

Paul Collier, *Harris Lebus: A Romance with the Furniture Trade*. Faringdon, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2020. 232 pp., 200 illus., ISBN: 978-1-911451-06-8. Paperback. £19.99.

This book examines the history of the London furniture manufacturer Harris Lebus from the 1840s to 1970. Four generations of the family worked in the business, started by Louis Lebus (1817–1879), who arrived in Hull from Breslau in Lower Silesia, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland) in the 1840s. By the mid-1850s he was in London, settling in Whitechapel within the well-established Jewish immigrant community, where he set up a cabinet-making workshop. His sons developed

the business into a family partnership, which later became a public company.

Structured in two parts, the seven chapters are organised in a broadly chronological way, tracing the transition from home-based cabinet-making in the East End of London to the 'largest furniture factory in the world' in Tottenham Hale, with a workforce of several thousand. Each chapter is divided into sections, with sub-headings listed in the contents page, a helpful guide as there is no index. The first part, made up of two chapters, establishes the building of the business, led by Louis's sons Harris (1852–1907) and Sol (1866–1926). The second section describes aspects of the business during the Tottenham Hale years, 1901–1970, including changes in design, materials, manufacturing processes and marketing strategies.

By 1885 manufacture had moved into a five-storey building in Tabernacle Street, Shoreditch, and by the late 1890s was incorporating machine-made parts produced in-house. With increasing sales and limited space, a new site for a purpose-built factory was purchased six miles north of the city, in Tottenham Hale. The Harris Lebus Finsbury Cabinet Works, Ferry Lane, opened in 1901; it was the first large factory in the area, with an initial site of 13½ acres, expanding to 45 acres.

Dining room and bedroom suites for the upper end of the wholesale market were the main products. Styles were 'antique', for instance a 'Sheraton' mahogany bedroom suite inlaid with satinwood, advertised in the 1913 catalogue for £230. A dark oak 'Jacobean'



The hand-carving workshop before the First World War. Carved decoration was a characteristic feature of the firm's furniture until 1914. *Courtesy of the Lebus Family Archive, Haringey Archive and Museum Service.*



bedroom suite was a cheaper option at £30. Maple & Co. of Tottenham Court Road was the largest domestic customer, accounting for 13% of sales by 1911. A team of travelling salesmen promoted furniture ranges to furnishing and department stores across the country. Exports amounted to 25% of sales by 1913, with most success in South America.

Major pre-war contracts included mahogany furniture for staterooms of the Cunard Liner *Aquitania*, for Waring and Gillow of Lancaster, and furnishing in French walnut all 400 bedrooms of the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. Gramophone cabinets were made for HMV and cupboards for the Initial Towel Company.

Following the start of the First World War, Lebus was contracted by the Ministry of Munitions to manufacture supplies including wooden reels and boxes for cordite. Aircraft produced in the Tottenham factory were the Handley Page 0/400 biplane bomber, the largest bomber used in the war, and the Vickers Vimy monoplane.

Anticipating a decline in demand for the type of furniture it had made previously, in 1920 manufacture changed to furniture for the lower end of the market. Dining and bedroom furniture was also sold either separately or as a suite to the public and showrooms were established in Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Liverpool. Catalogues were produced monthly in two versions, wholesale, and retail.

Aircraft contracts won during the Second World War included the Albemarle for Armstrong Whitworth, the Hotspur glider, wooden fuselages for the Horsa glider and the de Havilland-designed Mosquito. Collapsible wooden canoes used for reconnaissance operations, launched from submarines, assault landing craft and top-secret decoy Sherman tanks, were all made.

A public company was formed in 1947, with Sir Herman Lebus (1884–1957), knighted for his contribution during both wars, as Chairman and Managing Director. A showroom opened in Maddox Street, off Regent Street, and new designs were launched at the trade shows of the British Furniture Manufacturers' Federated Association, at Earl's Court. From the mid-1950s the Link range of contemporary style lounge and dining room furniture was introduced. Marketing became more sophisticated with short films produced by Pearl and Dean shown in cinemas across the country. Full-page advertisements appeared in women's magazines and a Routemaster bus advertising 'Lebus of London' toured the Netherlands and Germany.

In 1966, under Oliver Lebus (1945–2009) as Chairman, large-scale investment in new machinery and reduction of the workforce to 1,000 was the first phase in a plan to re-locate to new purpose-built premises. Thirty acres of the site was sold to the Greater London Council for social housing. A streamlined product range, Europa, was launched, using both solid teak and simulated teak veneer. Competition from other manufacturers who had standardised production earlier, using materials such as melamine, contributed to mounting losses and the factory closed in 1970.

This is a valuable addition to sources on the history of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century commercial furniture production. It is also a social history, telling the story of the family and workforce community in Tottenham Hale. The main source is the firm's business archive, donated by the family to Bruce Castle Museum, Haringey Archive and Museum Service.

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