THE FREDERICK PARKER FOUNDATION
Second Annual Lectures at the Linnean Society on 26th October 2000 at 6pm Burlington House, Piccadilly
Lecture by Robin Day O.B.E.

The well-filled lecture theatre at the Linnean Society was treated to lectures on two very different aspects of the development of chairs, which made a thought-provoking contrast. Octogenarian Robin Day OBE, a crucial part of British furniture design since the War, was born in High Wycombe in 1915. Although he had a very long and productive relationship in plastics with the Hille family from 1949, he was at pains to point out his love of wood (in which he still works) and the other widespread design work for which he has been responsible, including the interiors of VC10 planes and the Royal Festival Hall in 1951.

His first quality production stacking chair was made of ply on a beech underframe in 1949, but in order to achieve cheaper and better results that were comfortable, good-looking and tough, he turned to polypropylene which was initially licensed from Italy. Hille had the courage to invest in expensive metal dies to press out the shells in 1963 and the chairs were an immediate success, selling in time to over fifty countries. The process from sketch to model, to plaster, to fibreglass to cut steel moulds was outlined using period slides. A large range of variations of bases and seat types have been developed over the years, including smaller 'education chairs' with hand-holes in the backs, in five sizes from the late 1960's. There are also armed and tub chair versions, snap-on seat pads and covers and the outdoor 'Polo' chair with many piercings. The London Underground network has used the model in steel. The basic chair is still in production for Habitat.

After clothes and shoes, chairs are the most intimate product that designers encounter and Robin Day emphasised the privilege that it has been for him to work with them. There will be an exhibition of his and his wife's designs at the Barbican in 2001.

Christopher Claxton Stevens