty years) in the spacious lofts and drying rooms on the premises. The joinery in all qualities of goods is thoroughly sound, scamping not being allowed even in those of the most inferior kinds. When the frames of couches, chairs, and such like articles are made and carved, they are passed on to the upholstering department, where they are finished according to their class. The springs used are of the best steel, coated with copper, and the drapery with which the chairs, sofas, etc are covered consist of French and English tapestries, varied in colour, figure, and design; plain and stamped Utrecht velvets, plain and stamped silk plushes, chintzes, English and French cretonnes, dimities, cretonne and chintz linings, reppe, Terry French roan skins, French, American and English morocco, and Crockett's American cloth. Gimps, studs, and buttons, of which large stores are kept, are added in order to embellish the articles. When the various goods leave the hands of the workmen in their completed state, with locks, bolts, castors, hinges, knobs, etc. fitted, they go to the top storey. A staff of French polishers work here, and they soon give to the furniture that beautiful, smooth coating which may be called the finishing touch.



Immense quantities of gums, oils, and spirits of wine are used. Each department is under the supervision of a foreman, who also allots the work to each man and gives him the exact quantity of material with which to accomplish the task. Great economy is thus exercised, and it is by this method that Mr Alsop is able to manufacture goods in so substantial a manner and at so cheap a rate. Chairs of more general use are made in thousands, there



**Fig. 11 Windsor chair made by Uriah Alsop**

being an exceedingly brisk demand for them.

The manufactured articles are removed to the storerooms in the rear of the premises, where chairs are carefully piled in enormous stacks, and tables are stowed away in parts to save space. Much of the stock is placed in the extensive showrooms in the premises facing Broadmead, where furniture of all kinds in its perfection is to be seen, and intending buyers can meet with articles that will suit their tastes. It would be impossible to enumerate all the goods of which the enormous stock is made up, but suffice to say they range from the most costly sideboards to babies' chairs sold for less than a shilling each. Some of the suites of furniture are exceedingly handsome, one for bedroom, of black walnut with ebony beading and painted panels, which was shown us, being a magnificent work of art. Several ornamental articles of Amboyna wood (a pretty figured material) are exceedingly choice.

But Mr Alsop does not confine himself to the manufacture of furniture. He is a large importer of feathers, flocks, wool, millpuff, and such like goods, which he supplies retail to his customers and also makes up into beds, bolsters, pillows, and mattresses. The stock of bedsteads, too, wood (made on the premises) and iron, is extensive and varied; carpets and hangings also form part of the warehouse and saleroom stock, so Mr Alsop is able to completely furnish the largest mansion or the smallest cottage.

Supplies are sent to all parts of the world, but more especially to the North and West. Considerable quantities of sacking and hempen cloth are used for packing and several vehicles, drawn by powerful horses, carry them to the residences of local purchasers, or in bulk to centres whence they are despatched by rail or water to retail houses or private buyers at a distance.

The extent and size of the premises may be imagined when it is mentioned that they cover a large stretch of ground between Broadmead and Fairfax Street, to both

of which thoroughfares they have a considerable frontage. The buildings are four and five storeys high, and are lighted by nearly 300 windows. There are 700 feet of steam pipe and 800 feet of gas pipe in the various departments of the factory, which are also warmed by the steam. Every possible precaution is taken against fire by concrete floors and sliding iron doors, so that if a conflagration were to break out in any one section of the vast building its spread would be checked by its being simply shut off by the closing of these iron partitions. Mr Alsop studies the comfort and convenience of his large number of hands, many of whom have been in his employ from twenty to thirty years. A lavatory is provided for each department, so that when the men cease work they can leave the premises clean and refreshed after going through the agreeable but short operation of a "swill". The fact that there is a perfect understanding and good feeling between the men and their employer is most gratifying.

*Researched by Bill Cotton*