



Biggest in the world

The Harris Lebus Factory at Tottenham - 1 July 1950

The biggest furniture factory in the world. Those of THE CABINET MAKER readers who pay close attention to display advertisements will know that the phrase usually appears somewhere in the announcements of Harris Lebus Ltd. And those among them who have only superficial knowledge of the firm may think it exaggerated, but after reading some interesting figures, which I shall presently quote, it is certain they will realize this is not so. We thought it fitting that in the first issue of THE CABINET MAKER in its new size, an account should appear of a company which holds such a unique position in the trade.

There are, of course in America, where everything is on a large scale, as big furniture firms although they consist of a number of scattered units; but for a furniture factory under one roof, Harris Lebus's Finsbury Works are unmatched for size. And they are equipped for dealing with all stages of production, from reception and preparation of raw materials to the final finishing and despatch of the completed articles.

In the trade, the names Harris Lebus and furniture are synonymous; we cannot think of one without the other. There is no need to refer to the unique services rendered to the industry by Sir Herman Lebus, particularly during the war and the immediate postwar years, apart altogether from the fact that he was the founder president of the B.F.M., which brought all the furniture manufacturing associations into one affiliation. Nor is it necessary here to laud his praises; his services were officially recognized only recently in a modest but tangible way, and in a spirit which should have left him in no doubt as to how much his efforts at all times on behalf of the industry generally have been appreciated.

It is that same single-minded purposeness which has characterized Sir Herman's activities in the higher counsels of the trade and his dealings as its chief representative with Government Departments, which has been of such value in the building up of the business of Harris Lebus to its present eminence.

In the days of the partnership, Mr Louis H. Lebus, Sir Herman's brother, now retired from the business, was also active in the interests of the trade and his work in connection with the F.T.B.A is known to all; under these two men, who were the senior partners, the business expanded and prospered. Sir Herman now has the benefit of a board of directors, upon which his two sons, Messes. Anthony and Oliver Lebus, and other able colleagues server, and some of them like himself have held important offices in the trade – Mr. Cuthbert Greig, for instance, secretary of Mr. L. S. Lebus vice president of the B.F.M.

Sir Herman, when I interviewed him, spoke with much feeling of the loyal support which the employees, both hourly workers and staff workers, had for so many years given those controlling the business and said how much many faithful servants had contributed to such success as had been achieved. The fact that at a dinner given last year to mark Sir Herman's fiftieth year at Harris Lebus there were some 330 employees (both hourly and staff workers) present who had each not less than 25 years' service (the longest service being 54 years) is an indication that the confidence of Sir Herman in his workers is reciprocated by them.

But above all, perhaps, the extraordinary growth of Harris Lebus, Ltd., over the years is a monumental tribute to the sound foundation on which the company was laid nearly a century ago by Mr. Harris Lebus, father of Sir Herman, and whose memory is perpetuated in the company's name. At that time the factory was in Tabernacle Street, in the East End of London and now, as most people in the trade know, partly used as showrooms and easily accessible to buyers visiting the metropolis. The firm has also showrooms at 12/19 Walsh Street, Glasgow. And it may be recalled that for many years after its foundation the company continued as a partnership until it was incorporated as a public company in 1947.

Now for some of the figures I promised at the beginning; but first let me mention that the factory is within little more than thirty minutes from Central London by trolleybus, and adjoins Tottenham the main road from Manor House, E., to Epping Forest. The site on which it stands covers an area of forty three acres, and of those approximately twenty-eight, or over 1,000,000 sq. ft., are factory space. Part of the remainder is car park, and the balance is available for development. Perimeter of the factory area is 5,750 ft. or the equivalent of approximately 1 1/10 miles.

In the construction of the buildings there are twelve acres of glass and the west main corridor from end to end is about one third of a mile in length. Four thousand electric lamps are required for illumination, and power is carried through sixty-two miles of electric cables. Some 7,000,000 units of electricity are consumed in a year (I leave you to tot up the bill!). Then there are ten miles of service pipes, and over 82,000 tons of steam require to be raised each year for generating electric power for heating the premises and for sundry process work. Water to cool condensers of the main power plant is pumped at the rate of half a million gallons per hour; in view of such huge consumption it is just as well the River Lea is so near! A considerable part of the factory has frontage to it.

In such a large factory it is, of course, very necessary that there should be an efficient fire alarm system. And one of the things that fascinated me at the Harris Lebus works was the control board in the office of Mr. W. F. Robinson, which shows the exact position of every single water main, sprinkler installation and isolation valve (and there are several hundreds of them) over the whole of the premises. Mr. Robinson, I should mention, has under his charge a full-time brigade of fifteen men which was formed at the works at the beginning of the war. He himself has behind him twenty-eight years' experience. As support to the brigade there is what one might call a supplementary fire force spread throughout the works in the ratio of about one to a department, its total strength being about forty. There are regular drills which keep the brigade up to a properly high standard of efficiency, and this affords opportunities to test the alarm and communication system, as up to date as one might find in any municipal fire station. Evidence of the thoroughness with which the brigade is looked after is the trophies which it has won in divisional competitions.

Workers' Welfare

Little will be said in this article about the company's production and products: Harris Lebus furniture is sufficiently well known and is to be found in many thousands of homes from John O' Groats to Land's End. Meantime we shall make some references to welfare, on the good functioning of which good production depends so much. In a factory the size of Harris Lebus's it is paramount, and it therefore came as no surprise to THE CABINET MAKER representative when he visited it to find that everything possible was being done to look after the well-being of every individual of whatever age employed there.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of this is that Harris Lebus, Ltd., were a long way ahead of most of the other firms in the industry in recognizing the right of every employee to one week's holiday with pay annually. This was in operation long before the National Labour Agreement was even thought of. And soon afterwards the company followed this up by making payment for statutory holidays, too. Likewise it was a pioneer of the five-day week of forty-four hours. It should be mentioned here that the shops work on a payment by results scheme for which the evaluation is, generally speaking, expressed in terms of minutes, and the staff has the benefit of a contributory life assurance and pension scheme.

More or less harmonizing and concurrent with these developments was the introduction of a canteen service, a facility then practically unknown in the industry, but which has been in embryo at the Harris Lebus factory for some time. It was at this period also that the firm began studying welfare in all its aspects and making it reality. In the next two or three paragraphs it will be seen how great has been the progress achieved since.

Again a few figures which are eloquent testimony to the value placed by the firm's employees on the canteen. On an average 1,305,000 meals are served and 1,566,400

beverages consumed each year. Approximately 2,000 gallons of tea are drunk each week. Needless to say, a large canteen staff is employed, including a chef and his assistant chefs. Strict attention, of course, is paid to hygiene and to the personal cleanliness of the canteen staff.

Doctors and Nurses

Then there is a fully –equipped surgery under the charge of a doctor and resident nurses. This is the right place to refer to the firm’s proud boast of its comparative freedom from accidents, a matter which is high on the list of priorities of the Furniture Development Council in an effort to reduce casualties in the industry. Judging from the records in the Harris Lebus factory last year, the firm is keeping safety measures under close surveillance; accident frequency in 1949 was less than 1 per cent per 100,000 hours, the actual figure being .79, and the severity rate was 105.9 per 1000,000 hour.

There is also a barber’s shop, a survival of the Second World War. This was initiated for the employees when blackout and blitz were making it more and more difficult to reach hairdressers regularly. And it is an amenity which has come to stay.

Reference which I have just made to the Development Council reminds me also that one of its other priorities is education, and likewise it is something which is regarded as not one whit less important by Harris Lebus, Ltd. And the company is especially fortunate in that its plans can be entrusted to Mr. W. D. Douglas, D.Sc., formerly on the staff of the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough for many years.

The company aims at moulding the youngster’s career from the moment he enters the factory, the intention being to make as smooth as possible the transition in a boy’s life from school to factory, so that it really amounts to a continuance of his education but in a different environment, and to impress on the youths that although they have left school they have not finished learning. Talks by suitable people on suitable subjects are arranged, and more important still the lads are introduced to the men under whom they will later be working in a manner which will not impair their confidence, and it is impressed on them that although the jobs they may be asked to do at first will seem trivial they are not so much so that they can be left undone. It should be added that particular care is taken to select the right types of workmen to be over the boys; long experience has taught what delirious effects the wrong ones can have on their charges.

The company is equally alive to the need for assisting the supervisory class, i.e. the foreman and charge-hands, to extend their technical education and knowledge. One means which is being adopted in this regard, and which the works manager, Mr. R. Dolman Bibby, believes to be essential to include in the plan, for small parties, usually less than ten in number, to

visit other large factories so that systems can be compared. Another object is to demonstrate that problems experienced are not confined to the Harris Lebus organization but are common to industry generally. A number of such visits have taken place and proved most profitable.

In a company as large as Harris Lebus, some means must be found to judge accurately each individual employee's capabilities and where there is promise to remedy defects, so that ultimately the person concerned may be fitted to fill some of the higher vacancies as they occur from time to time. A panel has therefore been set up at which Mr. L. S. Lebus, assistant managing director, takes the chair and individuals are interviewed under a plan which is approved by the National Institute of Industrial Psychology, a representative of which has attended a number of sessions. Those who come before the panel do so of their own volition and entirely without compulsion.

Guide Book

Another valuable feature which it is proposed to include in the Harris Lebus education plan is a guide book which will be kind of a miniature encyclopedia of the industry, and written in such a manner as will make it attractive reading to the least disposed of the young recruits. They are, of course, allowed a day off with pay each week to attend convenient technical schools or colleges such as, for example, the South-West Essex Technical College, Walthamstow, and the firm wisely keeps the parents fully informed on all matters destined to shape their children's future.

A word about the factory library which is at the disposal of the employees during certain hours each day. This, naturally, is a very important adjunct of the education plan and is remarkably comprehensive. On its shelves are several hundred volumes which may be borrowed and can be supplemented by books from local libraries with which there are special arrangements. Books on most technical subjects such as factory management, training and services are available, and if any operative or member of the staff should find that what he particularly wants is not there he has only to give a hint for the firm to obtain it for him. There is, of course a wide selection of trade periodicals and less abstruse literature, on hobbies of various kinds for instance.

Something must be said about the firm's sports and social club, with headquarters at the Club House, Ferry Lane, Tottenham. It bears the name of Pando, derived from the polishing and office departments – "P AND O." The old saying states: "All work and no play makes jack a dull boy." That cannot conceivably happen at Harris Lebus for its sport club covers such a wide field that there is something to appeal to everyone, and the large part it occupies in the life of the factory may be gathered from the fact that it has an annual turnover of approaching £10,000.

I noticed that a prominent position is taken up in the works by a carved oak plaque on which is recorded the triumphs of the firm's football teams which play in several leagues. Then are cricket, tennis, badminton, darts, bridge and swimming sections, and also a very successful drama club which includes in its repertoire modern plays like Coward's *This Happy Breed*. Nor must we forget to mention the gardening section which holds its own show annually and at which medals and other suitable awards go to the prizewinners. Additionally, this gardening section contributes handsomely to the decoration of the hall in which the firm's two annual dances are held. The importance which the company attaches to the recreational and social side of its activities is illustrated by the fact that Mr. Anthony Lebus is president of the club, and his brother, Mr. Oliver Lebus, vice-president.

National Service

Before proceeding we must recount something of the services the company rendered to the nation during the two great wars. One of the things which Sir Herman showed me with special pride was an old album containing photographs of aircraft in production at the factory during 1914-18. In most of them women and girls were shown doing all kinds of manual jobs and this drew from him the spontaneous remark: "How wonderful they were."

There were pictures of the old Handley Page bomber, the O.400, a quaint-looking thing according to modern standards. Then there was the Vickers "Vimy" bomber, and the Handley Page V.1500, which had what was then considered the enormous wing span of 126 ft. It was designed to bomb Berlin, but never did because the war came to an end too soon!

Even more important was the part played by the firm in the second World War, when it placed its entire organization at the disposal of the Government and stripped the factory of all traces of furniture manufacture to convert it to aircraft production. Before war broke out it had in hand the preliminary work of composite aeroplanes of wood and metal, which was vitally necessary owing to the enormous demands which were to be made upon all kinds of the latter material, and significant of the company's foresight is the fact that it had constructed its own air raid shelters, which were among the first in the country to be underground. They were completed in July, 1939, and opened by Sir John Anderson, the then Home Secretary and Minister for Home Security.

Mosquito fighters, Horsa transport gliders and Hotspur training gliders, not to mention quantities of landing craft, came off the company's assembly lines. The latter were launched on the River Lea and the river towpath was guarded day and night to ensure the utmost secrecy the War Ministries demanded.

To tell THE CABINET MAKER readers in detail about production at Harris Lebus would be like taking them for a busman's holiday. This much, however, can be said: technique at the

Finsbury works is a combination of batch production and flow production and involves considerable planning and progress organization. Closely allied to this, for example, is the department which studies such detail as the exact positions where various machines (and there are many hundreds at the factor) must be stood to perform certain operations so that the utmost efficiency, accompanied by the utmost economy is obtained. Or again there may be very slight deformation occurring during the progress of a specific piece of work, which it will be the duty of the department to find a way of eliminating, and there is another department which is of vital importance, that is the research department. The preoccupation of this department is to see, after experiments have proved the best way to go about it, that every piece of furniture which leaves the factory is of the soundest possible construction.

The Laboratories

There are in the factory fully equipped experimental laboratories where highly qualified chemists under Mr. A. E. Lain develop new processes and control the quality and performance of the many kinds of materials which are used throughout the works. For example, joints are tested for "bloom," a condition which emerges as a kind of blue tinge on furniture in certain localities and atmospheres during damp weather.

The various shops are all of very great size, and what literally appear to be almost unending lengths of conveyor belts carrying all manner of furniture in various stages of completion, present a vivid picture of mass-production highly organized. This is only made possible by the most up-to-date equipment and here it is worth noting that many of the machines, jigs and tools employed have been designed and made in the company's own engineering workshops. This characteristic enterprise, for the firm of Harris Lebus, Ltd., has always been a pioneer in the introduction of machinery and methods likely to raise both the quality and quantity of output.

Several instances of this may not be common knowledge, Sir Herman's father was the pioneer in the industry of satin walnut and Californian redwood, and it was Sir Herman himself who brought over from America cellulose finishing and the spray gun for application to the industry. These are now so commonplace that it is difficult to imagine that there was ever a time when they had not been heard of. Again the firm was the first to apply high frequency heating to furniture production. In all this the underlying motive has been to design machines to suit the work and work to suit the machines. It is a formidable and impressive record.

What else can be said of this famous firm? Its main business is the manufacture of domestic furniture for sale at prices which suit the pockets of the medium and low income groups. Its products are distributed exclusively through the retail trade, contact being maintained by a

staff of representatives whose combined territories cover the whole of the United Kingdom and through a series of stockrooms covering the country. There is no direct approach to the public nor is it supplied direct under any circumstances, but would be difficult indeed to find any part of Great Britain into which Harris Lebus furniture has not found its way or is not known.

There, then, is a picture, by no means perfect or as a whole as it could be, of a great British company which has grown from small beginnings. What better example do we need, in times when such qualities are not always offered the encouragement they used to, of initiative and drive which have brought their own rewards. And it is not the end, for Sir Herman's last words to me when I continued to question him were that there was still room for development which he had no doubt would come about. It is likely, then, that what is already a giant will grow even bigger and reach greater eminence in an industry of which the firm forms do large a part.

To conclude. I have a warm admiration for the friendly spirit I have found on the two or three occasions I have visited the firm's works, and I can think of no better way of finishing this account than by using a quotation I came across on the back cover of the annual report of its sports and social club and which, I feel, admirably expresses the spirit that pervades the whole organization. It is this "And so let us be cheerful, without regret for the past, with contentment in the present and with strong hope for the future."