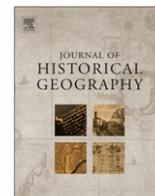


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## Geographies of the British government's wartime Utility furniture scheme, 1940–1945

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### Abstract

The Second World War Utility furniture scheme represented a distinctive moment in the changing geographies of the twentieth-century British furniture industry. The scheme enabled the British state to direct the entire furniture commodity chain, from the regulation of timber supplies through to the management of final consumption. Whilst there has been some discussion of Utility within the context of modernism in design, the paper explores the broader historical geographies of Utility furniture. We demonstrate the ways in which state activity in wartime reconfigured socio-economic networks of production, distribution and consumption. The paper's assessment of the Utility scheme reveals the importance of historical contingency in commodity chain dynamics as well as the role of the national state as a key organising agent.

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**Keywords:** Utility; Furniture industry; Commodity chains; State; Britain

The Second World War Utility furniture scheme represented a distinctive moment in the changing geographies of the twentieth-century British furniture industry. Planned through the latter part of 1942 and implemented in 1943, the scheme enabled the state to direct the entire furniture commodity chain, from the regulation of timber supplies to the management of final consumption. The wartime office of the Board of Trade specified a small set of designs for manufacture, designated individual firms for the production of Utility furniture, and controlled distribution through the issue of buying permits to households. When the scheme began, allocations of 'units' were provided to newly married couples setting up their first home and to existing households who had lost furniture as a result of bombing, whilst later in the war the families of pregnant women and/or with growing children also were prioritised.<sup>1</sup> The Utility furniture scheme continued in a strict sense until 1948, with a modified 'Freedom of design' phase lasting until the end of price control and quality assurance in 1952.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst the Utility period may appear to be a relatively short episode, it was shaped by concerns about the furniture industry which stretched back to the late nineteenth century, including disquiet with poor working conditions in sweated parts of the trade.<sup>3</sup> The reorganisation of the industry under the Utility scheme also was bound up with debates about the value of 'good design' and a need for design reform, which continued to frame assessments of the British furniture industry through the 1950s and 1960s. In part, the Utility scheme sought to address contemporary critiques such as Pevsner's which decried parts of the furniture trade for lacking design skill and reproached retailers for offering 'cheap goods' to the public.<sup>4</sup> When the scheme was introduced by the Board of Trade in 1942, a press announcement implied a need for design reform: 'the function of the [Advisory] Committee [on Utility Furniture] will be to produce specifications for furniture of good, sound construction in simple but agreeable designs for sale at reasonable prices, and ensuring the maximum economy of raw materials and labour.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Board of Trade, Utility Furniture. General Policy, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA) BT 64/2052. See also M. Denney, Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948, in: J. Attfield (Ed.) *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999, 110–124.

<sup>2</sup> C.D. Edwards, *Twentieth-century Furniture: Materials, Manufacture and Markets*, Manchester, 1994, 141.

<sup>3</sup> First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System, PP 1888 (361). After the war, the Board of Trade explicitly argued that wartime changes such as the establishment of a Trade Board and 'the improvement of organisation of the trade unions and employers during the war have ended this condition.' That is, state control of the furniture industry had been important in discouraging sweated labour (Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, London, 1946, 15).

<sup>4</sup> N. Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, Cambridge, 1937, 38 and passim.

<sup>5</sup> Board of Trade, 8 July 1942, cited in Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951*, London, 1974, 12.

Design historical approaches have situated the emergence of Utility design in relation to both modernism and the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as tracing connections between the Utility scheme and state-sponsored efforts to encourage 'good design' such as the establishment of the Design and Industries Association, the Council for Art and Industry and the Council of Industrial Design.<sup>6</sup> Some accounts have read the aims and intentions of the Utility furniture scheme as a means of attempting to shift British attitudes—of the industry itself as well as the wider public—away from 'traditional' and towards 'modern' designs.<sup>7</sup> In this paper we situate the scheme within the context of a broader system of wartime controls at a time of deep crisis. Faced with constraints at all points in the furniture commodity chain, the British state became involved in a wholesale reimagining of the geographies of furniture production, distribution and consumption. Early in the Second World War, the state was compelled to engage with acute shortages of finished consumer goods as well as the primary raw materials of timber, plywood and veneers.<sup>8</sup> Retailing and distribution of furniture also required control and intervention, given that the transport of bulky goods over long distances placed demands on scarce petrol resources. Finally—and not least important—leading furniture manufacturing firms were drawn into war work, leaving limited plant and labour capacity in remaining small and medium sized firms. Domestic furniture production was restructured via the 'designation' of individual firms in particular cities and regions to produce different types of Utility furniture (i.e. chairs, sideboards, wardrobes etc.) in order to distribute manufacturing capacity more evenly across the whole of Britain.<sup>9</sup> Careful specification of a narrow range of designs sought to ensure that manufacturers achieved economy of materials and were able to provide a uniform quality of product to consumers at fixed prices. As a 1942 Board of Trade memorandum written shortly before the introduction of the Utility scheme stated, 'price control of new furniture cannot achieve maximum effectiveness until there is complete control of all stages of production from the raw material to the finished article.'<sup>10</sup>

The central aim of this paper is to elaborate and interpret changing geographies of the British furniture industry during the wartime Utility period.<sup>11</sup> The paper makes two important contributions. First, we develop the Utility case as a means of foregrounding the role of the state in reconfiguring commodity chains, and underscoring 'the implications of this insight for appreciating the historically contingent and politically constructed nature of chains.'<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of research on late twentieth-century commodity chains and networks has emphasised the coordination of chains by lead firms (or transnational corporation networks).<sup>13</sup> However, the example of Utility furniture offers the possibility of excavating the role played by the national state not merely as an institutional backdrop to the making and remaking of commodity chains but rather as an important 'organising agent.'<sup>14</sup> The paper seeks to develop new perspectives on geographies of commodity chains and the role of the state: that is, not only do states regulate commodities as they cross territorial boundaries, but also—as explored here—they may act to reconstitute commodity chain dynamics at different scales. Insofar as an investigation of Utility furniture during the Second World War illuminates a distinct power shift away from manufacturers and retailers and towards the national state, our account lends weight to Bair's argument that 'historical analysis... helps to avoid the temptation of seeing the organisation of contemporary commodity chains as necessary or inevitable...'<sup>15</sup>

Second, the case of Utility furniture provides a valuable window onto commodity chain dynamics at a time of crisis, sharply contrasting with contemporary global commodity chain analyses which emphasise 'the durability, expansion and institutionality of global markets.'<sup>16</sup> Further, the paper's focus on a distinctive type of crisis—that is, wartime—demonstrates the ways in which military activity reconfigures socio-economic networks of production, distribution and consumption. As Evenden has observed in the case of the aluminium commodity chain, wartime restructuring

redrew the boundaries of industrial geography and geopolitics; mobilised distant peoples and places and environments;

<sup>6</sup> See J. Woodham, Britain Can Make It and the history of design, in: P.J. Maguire, J. Woodham (Eds), *Design and Cultural Politics in Britain: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946*, London, 1997, 17–28; Denney, Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948 (note 1); F. MacCarthy, *All Things Bright and Beautiful: Design In Britain 1830 to Today*, London, 1972.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Attfield (Ed.), *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999; J. Attfield, *The Role of Design in the Relationship Between Furniture Manufacture and its Retailing 1939–1965 with Initial Reference to the Furniture Firm of J. Clarke*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Brighton, 1992; H. Dover, *Home Front Furniture: British Utility Design 1941–1951*, Aldershot, 1991; Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (note 5); Gordon Russell interviewed in *Utility: how a wartime government hired its own designers to give the furniture industry a compulsory range of consumer products*, *Design* 309 (1974) 63–71.

<sup>8</sup> E.L. Hargreaves and M.M. Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade*, London, 1952, 521. Veneer is a composite material comprised of thin layer of wood (often more expensive and/or with a more decorative grain) glued to a thicker layer of solid wood.

<sup>9</sup> For reasons of space and consistency as well as limitations in the archival record, the paper's discussion omits Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was not part of the original Utility scheme although the scheme's introduction was considered by the Board of Trade in late 1943/early 1944. There was concern that the Northern Irish furniture industry was insufficiently developed to support the scheme: 'not more than one third of the firms there are capable of producing to our Utility specifications' (Memorandum, *Furniture Production in Northern Ireland*, n.d. (circa 1944), 1, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Policy 1944–1946, TNA BT 64/2825). Throughout the paper, we use British to refer to the operation of the Utility scheme in England, Scotland and Wales.

<sup>10</sup> Price Control of New Furniture. Memorandum from O.H. Frost, Vice-Chairman of the Central Price Regulation Committee, 30 June 1942, Board of Trade, Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, TNA BT 64/1835.

<sup>11</sup> The paper primarily focuses upon the period until 1945, although reference is made to the immediate post-war years where appropriate. The 1948–1952 period is addressed in Attfield, *The Role of Design in the Relationship Between Furniture Manufacture and its Retailing 1939–1965 with Initial Reference to the Furniture Firm of J. Clarke* (note 7); J. Attfield, Freedom of design, in: J. Attfield (Ed.) *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999, 203–220.

<sup>12</sup> J. Bair, Global commodity chains: genealogy and review, in: J. Bair (Ed.), *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, Stanford, 2009, 1–3; the quotation is from page 19.

<sup>13</sup> Debates about the relative merits of commodity 'chains' versus 'networks' as well as a survey of the expansive literatures on global commodity chains, global value chains, global production networks and systems of provision are beyond the scope of this paper. On the conceptualisation of chains and networks, see D. Leslie and S. Reimer, Spatialising commodity chains, *Progress in Human Geography* 23 (1999) 401–420; A. Hughes and S. Reimer, Introduction, in: A. Hughes, S. Reimer (Eds), *Geographies of Commodity Chains*, London, 2004, 1–16. A recent review is provided in Bair, Global commodity chains (note 12). Our analysis in this paper connects most closely to the early articulation in T. K. Hopkins and I. Wallerstein, Commodity chains in the world-economy prior to 1800, *Review* 10 (1986) 157–170.

<sup>14</sup> Bair, Global commodity chains (note 12), 11. See also Smith et al.'s argument that within work on global commodity chains, 'the state, if it appears at all, is little more than a contextual backdrop colouring the particularities of national industrial orders' A. Smith, A. Rainnie, M. Dunford, J. Hardy, R. Hudson and D. Sadler, Networks of value, commodities and regions: reworking divisions of labour in macro-regional economies, *Progress in Human Geography* 26 (2002) 41–63; the quotation is from page 46.

<sup>15</sup> Bair, Global commodity chains (note 12), 18.

<sup>16</sup> P.A. Hough, Disarticulations and commodity chains: cattle, coca and capital accumulation along Columbia's agricultural frontier, *Environment and Planning A* 43 (2011) 1016–1034, page 1016; see also J. Bair and M. Werner, Commodity chains and the uneven geographies of global capitalism, *Environment and Planning A* 43 (2011) 988–997.

and imposed a legacy on postwar production and consumption patterns.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, however, our discussion amplifies arguments about the ways in which war reshapes activities within and across nodes in the commodity chain with a notable focus on a product destined for domestic rather than military consumption: furniture. The remainder of the paper traces the geographies of Utility furniture through consideration of transformations in timber supply; coordination of design; reshaping of manufacturing geographies; and shifts in the retailing and consumption of furniture, documenting the 'extensive' and 'intricate' control retained by the British state through the Board of Trade.<sup>18</sup> Whilst coordination and control of the wartime food and clothing industries were perhaps strongest at points of consumption (particularly, of course, via rationing), the furniture industry was distinctive in the reconfiguration of practices and processes across the commodity chain.

### Timber control

Like its counterparts in continental Europe and North America, the early twentieth-century British furniture industry predominantly worked in wood.<sup>19</sup> Tracking the raw material sources of Utility furniture thus necessitates careful investigation of the supply of timber as well as plywood and veneers. During the inter-war period '96% of total requirements [across the whole of the British economy] were regularly imported.'<sup>20</sup> Timber and plywood imports dominated both by value and by volume:

in pre-war years we spent more money on timber and plywood imports than on any other raw material; the pre-war average import of softwood, hardwood and pit-wood was 9.5 million tons as compared with the next highest, 7.25 million tons of iron ore, pig iron, scrap, steel ingots and semi-finished steel.<sup>21</sup>

Hardwood timber was obtained from Canada and the USA as well as 'tropical' sources, whilst softwood typically was imported from Finland, Russia and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>22</sup> Finland supplied 40% of British plywood, with the remainder acquired from Russia, the USA and Canada. The main suppliers of veneers were Canada, the USA and West Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Given such patterns, the onset of war dramatically disrupted the shipping of timber from established sources in both Europe and

North America. Total softwood imports dropped rapidly after 1939 and hardwood imports after 1940, as depicted in Table 1. The pre-war British furniture industry 'normally consumed about half of the total hardwood imports together with some softwoods and a very considerable proportion [40%] of the plywood and veneer imports.'<sup>24</sup> The changing geographies of hardwood supply as the Second World War progressed reveal a particularly interesting picture and are of special relevance to the production of Utility furniture. Formerly the largest single supplier of hardwood, imports from the USA dropped from 17.43 million cubic feet (1934–38 average) to 2.85 million cubic feet in 1946.<sup>25</sup> Imports from the largest European suppliers by volume (Poland and Yugoslavia) disappeared entirely and Finnish supply dropped from 1.196 million cubic feet to just 1000 cubic feet.<sup>26</sup> Imports from Canada remained relatively stable, whilst there was considerable expansion in supplies from the Gold Coast (0.755–1.348 million cubic feet), Nigeria (0.910–2.435 million cubic feet) and French West and Equatorial Africa (0.324–1.405 million cubic feet).

Crucially, the wartime expansion of hardwood production in British and other colonial territories had important consequences for resource geographies in the post-war period. Given that the purchase of hardwood from 'dollar sources' was severely constrained by the British post-war currency crisis, resources from 'soft' sources came to be even more attractive from the late 1940s onwards. The Keith Price Committee, established to consider timber and plywood requirements for 1949–53, recommended that: 'everything should be done to increase to the maximum by 1953 exports of hardwood from British Colonial territories.'<sup>27</sup>

It was also argued that post-war softwood supplies should be 'secured from non-traditional sources':

the Government should afford what help it can to private interests willing to undertake, in conjunction with the Governments concerned, the develop of the softwood forest areas of Central American and Brazil. Whatever can economically be done in the colonies quickly to develop any untapped reserves should also be undertaken.<sup>28</sup>

This echoed the Board of Trade's 1946 suggestion that for all types of timber material (softwood, hardwood, plywood and veneers) 'urgent attention should be given to the development of Empire resources and to the acquisition of supplies from foreign sources on

<sup>17</sup> M. Evenden, Aluminium commodity chains and the environmental history of the Second World War, *Environmental History* 16 (2011) 69–93, page 71. See also M. Evenden, Mobilising rivers: hydro-electricity, the state and World War II in Canada, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99 (2009) 845–855. The reshaping of agricultural production and commodity landscapes 'at home' during the Second World War has been considered by D. Mitchell, *Battle/fields: braceros, agribusiness, and the violent reproduction of the California agricultural landscape during World War II*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010) 143–156; and by D. Harvey and M. Riley, 'Fighting from the fields': developing the British 'National Farm' in the Second World War, *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009) 495–516.

<sup>18</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), xi.

<sup>19</sup> With the exception of a few examples such as Otto Wagner's use of aluminium in furniture for the Austrian Postal Savings Bank in Vienna, the furniture industry was 'rooted in woodworking practice', C. Edwards, Aluminium furniture, 1886–1986: the changing applications and reception of a modern material, *Journal of Design History* 14 (2001) 209.

<sup>20</sup> J.J. MacGregor, The source and nature of statistical information in special fields of statistics: timber statistics, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 116 (1953) 298–322, 299.

<sup>21</sup> P. Ford, The allocation of timber, in: D.N. Chester (Ed.), *Lessons of the British War Economy*, Cambridge, 1951, 144–153, page 144; see also Board of Trade, *Report of the Committee appointed to Consider the United Kingdom's Probable Requirements and Supplies of Timber and Plywood 1949 to 1953*, London, 1949 (hereafter Keith Price Committee).

<sup>22</sup> Keith Price Committee (note 21), passim. See also F.H. House, *Timber at War: An Account of the Organisation and Activities of the Timber Control 1939–1945*, London, 1965, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Keith Price Committee (note 21), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 7. The figure of 40% of plywood imports is taken from Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 215. It is interesting to note that the next largest consumer of hardwood imports in the pre-war period was the vehicle manufacturing industry (Keith Price Committee (note 21), 8.).

<sup>25</sup> All figures from Keith Price Committee (note 21), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Timber from Finland was unavailable for some considerable time after 1945—Finnish industry (including the export trade) was hampered both by the need to make post-war reparations to the USSR as well as the fact that Soviet pressure prevented Finland from participating in the Marshall Plan (K. Davies, 'A geographical notion turned into an artistic reality': promoting Finland and selling Finnish design in post-war Britain 1953–1965, *Journal of Design History* 15 (2002) 101–116, page 105).

<sup>27</sup> Keith Price Committee (note 21), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Keith Price Committee (note 21), 20.

**Table 1**  
Hardwood and softwood imports, 1938–1942.

	Hardwood (million cubic feet)	Softwood (thousand standards)
1938	3.22	163.0
1939	2.82	140.1
1940	2.32	76.4
1941	1.24	41.3
1942	1.02	27.9

Source: *Monthly Digest of Statistics* No. 2, January 1946. Central Statistical Office, London. Data extracted from Table 89, Imports of miscellaneous raw materials, page 73. Note that softwood timber is conventionally measured in 'standards,' equivalent to 165 cubic feet.

a long-term basis.<sup>29</sup> Whilst it is beyond the context of this paper to detail the specific dynamics of colonial and post-colonial timber resource extraction, it is clear that British wartime experiences and shortages exerted considerable pressure on tropical forest resources both during and after the Second World War.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond shifts in the countries supplying timber, a significant development in the Utility furniture commodity chain was the increased use of what was typically referred to as 'home-grown' timber. Overseen by the Forestry Commission from 1939 and the Department of Home Timber Production from January 1941,<sup>31</sup> production of hardwood increased from 10 million (1934–38 average) to 38 million cubic feet by 1946.<sup>32</sup> Softwood production also increased, 'resulting in widespread depletion of our stocks of standing timber.'<sup>33</sup> Home-grown timber—predominantly beech, oak and elm—provided 75% of total timber consumption by 1943,<sup>34</sup> and by 1946, 'two thirds of timber standing in British woodlands in 1939 had been felled [...] to meet wartime needs.'<sup>35</sup>

The ability and speed with which the state sought to intervene in the supply of timber and to substitute 'home-grown' for imported timber were boosted by policies implemented in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>36</sup> There had been no national forestry policy before 1919, and little was known about the size of British timber resources.<sup>37</sup> Wartime shortages prompted the inter-war development of national strategies to manage both state forests and private woodlands, including the taking of woodland censuses to determine the potential size and quality of 'home output.'<sup>38</sup> In anticipation of Second World War disruptions, a draft

timber control scheme had been prepared through 1937–8, and on 5 September 1939—two days after Britain had declared war on Germany—the Ministry of Supply issued Control of Timber (No. 1) Order.<sup>39</sup> Timber Control became 'the sole buyer in the first instance of all timber, whether home-grown or imported, and [...] thereafter exercise[d] control over the distribution of timber and the price charged for it to the consumer.'<sup>40</sup> It managed allocations for military versus civilian use and among different types of industry. As a post-war Select Committee summarised:

The Control was originally set up in conditions of extreme physical scarcity and great risks in transit; many of the peacetime sources of supply were closed, and it was inevitable that the acquisition of all the available timber should be carried out by a body supported by the full financial power of the State and able to bear heavy trading losses.<sup>41</sup>

Although the appropriate level of Timber Control's profits was debated in the post-war period, both during and immediately following the war it operated at a loss.<sup>42</sup>

Given that it was such a large consumer of imported materials, the furniture industry was 'quick to feel the impact of war.'<sup>43</sup> Timber Control announced in July 1940 that no timber was to be available to domestic furniture manufacturers. Quota schemes subsequently were implemented across a range of different industries, and specific arrangements for furniture were applied in November 1941. After this date, only firms registered with the Timber Supplies Committee (part of Timber Control) could receive supplies of wood. What had been an already limited quota was cut in January 1942, and furniture manufacturers' pre-war timber stocks became significantly depleted. Both Timber Control and the Board of Trade increasingly became concerned about the price, quality and availability of domestic furniture available to consumers. Firms during this early wartime period were described as

eking out their timber supplies with inferior material, or increasing their profits by the application of unnecessary decoration, and the result was a supply of expensive and poor quality furniture insufficient to meet the general demand.<sup>44</sup>

Later post-war commentators Hargreaves and Gowing similarly noted that '...the shortage of timber had led to the extensive use of

<sup>29</sup> Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Tucker argues that 'the process of integrating the entire world's forests into a global economy of war' began during World War I but that the scale of such exploitation—particularly of tropical resources—accelerated after 1939. R.P. Tucker, *The World Wars and the globalisation of timber cutting*, in: R.P. Tucker, E. Russell (Eds), *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of Warfare*, Corvallis, OR, 2004, 110–139, page 116. See also M. Williams, *Deforesting the Earth: from Prehistory to Global Crisis*, Chicago, 2003; and more specifically on colonial forestry: J.M. Powell, 'Dominion over palm and pine': the British Empire forestry conferences, 1920–1947, *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007) 852–877; G. Barton, Empire forestry and the origins of environmentalism, *Journal of Historical Geography* 27 (2001) 529–552; R.P. Neumann, Forest rights, privileges and prohibitions: contextualising state forestry policy in colonial Tanganyika, *Environment and History* 3 (1997) 45–68; R.L. Bryant, Romancing colonial forestry: the discourse of 'forestry as progress' in British Burma, *Geographical Journal* 162 (1996) 169–178.

<sup>31</sup> G.D.N. Worswick, Raw material controls, *Oxford Economic Papers* 6 (1942) 1–41, page 32.

<sup>32</sup> Keith Price Committee (note 21), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Keith Price Committee (note 21), 10.

<sup>34</sup> House, *Timber at War* (note 22), viii.

<sup>35</sup> E.G. Richards, *British Forestry in the Twentieth Century*, Leiden, 2003, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Ford, *The allocation of timber* (note 21).

<sup>37</sup> MacGregor, *The source and nature of statistical information in special fields of statistics* (note 20); see also House, *Timber at War* (note 22), chapter 14.

<sup>38</sup> MacGregor, *The source and nature of statistical information in special fields of statistics* (note 20), 299. See also C. Watkins, *The use of Forestry Commission censuses for the study of woodland change*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 10 (1984) 396–406.

<sup>39</sup> House, *Timber at War* (note 22), 3–5; Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (note 5), 7.

<sup>40</sup> Seventh Report from the Select Committee on Estimates, Together With Minutes of Evidence Taken Before Sub-Committee F, and Appendices, Session 1950, *The Timber Control*, PP 1950 (170), vi.

<sup>41</sup> PP 1950 (170), xxv.

<sup>42</sup> PP 1950 (170), xxi–xxii.

<sup>43</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 512.

<sup>44</sup> Draft report for presentation to a visit of Swedish civil servants: 'Information for Swedish delegation on Price and Quality Control', 1947, Board of Trade, *Utility Furniture. General Policy*, TNA BT 64/2052 (note 1).

poor substitute materials; this encouraged the production of furniture whose shoddiness was often disguised by decoration.<sup>45</sup> Although new furniture initially was subject to both price control and maximum timber content, pressures on manufacturers resulted in the production of ‘poor quality articles,’ and second-hand furniture remained outside price control altogether.<sup>46</sup>

In many ways, then, the impetus for state control via the Utility furniture scheme can be seen to have emerged as a result of raw materials shortages. Pressures on the home furnishings commodity chain in the form of raised prices and poor quality were shaped at least in part by the scarcity of timber. As we have seen, initial measures by Timber Control sought to regulate and ration timber supply. Further controls then were introduced to limit the cost of second-hand furniture to its original selling price.<sup>47</sup> However, it became clear that neither price nor distribution control measures on their own would be sufficient to achieve the equitable distribution of adequate quality furniture to needy consumers, and in 1942 the Board of Trade moved a further step ‘along’ the commodity chain to specify designs for manufacture. The arrangements for furniture were distinctive: whilst Utility schemes were implemented for goods such as clothing, shoes and pottery, ‘it was only the furniture industry that was compelled to conform to specific statutory designs.’<sup>48</sup>

### Designing utility

If there is to be the utmost economy in the use of timber (and other materials) and labour then what in effect are standard designs will have to be evolved. This will follow from the specifications, because unless the latter are such that there is little scope for variation the economy of material will not be fully achieved. Both the manufacturers and the public will have to be educated away from the ‘frills and fancies’ of the present commercial products towards articles which through simple and even ‘austere’ in design are far more serviceable, practical, hard-wearing and pleasing to the eye. Here seems an opportunity which should not be missed for designers and craftsmen to co-operate through the exigencies of War to make a contribution towards the general betterment of furniture design and construction—there is ample evidence of the need for it at the present juncture when furniture is being ‘thrown together’ with the shoddiest of materials and workmanship, and sold at fantastically high prices.<sup>49</sup>

On 30 June 1942 a report by the Central Price Regulation Committee strongly advocated design oversight of the furniture industry. The following week, President of the Board of Trade Hugh Dalton announced the appointment of an Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, to be chaired by design reformer Charles Tennyson. Committee members were selected to provide representation from the furniture manufacturing industry, furniture designers, trade unions, housing specialists and consumers.<sup>50</sup> The Advisory Committee was to be responsible for the interpretation of the ‘simple but agreeable designs’ mentioned in Hugh Dalton’s announcement of the Utility scheme, and agreed on a deadline of 24 August 1942 for the submission of drawings from nominated designers.<sup>51</sup> The final designs selected were those of Edwin Clinch, a designer for the High Wycombe furniture manufacturer Goodearl Brothers and Herbert Cutler, deputy head of Wycombe Technical College.<sup>52</sup> Several ‘established’ designs were added to those submitted by Clinch and Cutler, ‘notably the rail-backed Windsor chair with the elm seat, the only piece which was made throughout the war in High Wycombe alone, because it was a highly specialised product, necessitating special machinery.’<sup>53</sup> Prototypes were constructed by the end of September 1942 and the first public exhibition opened at the Building Centre in London on 19 October.<sup>54</sup> A catalogue illustrating the complete range of designs for living room, bedroom, kitchen and nursery furniture as well as miscellaneous items such as easy chairs and a bed settee was published on 1 January 1943.<sup>55</sup> Furniture manufactured by designated firms became available to consumers through the spring of 1943.

Through the introduction and development of the Utility furniture programme, the simplicity and clean lines of Utility design often were contrasted with—as described by O.H. Frost above—the ‘frills and fancies’ seen to be characteristic of the reproduction furniture that dominated the ‘lower end’ of the British furniture trade in the early twentieth century. Such a distinction recurs within government documents and commentaries by key individuals. A Board of Trade memorandum remarked that ‘there is a chance here, during our period of greatest economy, of influencing popular taste towards good construction in simple, agreeable design to the benefit of our after-the-war homes’ (see Figs. 1 and 2).<sup>56</sup> Member of the Advisory Committee Gordon Russell described pre-war furniture as ‘[not] so much reproduction as machine-made caricature’ and claimed that with the introduction of Utility furniture ‘the basic rightness of contemporary design won the day, for there wasn’t enough timber for bulbous legs or enough labour for even the cheapest carving and straightforward,

<sup>45</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 513.

<sup>46</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 513.

<sup>47</sup> ‘The General Furniture (Maximum Prices, Maximum Charges and Records) Order 1942’, July 1942.

<sup>48</sup> J. Attfield, *Bringing Modernity Home: Writings on Popular Design and Material Culture*, Manchester, 2007, 27. On other Utility goods, see Attfield, *Utility Reassessed* (note 7). David Crowley has contrasted the British state’s role in design, including its interest in design reform, with Stalinist projects in, for example, Poland, where design formed a mechanism through which the state could plan and manage innovation in manufacturing industry (D. Crowley, ‘Beauty, everyday and for all’: the social vision of design in Stalinist Poland, in J. Attfield (Ed.), *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999, 58–72); see also J. Pavitt and D. Crowley, *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*, London, 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Price Control of New Furniture. Memorandum from O.H. Frost, Vice-Chairman of the Central Price Regulation Committee, 30 June 1942, 5, Board of Trade, Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, TNA BT 64/1835 (note 10).

<sup>50</sup> Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (note 5), 12. The ‘consumer interest’ was represented by Mrs. E. Winborn, a member of the Tenants’ Committee of the Kensal House Estate. Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 515, report that ‘the membership was made up of one or two leading furniture manufacturers and furniture trade unionists and a housewife,’ clearly gendering the furniture consumer. See D. Leslie and S. Reimer, Gender, modern design, and home consumption, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21 (2003) 293–316.

<sup>51</sup> Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (note 5), 13.

<sup>52</sup> Denney, *Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948* (note 1), 112.

<sup>53</sup> Russell, interviewed in *Utility* (note 7), 66.

<sup>54</sup> Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (note 5), 14.

<sup>55</sup> The 1943 catalogue is reprinted in J. Mills, *The 1943 Utility Furniture Catalogue with an Explanation of Britain’s Second World War Utility Furniture Scheme*, Sevenoaks, Kent, 2008. Original drawings and full specifications are at Board of Trade, Utility furniture scheme: Files. 1943–49. TNA BT 183.

<sup>56</sup> Memorandum, n.t., n.d., Board of Trade, Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, TNA BT 64/1835 (note 10).



Fig. 1. Utility dining room and living room furniture, 1945. Source: Design Council Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives, [www.brighton.ac.uk/designarchives](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/designarchives).

commonsense lines were both efficient and economical.<sup>57</sup> Designer Edwin Cutler suggested that the Utility scheme changed the character of British furniture design: 'the general standard was much better [after the war] than it was before—it was influenced by the simplicity of Utility. All you see with Utility furniture is pure, it's good. If the joint isn't up, then you see that the joint isn't up.'<sup>58</sup>

Russell's and particularly Cutler's assessments might be seen to resonate with certain tenets of modern design, such as Le Corbusier's suggestion that manufacturers disguise faults through the addition of unnecessary ornamentation: 'Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well made, neat and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture.'<sup>59</sup> Given the extent to which a rhetoric of 'good design' in the sense of fitness for purpose and quality of materials ran through early twentieth-century discussions of the British furniture industry, it is not surprising that twenty-first century commentators have referred to the Utility furniture scheme as 'an unprecedented opportunity for design reformers to put their ideas into practice.'<sup>60</sup> For some design historians, Utility is considered to

be 'an iconic period in the history of the "good design" movement' and even has been read as 'synonymous with modernism.'<sup>61</sup>

Unpacking the extent to which Utility represented the explicit promotion of modern design, however, reveals a more complex story and in particular substantiates assessments which emphasise a variety of national modernisms.<sup>62</sup> It has been suggested, for example, that 'standardised Utility furniture rejected continental modernism as being aesthetically alien, opting for a simple functionalism redolent of the qualities [Gordon] Russell admired in practical, well-made pieces of English vernacular furniture, and in the continuity of craft traditions within the contemporary Swedish modern style.'<sup>63</sup> Other commentators have noted that 'the Utility scheme drew upon traditional Windsor chair designs and reflected a workmanlike, vernacular approach to design and manufacture.'<sup>64</sup>

Beyond interpretation of the design lineages of Utility, however, we would argue that it also is important to understand the ways in which design aesthetics were shaped by the requirements of wartime production. The Board of Trade believed that providing firms with detailed specifications for simple designs would enable state-designated firms to cope with both the technical aspects of

<sup>57</sup> G. Russell, *Designer's Trade: An Autobiography*, London, 1968, 199. Gordon Russell is often positioned incorrectly as a—or even *the*—leading member of the Advisory Committee: Conway, for example, describes him as 'head of the Utility furniture design team' (H. Conway, *Ernest Race*, London, 1982, 15). See also Denney, *Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948* (note 1), on this point. Russell's influence in shaping understandings of the Utility scheme stems not only from his subsequent involvement in the post-war Council of Industrial Design but also from his own writings on Utility. See Russell, *Designer's Trade* (note 57), especially chapter 15; Russell interviewed in *Utility* (note 7); G. Russell, National furniture production, *Architectural Review*, Dec. 1946; notes for this article filed in Board of Trade, The Council of Industrial Design. History of the Utility Furniture Scheme 1946–1951, TNA BT 64/2798. Russell's paper formed part of a short-lived 'Design Review' section of the *Architectural Journal*. See J. Seddon, The Architect and the 'Arch-Pedant': Sadie Speight, Nikolaus Pevsner and 'Design Review', *Journal of Design History* 20 (2007) 29–41.

<sup>58</sup> Edwin Clinch interviewed in *Utility: how a wartime government hired its own designers to give the furniture industry a compulsory range of consumer products*, *Design* 309 (1974) 63–71, pages 68–69.

<sup>59</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. J. Dunnett, London, 1987 [1925], 87.

<sup>60</sup> J. Woodham, Design and everyday life at the Britain Can Make It Exhibition, 1946, *The Journal of Architecture* 9 (2004) 463–476, page 465.

<sup>61</sup> Atfield, *Bringing Modernity Home* (note 48), 16.

<sup>62</sup> A more extended discussion of modern design is in Leslie and Reimer, *Gender, modern design and home consumption* (note 50); see also S. Reimer and D. Leslie, Design, national imaginaries and the home furnishings commodity chain, *Growth and Change* 39 (2008) 144–171. On the national inflections of modernism and modernity, see D. Gilbert, D. Matless and B.M. Short, *Geographies of British Modernity*, Oxford, 2003; D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, London, 1998; as well as K. Davies, Scandinavian furniture in Britain: Finmar and the UK market, 1949–1952, *Journal of Design History* 10 (1997) 39–52.

<sup>63</sup> M.-P. Elena, Review of *Gordon Russell: designer of furniture*, *Journal of Design History* 5 (1992) 313–314, page 314.

<sup>64</sup> P. Sparke, *The Genius of Design*, London, 2009, 120.



Fig. 2. Sideboard, Model 1 in light oak. Source: authors' photo.

manufacture and the production schedules necessary to meet wartime demand. Close dimensional specifications were stipulated in order to avoid wastage in the cutting of wood stock. As we shall see in the following section, the geographic redistribution of the industry under the Utility scheme shifted production to 'comparatively inexperienced manufacturers.'<sup>65</sup> As Gordon Russell recalled in the 1970s,

a number of firms with good equipment had been called on to do more urgent Government work, so anyone with a reasonable number of wood-working machines was pressed into service. The specification had to be detailed and explicit. Some of these people had to be coached.<sup>66</sup>

Or in designer Edwin Clinch's interpretation:

You see, everybody had to make this furniture, from the little tin-pot factory employing six to ten people, to Harris Lebus employing thousands, and it all had to be done to this specification.<sup>67</sup>

Standardisation and the centralisation of design expertise thus would assist in the coordination of production across all parts of Britain. Economies of scale in design could be achieved if individual firms did not have to engage in the design aspects of production: 'if utility types are fixed once and for all there must necessarily be a considerable labour saving on the work of designing.'<sup>68</sup> Finally, 'since uniformity of price and service had to be maintained, design

and specification had to take account of the widely differing equipment of manufacturers. Design had in fact to be adapted to the simplest productive processes.'<sup>69</sup> Under the Utility scheme, then, the state operated much like a precursory Ikea, closely specifying designs with the intent of controlling costs and efficiency. All furniture was to be stamped with a Utility mark ('CC41,' colloquially known as 'the cheeses': see Fig. 3) and the designation number of the manufacturer. The mark functioned as a state guarantee of quality whilst the specific designation number enabled traceability of individual pieces of furniture.

### Manufacturing geographies

Having approved a set of standard designs in autumn 1942, the Board of Trade then sought applications from firms wishing to manufacture Utility furniture. The Board calculated that 150 firms of 40 employees each operating at 'near-full capacity' would be required to satisfy target production levels of 400,000 units every four weeks.<sup>70</sup> An initial closing date of 28 October was extended to allow additional applications, and by 10 November 1942, 600 firms had responded.<sup>71</sup> Approximately 1150 firms had held a nominal timber quota in the early part of the war and the reduction in capacity under the Utility scheme was potentially very difficult for the Board of Trade.<sup>72</sup> Although larger firms such as Ercol and Harris Lebus shifted to the war work of aircraft production or assembling munitions cases, the manufacture of Utility furniture was attractive to remaining firms with available plant and labour.<sup>73</sup> Consultation with furniture trade associations was seen to be important given that designation involved 'cutting out such a large proportion of firms from a lucrative trade.'<sup>74</sup>

Designation also involved the careful selection of firms based on a range of specific criteria. The Board of Trade sought manufacturers

with just the right amount of capacity to produce efficiently the number of tables, chairs, wardrobes etc. needed in each region, and to pay regard at the same time to the demand for each firm's labour and premises for other purposes, as well as the question of price.<sup>75</sup>

In order to achieve production efficiencies, firms designated to manufacture Utility furniture needed to have sufficient 'machining' as well as 'kilning capacity for drying home-grown timber' given that larger volumes of home-grown timber were drawn into production.<sup>76</sup> It also was stipulated that designated firms must

<sup>65</sup> Minutes of the 8th Meeting of the Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, page 4, 17 December 1943 BT 64/1749.

<sup>66</sup> Russell interviewed in Utility (note 7), 64.

<sup>67</sup> Clinch interviewed in Utility (note 58), 66. There is a slight inaccuracy in Clinch's comments given that the large firm of Harris Lebus did not become involved in Utility production until 1945. Herman Lebus, who also served as chair of the Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, offered to undertake Utility production at his Tottenham factory in August 1943, but his offer was refused on the grounds that this would take labour away from other essential war work. Letter from President of the Board of Trade Hugh Dalton, 12 August 1943, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture 1944/46, TNA BT 64/2825.

<sup>68</sup> Memorandum, n.d., Board of Trade, Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, TNA BT 64/1835 (note 10).

<sup>69</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 515.

<sup>70</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 517 and 528.

<sup>71</sup> H.A.R. Binney, Memorandum: Progress of designation of firms to make utility furniture, 10 November 1942, Board of Trade, Correspondence re designations, TNA BT 64/1816.

<sup>72</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 517. Note that these may not all have been furniture manufacturers: in a special Census of Production taken by the Board of Trade in 1938 under the import duty act recorded 997 furniture manufacturing establishments (Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 45–46).

<sup>73</sup> 'Indeed, the Mosquito was known as "the cabinet makers' plane" because the whole of the fuselage was made of wood,' P. Kirkham, R. Mace and J. Porter, *Furnishing the World: The East London Furniture Trade 1830–1980*, London, 1987, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Binney, Progress of designation of firms to make utility furniture (note 71), BT 64/1816.

<sup>75</sup> Binney, Progress of designation of firms to make utility furniture (note 71), BT 64/1816.

<sup>76</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 518. Whilst almost all pre-war imported timber was kiln-dried prior to shipping, home-grown British timber traditionally was left to air dry. Given the impossibility of building up timber stocks during the war, kilning facilities were essential to avoid warping and distortion of Utility furniture. The need for the furniture industry to continue to modernise this aspect of production is emphasised in Appendix E, The kilning of timber; in Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 177–178.

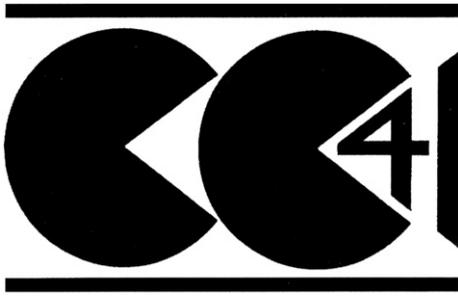


Fig. 3. Utility mark. Source: Board of Trade, *Utility Furniture Trader's Leaflet* UFD/8, 1942, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee (1942–1944), The National Archive, BT 64/1749.

produce only Utility furniture, which excluded companies who were engaged in other types of government work.

Petrol shortages and transport difficulties meant that regional geographies of furniture production and supply became an important consideration. Where possible, capacity was to be distributed across specified zones so that local firms could deliver to local consumers. In addition, careful calculations had to be made about local labour market geographies and the extent to which labour could be 'release[d]...in the right places.'<sup>77</sup> Firms were graded as scarlet, red, amber or green according to the availability of local labour. Designation was further managed by visiting premises and inspecting the account books of potential firms.<sup>78</sup> For example, handwritten additions to a typed table, following a visit to an East End firm in early 1943 noted: 'Well balanced plant. Prod. could be stepped up. Work of good quality.'<sup>79</sup> Following a visit to Liverpool later in 1943 it was noted of another firm: 'Clearly, Mr Ross is not a good manager, and his production requires very careful watching.'<sup>80</sup>

Designation represented a significant transformation of the geographies of the British furniture industry, which traditionally had been concentrated in High Wycombe and in the East End of London. High Wycombe's historic role as a centre of production—especially the manufacture of Windsor chairs—often has been interpreted as a function of its proximity to beech wood in the Chilterns.<sup>81</sup> By the

late nineteenth century, the industry increasingly had begun to use imported timber and firms developed production beyond chairs to include all types of cabinet goods. Although local timber sources became less important, local labour markets retained their significance. At one level it has been argued that 'the industry was held in the district by the skill of the local craftsmen.'<sup>82</sup> Further, however, production was supported by a dense network of outworking and subcontracting relationships, as evident from the report of an inter-war subcommittee tasked with investigating 'profiteering':

[bedroom] suites are made by all classes of manufacturers, from the largest factories in the country to small backroom workshops. In a number of cases it was found that certain firms purchased their suites 'in the white' (i.e. made by small workshops and sold unfinished) then finished and polished the suites for resale. It has been ascertained that sometimes the firm supplies the timber to the small manufacturer, who makes the suite and returns it to the original firm who supplied the timber, thus simply being paid for his labour and profit.<sup>83</sup>

Wages for men making daily journeys from the villages surrounding High Wycombe were higher than could be obtained in agriculture, but seasonal irregularity and underemployment during slack times in the furniture industry contributed to a fragile labour market position.<sup>84</sup>

High Wycombe's importance continued through the inter-war period, but the furniture industry also saw significant expansion in London.<sup>85</sup> The East End trade—or what Peter Hall has termed the 'Victorian manufacturing belt'—shifted northwards into Tottenham, Edmonton and Walthamstow.<sup>86</sup> Inner London manufacturers came to serve a smaller-scale, higher quality market whilst in the outer boroughs large scale manufacturing premises (supported by new developments in electrification) began to supply the growing mass market in London and the South-East.<sup>87</sup> The regional concentrations of the industry in 1935 are evident in Table 2, in which 43.3% of firms and almost half of total furniture employment was located in the Greater London region, which includes High Wycombe.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 518.

<sup>78</sup> Binney, Progress of designation of firms to make utility furniture (note 71), BT 64/1816.

<sup>79</sup> Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1749.

<sup>80</sup> Conclusions reached as a result of the visit to Liverpool and Manchester, 1943, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Policy 1944–46, TNA BT 64/2825. The delegation included Herman Lebus.

<sup>81</sup> Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*; H.A.E. Tilney-Bassett, Forestry in the region of the Chilterns, *Forestry* (1988) 61 267–286.

<sup>82</sup> Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> *Findings and Decisions of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Standing Committee on the Investigation of Prices to Investigate Costs, Profits and Prices at all Stages in Respect of Furniture*, London, 1920, Cmd. 983, page 6. Despite significant furniture shortages immediately following the First World War, the committee did not ultimately find any evidence of profiteering in the industry. H. Reid, *The Furniture Makers: A History of Trade Unionism in the Furniture Trade 1865–1972*, Oxford, 1986, chapter IV also discusses the 'primitive' conditions and low pay of High Wycombe outworkers.

<sup>84</sup> S. Hussey, Low pay, underemployment and multiple occupations: men's work in the inter-war countryside, *Rural History* 8 (1997) 217–235.

<sup>85</sup> Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 49.

<sup>86</sup> P.G. Hall, *The Industries of London since 1861*, London, 1962, 72. Note that Hall's reliance on Census data for 1861, 1921 and 1951 means that his account overlooks distinctive wartime geographies. P. Scott and P. Walsh, Patterns and determinants of manufacturing plant location in interwar London, *Economic History Review* 57 (2004) 109–141 note that an inter-war shift within Greater London occurred in part because of the legacy of the First World War: the development of munitions factories in outer London locations created a pool of labour and plant capacity which furniture firms were able to exploit.

<sup>87</sup> Scott and Walsh, Patterns and determinants of manufacturing plant location in interwar London (note 86), 126, characterise inner London production as 'craft-based, "flexible specialisation"' although in our view the suitability of this later twentieth-century term is debatable. See also Kirkham, Mace and Porter, *Furnishing the World* (note 73).

<sup>88</sup> This important regional data for the 1930s is taken from the 1935 Census of Production, published in 1944. The furniture industry was not included in surveys conducted under the Import Duties Act (1937/38), and processing of all late 1930s data was delayed by the onset of war. Publication of the 1935 Census of Production was postponed because of the destruction of the typeset manuscript, and the 1944 publication had to rely on the photographic reproduction of galley proofs. *Final Report on the Census of Production*, London, 1944, introductory notes. The Census of Production is seen to be 'the most significant source of business statistics' and is 'particularly suited...for providing regional information, because of its large coverage.' P. Smith and Stephen Penneck, *100 Years of the Census of Production in the UK*, Cardiff, manuscript available at [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/methodology\\_by\\_theme/downloads/CoP100yearsintheUK.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/methodology_by_theme/downloads/CoP100yearsintheUK.pdf). It was once possible to construct a more finely grained picture from early twentieth century Censuses of Production: *The Atlas of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, for example, locates 442 furniture manufacturing establishments in 1954 (D.P. Bickmore and M.A. Shaw, Furniture and sawmills, in: *The Atlas of Britain and Northern Ireland*, Oxford, 1963, 127.) However this level of detail has now been lost because the original Census of Production questionnaires have been destroyed (Paul Smith, Office of National Statistics, personal communication, 13 July 2011).

**Table 2**  
Regional distribution of the furniture industry, 1935.

Area	Number of furniture establishments	% Of all furniture establishments	Average number of persons employed in furniture	Number of persons employed as % of total
Greater London	771	43.3	52,852	48.8
Lancashire, Cheshire & Derbyshire (part)	264	14.8	16,274	15.0
West Riding of Yorkshire	114	6.4	5411	5.0
Northumberland, Durham & North Riding of Yorkshire	55	3.1	3909	3.6
Warwickshire, Worcestershire & Staffordshire	131	7.2	6927	6.4
East Midland district	53	3.0	4228	3.9
West Midland district	47	2.6	2510	2.3
South-eastern district	85	4.8	3503	3.2
South-western district	37	2.1	1836	1.7
Eastern district	56	3.1	2905	2.7
Cumberland & Westmoreland	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Wales (incl. Monmouthshire) and rest of Wales	25	1.4	1028	0.9
West Central Scotland	84	4.7	4650	4.3
East Central Scotland	43	2.4	1866	1.7
Southern and Northern Counties of Scotland	14	1.0	454	0.4
Total	1779	100%	108,353	100%

Source: compiled from *Final Report of the Census of Production, 1935*; published 1944.

Production of Utility furniture began in January 1943, with 132 firms designated by March 1943.<sup>89</sup> The Utility Furniture Distribution Committee monitored production on a monthly basis, and designated additional firms where necessary and possible. By February 1944, 171 firms had been designated, as detailed in Fig. 4, including notable clusters of activity along a Leeds–Manchester–Liverpool axis, in Birmingham, Bristol and in central Scotland.<sup>90</sup> This restructuring marked a substantial cut in the numbers employed in the furniture industry, from a pre-war figure of over 100,000 employees to 5872 by February 1944. It also involved some significant spatial shifts. As indicated above, the Distribution Committee in order to minimise transport costs sought, where possible, to spread manufacturing more evenly across the country. It established 38 ‘production zones,’ such that firms would supply retailers within a local area. Zones mainly were based on existing county boundaries, with some amalgamations in, for example, Devon and Cornwall or Norfolk and Suffolk. As Fig. 4 illustrates, by February 1944 there were 55 designated firms in the Greater London and High Wycombe area. This amounted to 32.2% of total firms, a considerable de-concentration of production away from the industry’s traditional heartland.

Alongside this general pattern of dispersal, however, the new geography of furniture manufacturing ultimately came to be characterised by considerable regional differentiation. There were seventeen categories of Utility furniture, ranging from bulky items such as category 1 (Wardrobes, Chests and Tallboys) and category 3 (Sideboards and Dining Tables), to lighter and relatively more easily transportable items such as categories 4 (Dining Chairs) 7 (Kitchen Chairs) and nursery furniture, such as category 15 (Cots) and 17 (Playpens). Some items, notably dining and kitchen chairs, required more specialist knowledge and machinery to mass produce efficiently (or at least so argued successfully a number of High Wycombe’s traditional chair manufacturers to the Distribution Committee). Ultimately, none of the designated firms produced all items in the Utility range. Firms varied considerably in what items they were designated to produce and the number of zones to which these products could be supplied. As the Chairman of the

Utility Furniture Distribution Committee explained in December 1942:

The area a manufacturer will be permitted to supply will sometimes depend on his type of production; for example, Hutchinson and Edmonds of High Wycombe will be permitted to supply dining chairs to all England and Wales except Cumberland, Westmorland, Cheshire, Northumberland and Durham.<sup>91</sup>

By 1944 Hutchinson and Edmonds, along with five additional High Wycombe manufacturers, were supplying kitchen chairs to all (and dining chairs to most of) the 38 production zones across England, Scotland and Wales, while most other High Wycombe firms were supplying at least 20 of the country’s zones. Only two of the fifteen High Wycombe firms were making anything other than two of the chair categories in the Utility range, making High Wycombe in effect a specialised chair manufacturing area supplying regions across England, Scotland and Wales. In contrast, in some zones firms produced only one or a very few Utility items for localised distribution, whilst others produced a wider range of Utility products, sometimes for a restricted local geography, but sometimes a regional or national one.

We can get a further sense of this complexity by more closely examining the furniture production and supply geographies for Devon and Cornwall, one of the more peripheral zones (see Table 3). Of the twenty-six companies supplying Utility furniture to this zone, only four were actually located within it. The Seymour Cabinet Works of Plymouth and Dartington Hall Ltd. of Totnes produced only one and two (respectively) relatively bulky items of the Utility range, whilst the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) of Plymouth and Clatworthy and Co. Ltd. of South Brent supplied a much wider number of items from the Utility catalogue. None of these companies supplied outside Devon and Cornwall. Three Bristol companies (within the next closest production zone: Gloucester) met the remaining demand for relatively bulky furniture items, whilst all the Utility chair and nursery items were supplied (with one exception, the Ex-Service Industries Copex works in

<sup>89</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 519.

<sup>90</sup> Cumulative lists of designated firms are available at Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee (1942–1944), TNA BT 64/1749. Archival records make it possible to locate each firm by street name. We take February 1944 as a ‘census date’ given that it represents the clearest snapshot of intended wartime capacity under the Utility scheme. Additional designations were added in May, October and December 1944, culminating in the designation of 237 firms by the end of 1944.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes of the 3rd meeting of the Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, 30 December 1942, 4, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1749.

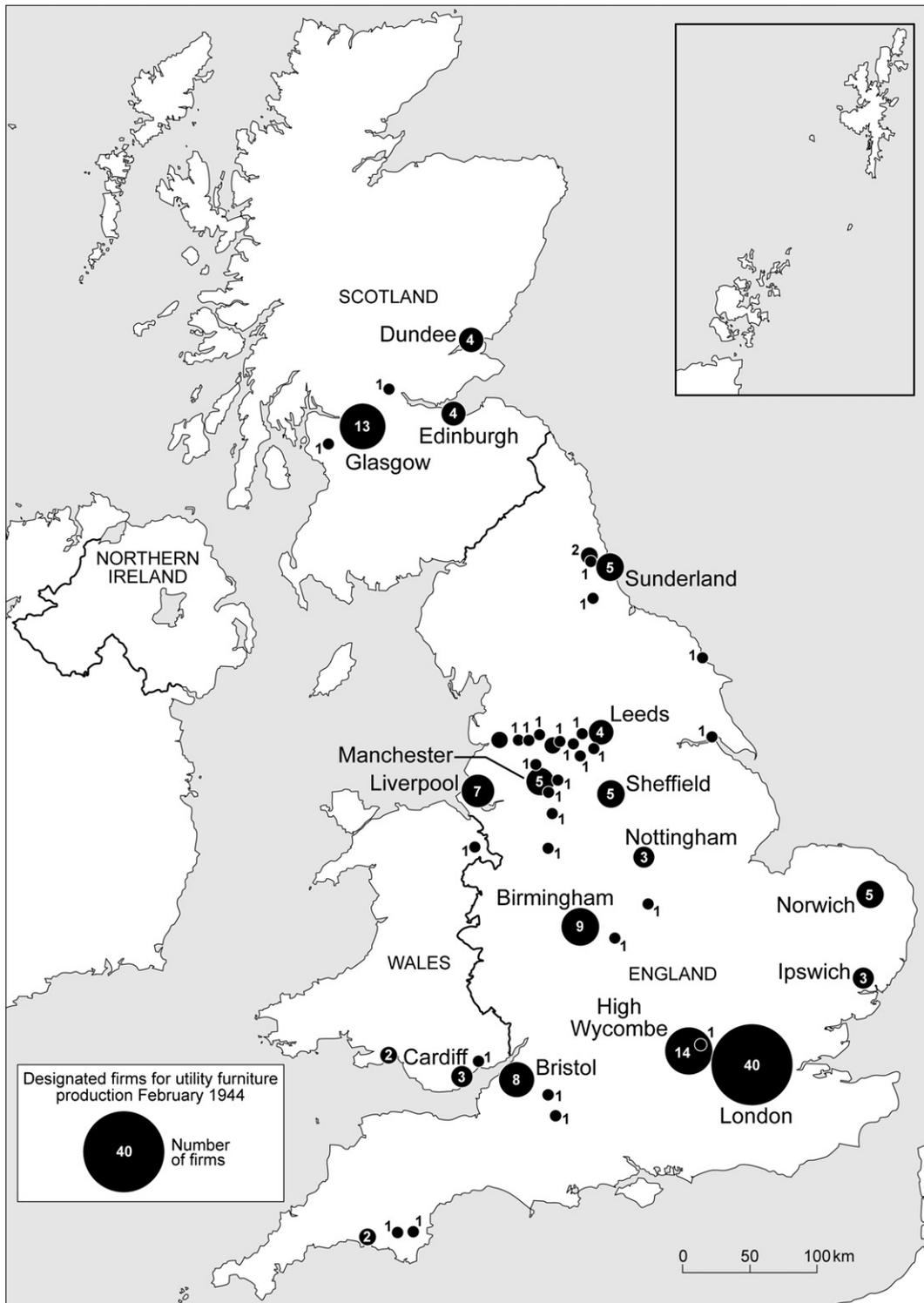


Fig. 4. Designated firms for Utility furniture production, February 1944. Source: compiled from Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee (1942–1944), The National Archive, BT 64/1749.

Warminster) from seventeen companies from London and the High Wycombe area.

In summary, then, reorganisation of the industry did shift furniture production away from its 'heartland' in London and High Wycombe, particularly the manufacture of bulky items such as sideboards and wardrobes; however the specialist production of chairs was largely retained by High Wycombe firms. Whilst in part this specialisation can be attributed to the materiality of the chair

itself, High Wycombe firms did exert a certain influence in the early period of designation. At 'special meetings,' representatives

pressed very strongly for work equivalent to the employment of 300 people, emphasising that Wycombe was the home of the chair trade, that there were numbers of employees not adaptable for other work and that production at Wycombe was specially economical of timber owing to the

**Table 3**  
Geography of Utility furniture manufacture and supply, Devon and Cornwall zone, February 1944.

Manufacturer	Location	Utility items supplied
Seymour Cab Works Ltd. CWS	Plymouth Plymouth	1. Wardobes, Chests & Tallboys 5. Curbs 8. Arm and Fireside Chairs 9. Bed Chairs 10. Bed Settees 11. Divans
Clatworthy & Co. Ltd.	South Brent	3. Sideboards and Dining Tables 4. Kitchen Tables 6. Shelves 7. Occasional Tables 8. Arm and Fireside Chairs 9. Bed Chairs
Dartington Hall Ltd.	Totnes	3. Sideboards and Dining Tables 6. Shelves
Wake & Dean Ltd.	Bristol	1. Wardobes, Chests & Tallboys 3. Sideboards and Dining Tables 6. Shelves
F. H. Miles	Bristol	1. Wardobes, Chests & Tallboys
B. Maggs & Co.	Bristol	1. Wardobes, Chests & Tallboys
CWS Ltd.	Bristol	2. Bedsteads
Ex-Service Industries	Warminster	12. Dining Chairs
Cecil George Lovegrove & Co. Ltd.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs
A J Way & Co.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs
Smith Bros. & Co.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs
Croxson Bros	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs
W Davis Ltd.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs
J.W. Hawkins & Sons Ltd.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs 13. Kitchen Chairs
Hutchinson & Edmonds Ltd.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs 13. Kitchen Chairs
B. Cartwright & Son	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs 13. Kitchen Chairs
The Ogilvie Chair Co.	High Wycombe	12. Dining Chairs 13. Kitchen Chairs
B. Goodearl & Sons	High Wycombe	13. Kitchen Chairs
Rose and Co.	Amersham	13. Kitchen Chairs
Bernard Parker & Co.	London	14. Kitchen Cabinets
Sparrow Simmons & Sons	London	14. Kitchen Cabinets
M. Fisher & Sons	London	14. Kitchen Cabinets
The Beattall Furniture Co. Ltd.	London	14. Kitchen Cabinets
A. Baveystock & Co.	London	15. Cots 16. Nursery Chairs
Wood & Metal Industries Ltd.	London	17. Playpens

Source: compiled from Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee (1942–1944), BT 64/1749.

sorts and cuts which Wycombe is skilled in using. On the other hand, we had to bear in mind the claims of other districts, for example, Scotland, where dining room chairs can be made and also the need to cut down transport to the minimum.<sup>92</sup>

Apart from the role of the High Wycombe firms, however, the introduction of the Utility scheme meant a relative decline in influence of manufacturers. Across the national space of the

furniture industry, there was scepticism and even overt hostility from the furniture trade, particularly in relation to a loss of design control. Considering themselves craftsmen, manufacturers resented what they saw as a deskilling of the trade.<sup>93</sup> This was despite the fact that some companies had considerable sales success with Utility-based designs for several decades after the end of the scheme.<sup>94</sup> Resentment also was felt by owners of firms excluded from Utility designation who, without labour or raw materials during wartime, did not survive into the post-war period.<sup>95</sup>

### Distribution, retailing and consumption: supplying utility

At the first meeting of the Utility Furniture Distribution Committee on 2 November 1942,

it was agreed that the simplest way to work would be to follow the furniture through its progress from the manufacturer to the consumer, so that recommendations could be made for dealing with any obstacles which might hinder the machinery of distribution.<sup>96</sup>

Utility furniture was distributed to wartime consumers through a distinctive set of mechanisms which differed from goods such as clothing and food, for example. The scarcity of furniture and concerns about selling 'on the black market'<sup>97</sup> led to the development of a rigid system of pointing, under which a specific number of units were required for each piece of furniture. Allocations were made only to 'priority classes' of household. Households were required to apply to the nearest District Office of the Assistance Board, which issued buying permits on behalf of the Board of Trade. Both the maximum number of units as well as the definition of priority classes were revised as the war progressed: in 1942 priority households were entitled to a maximum of 60 units, and were defined as couples who

proposed to marry and set up house within three weeks or who had married on or after 1st January 1941; people who were setting up house because they had or were about to have young children, and people who had lost furniture through enemy action.<sup>98</sup>

Later in the war the definition was extended to include all who had set up house since September 1939 as well as married refugees. Throughout the war, maximum retail prices for individual pieces were fixed and all Utility furniture was exempt from purchase tax.

Paralleling manufacturers' loss of control of design aspects of production, the role of retailers in the Utility furniture commodity chain also was considerably circumscribed. The spaces of furniture retailing (a wide mix of outlets including small independent shops, department stores and some national chains) did not change significantly during the wartime period, but retailer power diminished. State control was seen to offer efficiency and economy not only in design but also in the delivery of goods to the consumer.

<sup>92</sup> Binney, Progress of designation of firms to make utility furniture (note 71), BT 64/1816.

<sup>93</sup> J Attfield, 'Give 'em something dark and heavy': the role of design in the material culture of popular British furniture, 1939–1965, *Journal of Design History* 9 (1996) 185–201, page 188.

<sup>94</sup> Attfield, Give 'em something dark and heavy (note 93), 200.

<sup>95</sup> On this point, see D. Joel, *Furniture Design Set Free: The British Furniture Revolution 1851 to the Present Day*, London, 1948, 48. Whilst it is difficult to extend our analysis beyond 1945—not least because of the distinct fragmentation of the furniture industry (see footnote 88 regarding data sources)—our sense is that a level of re-concentration did occur once Harris Lebus and Ercol shifted back to domestic furniture production after the war. However, we are unable to reconstruct what happened to the many regional producers who may have been new to furniture production. There were examples such as Dartington Hall Ltd. in Totnes, who went on to manufacture 'Dartside' furniture after the war (which was explicitly advertised as modernist: marketing images depicted William Lescaze's High Cross House as 'the style of home for which "Dartside" is appropriate')—but the extent to which this case had parallels in other regional locations is impossible to assess.

<sup>96</sup> Minutes of the 1st meeting of the Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, 2 November 1942, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1749.

<sup>97</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 335.

<sup>98</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 335.

Early discussions of the Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture noted that

we do not want to waste time designing and selling a lot of different types of furniture at the present stage of the war; if utility types are fixed once and for all there must necessarily be a considerable labour saving on the work of designing and of selling.<sup>99</sup>

Retailers were no longer engaged in any form of advertising or marketing; and once the scheme was introduced, no longer held stocks. Such was the shortage of individual pieces of furniture in first months of the scheme that retailers were unable even to put goods on display. Consumers might have been able to visit a regional exhibition set up by the Board of Trade, but generally they were required to consult the Utility catalogue (either purchased from a bookshop or viewed at a retailer), choose selected items, and place an order. Retailers would submit the order to their designated suppliers.

It also was felt that the use of regional exhibitions would diffuse competition between retailers. The Utility Furniture Distribution Committee wanted to ensure that smaller retailers were not disadvantaged over others (such as department stores and larger multiples), for example because they lacked space to display larger sets of Utility furniture. The Distribution Committee also sought to reprimand retailers' use of any form of consumer enticement:

Mr Barber [of the Retail Distributors Association] brought up the case of Messrs. Brodericks who are offering to give a gift of £2 worth of National Savings Stamps to every customer buying £40 worth of utility furniture.

Concerns also were expressed about Utility furniture contributing to a Co-operative dividend and thereby potentially disadvantaging other retailers.<sup>100</sup>

As we have indicated, one aim of the Utility furniture scheme was that manufacturers would produce 'locally' (or at least within designated zones), such that consumers within a given area could be supplied without waste of scarce and expensive petrol resources. Changing geographies of production thus were meant to lock closely together with geographies of consumption. In addition to the desire for equality of access to resources via national level rationing systems, it also has been suggested that the Utility scheme aimed to achieve an even spatial distribution of 'public access to furniture.'<sup>101</sup> Buying permits were issued to households with a clear 'area of validity' and retailers were allowed to 'accept orders only against permits valid for the area in which their shop [was] situated.'<sup>102</sup> The Utility Furniture Distribution Committee sought to oversee any difficulties with the definition of 'local areas': in 1943 the retail representative, Mr Barber

thought mistakes had been made because the District Officers of the Assistance Board had no exact knowledge of the

shopping facilities in various areas. He instanced a case when a permit had been made valid for Felixstowe alone, whereas Ipswich is a far more prominent shopping centre and the furniture would in any case have to pass through Ipswich on its way to Felixstowe.<sup>103</sup>

Mr Barber was assured that the Committee would continue to monitor the situation.

Balancing production and demand became a key role for the Board of Trade. When the scheme was first introduced, difficulties arose not only because manufacturers struggled to quickly achieve adequate production levels, but also because of a pent-up consumer demand for furniture. At times the state sought to resolve supply difficulties through more general measures such as introducing a six week restriction on new permit applications in July 1943. Upon resumption of supply, permits were only issued for the value of 30 units, which as Hargreaves and Gowing noted, was 'barely enough to furnish one room.'<sup>104</sup> Although a greater number of householders were able to obtain Utility furniture in the latter part of the war because of extensions to the definition of priority classes, a lack of supply meant that buying permits could not be increased to 60 units until March 1946.<sup>105</sup>

Specific attention was paid to variations in demand for different types of furniture. Cross-comparison of information from permit application forms as well as manufacturing data at a national level enabled the Board of Trade to assess variations across furniture types: a May 1943 memorandum concluded, for example, that

the items for which licensed production should be somewhat reduced are the divan, chair, kitchen table, kitchen cabinet and sets of shelves, whilst the figures for dining tables and sideboards should be increased. We do not recommend a reduction on bedsteads, as the demand for this item is likely to increase as the right of growing children to have one becomes known.<sup>106</sup>

In hindsight the lack of demand for kitchen cabinets was not perhaps surprising given their relatively high 'pointing.' At the same time, the Distribution Committee had not considered that whilst householders might make do with temporary shelving arrangements in the kitchen, there was a greater desire for bedroom and dining room furniture.

Further, however, the Board of Trade sought to respond to the changing regional geography of furniture demand. In April 1943 it was recorded that there were 'considerable variations [in demand] from region to region... in Scotland, for instance, demand (i.e. units issued) was only 54% of the basic figure whilst in London it was 185%.<sup>107</sup> The Distribution Committee concluded that the only possibility of responding to this unevenness would be to decrease access to the regional exhibitions of Utility furniture: 'it was RECOMMENDED that although the real purpose of exhibitions was the dissemination of necessary information, they should initially be confined to areas where supply is adequate in relation to demand,

<sup>99</sup> Memorandum, n.t., n.d., Board of Trade, Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, TNA BT 64/1835 (note 10).

<sup>100</sup> Minutes of the fourth Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, February 1943, 3, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1749.

<sup>101</sup> Dover, *Home Front Furniture* (note 7), 14.

<sup>102</sup> Board of Trade, *Utility Furniture Traders' Leaflet* UFD/8, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1769.

<sup>103</sup> Minutes of the 5th Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, March 1943, 4, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1769.

<sup>104</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 336; they note also that reductions were made in the 'pointing' of bed settees, divans and bed chairs. In part, 'downpointing' sought to 'lessen the shock' of the overall reduction in permit units, but also it sought to 'help manufacturers to dispose of accumulated stocks of bed-settees etc.' which had turned out to be much less popular than bedroom and dining room furniture. (Interdepartmental Committee on Rationing, Utility Furniture, Paper 17, November 1943, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture, Balancing of Production and Demand, TNA BT 64/1787.)

<sup>105</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 521.

<sup>106</sup> Utility furniture production and demand (memorandum), May 1943, 2, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Policy 1944/46, TNA BT 64/2825.

<sup>107</sup> Minutes of the 6th Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, April 1943, 2, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1769.

as exhibitions do stimulate demand.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, later in the war it became clear that demand in London had dropped considerably, and this became problematic for the Distribution Committee in that it led to ‘an embarrassingly light load on some of the manufacturers which conflicts with the rather heavy load which other manufacturers in other regions still experience.’<sup>109</sup> It was suggested that Londoners might be delaying purchase ‘in the hope of better furniture to come,’<sup>110</sup> although it may have been the case that London couples were delaying household formation more generally.

Comprehensive assessments of consumer attitudes towards wartime Utility furniture are difficult to assemble from available archival material.<sup>111</sup> There is some evidence of retailer as well as manufacturer opposition to standardised styles: as the Distribution Committee recorded, ‘the trade was not so sanguine about the demand for utility furniture as the Board of Trade. Retailers were adversely impressed by the simplicity of the designs and by the absence of french polish.’<sup>112</sup> For reasons of material shortage, matt wax finishes were substituted for polished surfaces. Although the 1943 Utility Furniture catalogue described these as ‘pleasant to look at and easy to keep in condition, retailers expressed concern about consumer disapproval.’<sup>113</sup> Post-war commentators have tended to claim that Utility furniture was viewed unfavourably: Hoggart wrote in 1957, for example, that: ‘it was not difficult to guess that working-class people would go back, as soon as they no longer had to buy Utility furniture, to the highly polished and elaborate stuff the neon-strip stores sell.’<sup>114</sup> However, such accounts tend to infer negative consumer attitudes from manufacturer and retailer responses.<sup>115</sup> In contrast, a 1943 Mass Observation News Quota questionnaire concluded that ‘opinion [of Utility furniture] was on the whole favourable, especially amongst men’ and a 1945 Mass Observation survey of 291 ‘housewives’ who owned or have ordered Utility furniture recorded that: 51% liked it; 9% liked ‘with reservation’; 7% liked ‘certain specifications but dislike[d] others’; 16% disliked and 16% had ‘no definite judgement.’<sup>116</sup> Such figures prompted a twentieth-century analyst to argue that ‘in contrast with clothing, utility furniture was popular.’<sup>117</sup>

Ironically, assumptions by design reformers about the pedagogic function of Utility designs for consumers have had a tendency to reinforce the notion that consumers were disapproving. That is, if

consumers needed to be ‘educated’ about ‘good design,’ their prevailing preference must have been for ‘bad’ design. Designer Edwin Clinch recalled that:

as for the customers, it was the only thing to have, and they were used to something else. But that wasn’t good furniture so we were re-educating them, definitely.<sup>118</sup>

By definition, then, consumers are positioned as rejecting something with which they were unfamiliar—or untrained in appreciating. Not only does such commentary reveal class-prejudiced assumptions about a need for ‘re-education,’ but also we would also argue that an exclusive emphasis upon design issues underplays the practical benefits of the Utility scheme for consumers. Despite associations with wartime deprivation, it might also have been that householders—particularly those setting up home for the first time under conditions of austerity—valued the ability to obtain new household goods. For example, a Mass Observation diarist commented on the arrival of the furniture for which her mother had obtained permits: ‘I think it is jolly good considering that it is Utility—the wardrobes are grand, large and roomy.’<sup>119</sup> For consumers, the Utility furniture scheme offered the egalitarian distribution of a standardised product, connecting with principles of progressive political reform inherent in modernism more broadly.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusions

During the Second World War, geographies of the British furniture commodity chain were extensively reorganised and reshaped through the introduction of the Utility furniture scheme. Directed by the wartime state through the Board of Trade, the Utility scheme reworked raw material supply, design, manufacturing, distribution, retailing and consumption of furniture. This paper has investigated this specific example of state control in order to enrich discussion of the historically-specific role of actors across nodes throughout the commodity chain, rather than simply viewing states as providing the institutional contexts within which commodity chains operate. The Utility example also foregrounds chain dynamics under conditions of crisis, offering a critical counterpoint to accounts which emphasise ‘continuity over space and stability over time.’<sup>121</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Minutes of the 6th Utility Furniture Distribution Committee (note 107), TNA BT 64/1769.

<sup>109</sup> Charles H. Walker, Memorandum, Utility furniture, 10th March 1944, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Policy 1944/46, TNA BT 64/2825.

<sup>110</sup> Charles H. Walker, Memorandum: Utility furniture: production and demand to August 1944, dated 19 September 1944, 5, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Policy 1944/46, TNA BT 64/2825.

<sup>111</sup> The Mass Observation archive, University of Sussex contains only brief references within five Diarists’ reports, one News Quota report (involving a short questionnaire about Utility furniture), a report on the *Daily Herald* Modern Homes exhibition (3 April 1946) and within documents associated with surveys of the Britain Can Make It (BCMI) exhibition. Given our focus on arrangements during wartime, as well as the fact that the survey represents only exhibition attendees and not necessarily Utility furniture purchasers, a detailed discussion of the BCMI is beyond the scope of the paper, although we would want to draw attention to the not inconsiderable support for light colours, styles and ease of cleaning, such as Mrs. Samuel’s comment that ‘I like this sideboard. It’s just like the one I bought. . . it goes right to the floor. I like to have them on the level on the top—then you can dust them.’ ML 15 November 1946, Mass Observation Archives, University of Sussex (hereafter MOA).

<sup>112</sup> Minutes of the 1st Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, November 1942, 1, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Distribution Committee, TNA BT 64/1749.

<sup>113</sup> Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (note 8), 515.

<sup>114</sup> R Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London, 1957; cited in J. Attfield, The empty cocktail cabinet: display in the mid-century British domestic interior, in: T. Putnam, C. Newton (Eds), *Household Choices*, London, 1990, 84–88, page 85. Edwards cites the same quotation as evidence that Utility furniture was ‘received with ambivalence by the customers it was designed for’ (C. Edwards, *Turning Houses into Homes: A History of the Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishings*, London, 2005, 253).

<sup>115</sup> Whilst Denney claims ‘there is sufficient material to suggest that [utility furniture] was not widely popular with the consumer, nor with the furniture trade,’ his associated reference is solely ‘*The Cabinet Maker and Complete House Furnisher* and similar publications of the period’: Denney, Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948 (note 1), 116 and n.35.

<sup>116</sup> News Quota Questionnaires for April 1943, 12 May 1943, MOA FR 1678; and Furniture: A study of demands for furniture, and attitudes to utility furniture, Mass Observation Social Survey 63, May 1945 for the Board of Trade, TNA RG 23/73.

<sup>117</sup> I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939–1955*, Oxford, 2000, 95. Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, 197 details a small survey of 100 consumers, which recorded: 28 ‘disapproved’; 32 had ‘mixed feelings,’ 12 ‘praise’ and 28 ‘no answer given.’

<sup>118</sup> Clinch interviewed in Utility (note 58), 68.

<sup>119</sup> D 5443 (single office worker, London SE9) diary for September 1943, 1, MOA.

<sup>120</sup> See the discussion of the social egalitarian principles of modernism and an associated impetus for the democratisation of material goods in P. Sparke, *As Long As It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, London, 1995.

<sup>121</sup> Hough, Disarticulations and commodity chains (note 16), 1017.

The Board of Trade and its associated committees stipulated detailed specifications as a means of managing material shortages and facilitating the allocation of production capacity to a wide range of firms. The coordination and monitoring of manufacturing across designated firms in specified zones resulted in a distinctive de-concentration of activity away from the historical centres of London and High Wycombe. This pattern of dispersal was cross-cut by regional differentiation, which emerged as the Board of Trade assessed firms' capacity to produce different categories of furniture while also attempting to regulate and control distribution and consumption.

Although the reconfiguration of the commodity chain was by no means uncontested—manufacturers were concerned about the loss of design capability and retailers argued that the designs would not sell—this paper queries interpretations which have foregrounded consumers' unfavourable opinions of Utility furniture. We have argued that there is scarce evidence for such a contention. We are wary of portrayals which position households as highly critical of Utility designs, as these assessments rest largely on readings of manufacturers' and retailers' conjectures about consumer responses rather than detailed historical work on consumption.

Ultimately, the attempt to ensure equitable distribution of a standardised product at controlled prices, combined with the aim

of making efficient use of scarce resources at a time of great shortage can be seen to represent a progressive intervention, which offers on-going lessons for the social and environmental regulation of commodity chains.<sup>122</sup> Not only does the Utility example demonstrate the importance—at a time of sudden raw material shortage—of the need to reconfigure a range of sites across the commodity chain, but also we would argue that it reveals a key regulatory and coordinating role for the national state. The wartime period of Utility raises questions about the transformative power of market mechanisms to make change happen, particularly at times of instability. Given the potential for market responses to crisis conditions to have iniquitous social consequences such as inflation, profiteering and the racketeering of substandard substitute products, the case of Utility furniture opens up sharp questions about the most appropriate mechanisms for achieving environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and resource efficient futures.

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<sup>122</sup> See also the brief discussion in A. Massey and P. Micklethwaite, *Unsustainability: towards a new design history with reference to British Utility*, *Design Philosophy Papers* 2 (2009) 1–6.