

**What
the Press says**



**about
ERCOL
FURNITURE**

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THE ERCOLION has never gone out of his way to seek publicity. But the story of how, starting with the time-honoured Windsor chair, he evolved a whole range of better-designed, better-built furniture for the modern home, inevitably makes news here and abroad.

Over the years a very large number of articles, reports and pictures have appeared in newspapers, magazines and trade papers. These are not advertisements. They are the spontaneous outcome of visits made to the Ercol factory by editors and journalists at their own request. They have been at liberty to see everything and to write and publish whatever they wished about Ercol furniture and methods without hindrance or restraint.

This small booklet reprints, with the courteous permission of the publishers, a cross section of articles chosen from many.

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THE OBSERVER PROFILE

25th January, 1959

EVERY industry has its *enfant terrible*, even an industry as sober and traditional as English furniture making. Among the sober and slightly worried men to be seen at the British Furniture Exhibition this week, Lucian Randolph Ercolani, of High Wycombe, will be spreading the gospel that good furniture is good for the soul, and that craftsmanship is compatible with the production-line. A few heads may be shaken; some people will be impressed.

Mr. Ercolani was born an Italian, which may account for his hot and vigorous manner, but his particular achievement has been to build modern-looking furniture which goes back to the roots of an English rural craft. Windsor chairs, with the famous wheel-backs and strong, spare lines, have been made by hand for centuries in and around Wycombe; Mr. Ercolani has seized the design and exploited it for mass production.

Artistic and intellectual, he is also a shrewd and prosperous manufacturer, turning over *£1,250,000 a year with a staff of fewer than five hundred.

Since he was a young man he has kept to a few simple, basic beliefs, so that now, later in life, he can answer questions without the customary embarrassment of the man who is trying to tell the truth about himself. 'If I put into a chair something which is vainglorious, something which is there to catch the eye, then I'm cheating. If I want to appear vainglorious then I'm sunk.'

At the same time, he has no doubt about his position. A solid, shortish, voluble man, his bald head steep and winged with grey hair, he seems almost pleased to have so little in common with his fellow manufacturers - 'There's too much commercialism; they want jam-to-day.'

The start of his life was strange and difficult, just the thing to toughen the spirit. He was born in 1888 in a village near Florence, the son of a small furniture maker - a fervent Protestant and member of the Christian Mission (later the Salvation Army), who toured the countryside on a tricycle, showing 'Pilgrim's Progress' with a magic lantern and playing the tambourine to the great annoyance of Catholics. He was very nearly murdered, and when Luciano was three, the Salvation Army brought the family over to England.

In London the boy grew up in a poor and godly household, and there was an idea that he should make the Salvation Army a career. He played the trombone in the band, ingraining a lifelong passion for brass music, but outgrew evangelism by the time he was nineteen. 'I bought a morning coat and top-hat and went to the Baptists, and there I met my wife.'

Since leaving school he had been working in the daytime with a joiner, often cycling to look at furniture in his lunch-hour, and studying at technical school in the evenings. He began to do freelance illustration.

'It so happened in 1907 that I finished a very large drawing, a very lovely drawing, of a piece of furniture for an exhibition. The editor of the *Cabinet Maker* saw it and they gave me three pages for it. It settled me in my mind and I thought, by and large I'm all right. I'm going to keep at it.'

To learn more about furniture design he went to Parker's, a firm at High Wycombe - the centre of the quality side of the industry. They made 'fine' furniture, but most of it was reproducing classic styles, and he saw little future in helping to make four-poster lacquered beds with carved dragons, Chinese Chippendale-type, costing £1,200 retail and finding their way to a small, rich public.

He wanted to make good furniture and find, or create, a mass market for it. In 1920 he borrowed some money, bought twelve acres off the London road in Wycombe, and went into business. It then took him the best part of thirty years to start doing what he really wanted.

Before the First World War he had seen them hand-making Windsor chairs at Stokenchurch, a few miles west of Wycombe. The design was clean and simple - 'the only piece of furniture which is reduced to the simplest possible level' - and what he thought of as its peasant origin appealed to him strongly. 'Poor little devil of a farmer, he didn't have any tools. He bent a piece of willow and put sticks at the back to hold it up.'

A huge Board of Trade order for kitchen-type chairs, placed near the end of the war, gave him the chance to start expanding in the desired direction.

The order was so big that he could afford to design and build some ingenious tools for making chairs based on the Windsor pattern - not mass-production machinery in the usual sense, but plant that broke down chair-making into a series of carefully planned operations.

By 1946 the Council of Industrial Design was showing interest in his furniture, and

* Present turnover is now far in excess of this figure.

some of it was chosen for a Council exhibition; this brought orders and encouragement.

For some time the Utility restrictions curbed him, but between 1947 and 1952 he spent £150,000 on advertising. Business leapt ahead. In the last few years he has been making more and more furniture with the Windsor look, or something akin to it, and the public has been buying; Mr. Ercolani is a happy man.

Design isn't something to be hurried. A model of a chair, two inches high, will be photographed from all angles, thirty or forty times, the prints of details blown up to life-size, cut out of cardboard, and pinned on the walls so that 'space shapes' can be studied. Mr. Ercolani is intense about space shapes.

There seems to be no bossism about Mr. Ercolani. 'This is a peculiar thing. I can walk among my men and feel a oneness, and I can't feel like that with my fellow manufacturers.' But he can be sharp and exact in his attitude to output; he thinks in seconds and pennies.

'We get men going to the lavatory and spending ten minutes to have a smoke. It's not the cost of the cigarette, they forget they're earning a penny-farthing a minute. That cigarette's costing us another bob in output, and then there are the overheads – more bobs.'

In everything he's the great practical man. To test a chair he would rather throw it down a flight of stairs than send it to a laboratory.

Years ago, when people were grumbling about Utility furniture, he summoned a party of High Wycombe councillors and officials to the works, then asked the Borough Librarian to choose pieces at random and write his name on them in ink. The selected furniture was hauled to a band-saw, and there followed the impressive sight of a sideboard and chest of drawers being sliced apart, knife-through-butter fashion, for the company to see how good the workmanship was.

There is a self-contained air about Mr. Ercolani. He buys his timber in the tree and wastes very little. The business has remained a family one; Lucian, his elder son, a brilliant machine designer, is in charge of the works; Barry, the younger, is sales manager.

In an industry which alternates between boom and bust with bewildering rapidity and which has only recently emerged from a period of fairly depressed trading conditions, Mr. Ercolani glitters with certainty. He thinks that we are 'enjoying the greatest civilisation the world has ever seen, in this country.'

No one would say that he has made an

original contribution to modern chair design. Automation is his achievement, the production of solid, cheap, attractive, well-constructed chairs at a low price for a mass market.

Originators in this field – for instance, Saarinen, Bertoia, Eames in America or Arne Jacobsen in Denmark – have exploited industrial techniques to create new forms, new concepts. Ercolani has transferred the craftsmanship which once went into the making of Windsor chairs into the machines which make them. He has developed what in fact was already a form of mass production in embryo. In the old days seats, legs, ladderbacks were separate components made by hand in scattered cottage workshops, then collected and assembled. Now they are hardly touched by human hand.

Every Wednesday tea-break the Ercol Brass Band (with silver instruments) plays in the main factory's canteen for half an hour, and Mr. Ercolani sits at the management's trestle table a yard from the platform, the cups vibrating, applauding furiously, remembering his youth at the joiner's in the East End and how he would go out on the roof to practice his Salvationist's trombone.

*'No need to blow
my own trumpet
these days!'*
says the ERCOLION.



Clear Cut Comfort for 1960 Furniture

ALICE HOPE'S Home Column

THE HOME PAGE DOCTOR TALKS ABOUT THOSE UNTHINKING HUSBANDS

IF YOU HAVE a problem child, who has feeding troubles or colic or stomachs, it may be that the cause is stress between the parents.

The Home Page Doctor, who will discuss family problems in this feature from time to time, asks me that children, even babies who have not crawled, the talking stage, are quite often emotional barometers of the home. They react, with extraordinary sensitivity to nervous tensions in the parents.

THERE'S A YEAR OF TESTS AND TRIALS BEHIND A THESE NEW DESIGNS

The furniture factories and warehouses now they are putting the finishing touches to the new pieces we are to see at the annual exhibition at Earls Court in ten days time. And I've been having a private preview.

It takes a long time to get a chair ready for you and the shops. At least a year of testing and painstaking usage is behind the best of the products you will see.

There is, for example, a new table still on the secret list of Mr. Lucian Ercolani, the 'lion' of the furniture trade (it is his trademark).

Flotting

But I can show you a picture of another of the 'lion's' new items. It is a chaise-longue (above), which is so made that there are no wooden slats to stick into your back. You will just 'float' on soft supporting straps, with rubber foam seats. The footrest separates from the chair to become a stool.

We're going to have more space for seats like the chaise-longue around the house, says Mr. Ercolani.

More furniture will be fitted into homes, and I believe that in future architects will specify a certain wardrobe or sideboard just

movement and new ideas. Mr. Ercolani, who has been having a private preview, says that the new pieces we are to see at the annual exhibition at Earls Court in ten days time. And I've been having a private preview.

Deflection

There is nobody in the more advanced in the creation of good furniture than Mr. Ercolani, who has been having a private preview in his office at Earls Court in ten days time.

Addition

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BIG MERGER OF 3 AIR FIRMS

Vickers, B English Mr. SANDY PLAN

FORMATION of an aircraft industry will combine the interests of Vickers Aircraft Co. Siddeley, de Havilland and the Bristol Company. The Vickers Aircraft Co. will be the new company which will carry on the business of the three firms.

The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post

No. 12,576 LONDON, TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 1960

MR. MACMILLAN CHERISHED INTO LAGOS



Reprinted by permission of THE DAILY TELEGRAPH 12th January, 1965

CLEAR CUT COMFORT FOR 1960 FURNITURE

There's a year of tests and trials behind all these new designs

THE furniture factories and warehouses now they are putting the finishing touches to the new pieces we are to see at the annual exhibition at Earls Court in ten days' time. And I've been having a private preview.

It takes a long time to get a new table or a chair ready for you and the shops. At least a year of testing and painstaking usage is behind the best of the products you will see.

There is, for example, a new table still on the secret list of Mr. Lucian Ercolani, the 'lion' of the furniture trade (it is his trademark).

The table, which I saw in his office this week, has been made and remade for 12 months until now, when it is about to be

released. And all I'm allowed to say is that it will seat 4 or 10.

FLOATING

But I CAN show you a picture of another of the 'lion's' new items. It is a chaise-longue (above), which is so made that there are no wooden slats to stick into your back. You will just 'float' on soft supporting straps, with rubber foam seats. The footrest separates from the chair to become a stool.

'We're going to have more space for seats like the chaise-longue around the house,' says Mr. Ercolani.

'More furniture will be fitted into homes, and I believe that in future architects will specify a certain wardrobe or sideboard just

as they now specify a bath or toilet fittings. 'This kind of planning will give us more room for comfortable movement and sitting.'

At their home in High Wycombe, Mr. and Mrs. Ercolani dine off a comfortable, old-fashioned square table which was a wedding present 40 years ago from a rival firm for whom he was then working.

'Why throw out furniture which has given you happiness and which holds memories for you?' they say, remembering that their three children and now their seven grand-children have all sat around the old table.

DEDICATION

There is nobody in the trade more dedicated to the creation of good furniture than Mr. Ercolani (his name is Italian and he was brought to this country at three years old).

At lunch (he carved the beef on a big beechwood platter), he constantly took out his pencil to draw sketches on a table mat.

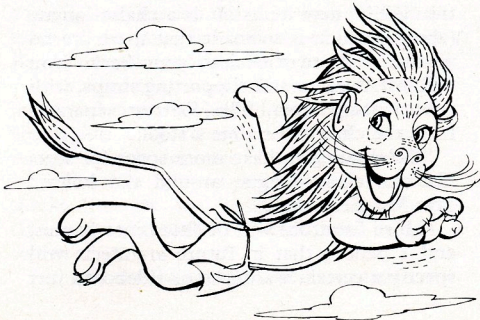
And what, you may ask, was his wife's reaction? Serene and tranquil, she just watched thoughtfully – for 40 years she has been the ideal wife.

'I found her when I went over from the Salvation Army to the Baptists,' said Mr. Ercolani, who began life as a carpenter, going five nights a week for five years to evening classes at Shoreditch Technical College.

The famous modernised Windsor chair, which was made for the Britain Can Make It Exhibition in 1947, was inspired by a visit to America when he saw a great deal of Colonial furniture.

The newest product of the factory, the chaise-longue, is the design of Mr. Ercolani's eldest son. Nothing, by the way, is ever made to match in their factory, and they have never produced a 'suite' of furniture.

*'I'm quite at home
in Editorial space,'
says the ERCOLion.*



*Reprinted from
THE SCOTSMAN
30th January, 1960*

HE WORKS WITH SOLID WOOD

A MAN who has ploughed a singular and highly successful course in British furniture, and one of the few to work in solid wood, is Lucian Ercolani.

At a time when British furniture designers were looking frantically in all directions for some inspiration, usually from abroad, Ercolani set out to make, with modern methods, a range of simple, well-designed furniture based on the fundamentally-English Windsor chair, and to use for it the traditional and difficult wood elm.

That was for the 1947 Britain Can Make It Exhibition. Now Ercol Lion furniture rolls out of the factory to a tune of 2,000 pieces a day – and though the original Windsor inspiration is no longer so evident, the clarity and sincerity of design is always there.

SIMPLICITY

Lucian Ercolani has always been obsessed by the idea that the ordinary, average person should be able to possess beautifully-proportioned and finished craftsmen-made furniture. His whole credo is based on an honesty and simplicity, not only of design but of material.

Nobody believed that it was possible to stabilise elm for such use, always notorious for its movement – but Ercolani felt that this was the right wood for the purpose, beautiful in grain and also a home-grown timber.

The reason he has succeeded is because not one moment or movement in the wood's life is left to chance. The standing wood is brought every week to the factory in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. The logs are unloaded and immediately cut into the lengths for each item needed, according to the quality of the wood – so much for table tops, so much for chair seats, another length for cupboard doors and so on.

The wood, in planks, is kept together, labelled and numbered, and air-seasoned for between nine months to a year, depending on the thickness of the planks. Thus the timber is dried and weathered as long as possible naturally before it goes into the kilns, where



*'I may be a Sassenach
but Scotsmen like
my chairful tune,'
says the ERCOLion.*



it can take nearly three weeks to get the correct moisture content gradually and safely. Final moisture content should be between 10 and 11 per cent. This process is not merely drying, it is a conditioning of the wood and it is very important that it is done slowly and very exactly.

From this moment the timber then goes into the factory to be cut, sanded, polished and assembled into its various designs.

Most of the plant here has been specially designed by Lucian Ercolani junior, whose delicate task it is, among others, to work out the machinery for the particular design, and to ensure that large-scale production is practical and economical.

One of the most important items in this are the endless variation of 'cutters' for making any desired shape - a table leg, a chair . . .

Each operation is wholly foolproof due to the perfect jig designs produced for each component. There is no measuring and marking of wood allowed. Mr. Ercolani says that no two people with a tape measure get exactly the same measurements. Each item is therefore fitted exactly on to the jig and cannot vary by a blade of a millimetre as the cutters do their work.

Ercolani works in solid wood because he feels so strongly for the beauty of the grain and because he believes that the back and the front, the sides and the insides of all that he makes should have the same quality and finish.

The great insistence throughout all

Ercolani designs, emanating from this simple piece of traditional craftsmanship, is Lucian Ercolani's belief in the importance of space and form. Not just line and form. The patterns that a design makes between its solid lines is as important, he says, as the design itself.

This is very evident in his new Bergere chair which, with its matching stool, forms a delightful chaise-longue. The Bergere follows very much on the lines of the successful easy chair with its 'free floating setting' on rubber filled cushions upon reinforced rubber webbing. This new chair has curved elm arms complementing the rather more reclining angle of the seat and back, so that the body is perfectly supported without any contact with wooden cross bars.

Another very interesting Ercol addition is a slender dining table which can seat 10, with a firm, hinged leaf that easily removes to slide underneath so that the table becomes a normal family size. The beauty of this design is that there are no tiresome legs for unfortunate guests to straddle - the leg which supports the extra leaf is underneath in the centre of the table well out of reach.

All this furniture once based on the cottage-type of traditional English craftsmanship has now won itself popularity not only in the homes for which the original Windsor chair was made, but also in the homes of the rich, proving yet again that good design of any kind and any age can meet and mix in harmony.

or sell his furniture for 10 hours a day. You have first to dream dreams, then make them come true – as we all try to do.'

SCHOOLING

I don't think it was nepotism that brought the sons into the business. Only Ercolanis, who imbibed their father's philosophy with their mother's milk, could hope to run the business his way.

'When I am gone,' said Mr. Ercolani, 'I know my boys will never consider takeover bids.'

'My sons have never disappointed me. Even as little boys they loved to run around the works. Lucian used to stand on large lumps of coal prepared in the boiler house to make him tall enough to start the machines running. They were always interested.'

The Old Man gave his boys the education he missed.

'The Old Man educated himself at night schools after working long hours by day as a joiner, and cycling to look at fine furniture in the lunch hour,' Barry told me with obvious pride. Yet both sons were made to learn the business the proper way – from the ranks.

From an early age they spent their holidays in the works, getting the feel of the place, finding their natural bents.

Lucian proved himself a genius with machines; Barry was a born salesman. When they were 17 they left school and worked their way through the factory.

They were put through every job, with

The Old Man never far away, watching and advising.

ANGUISH

He taught them to love the straightgrain, golden beech and the rugged elm, explaining this was where their furniture story began.

'It's not easy for the boys working with me,' said Mr. Ercolani. 'I'm much harder on them than I would be on anyone else.'

'But for me it is wonderful. I have planted two acorns, and watched the growth of two fine sturdy oaks.' The Old Man kept his anguish to himself when his boys joined the Air Force in the war, but the heart had gone out of his work.

When it was over, and they returned, much decorated, Mr. Ercolani began to live again. His first love is designing and his factory went over from utility furniture to beautiful craftsmanship, and his sons took over executive posts.

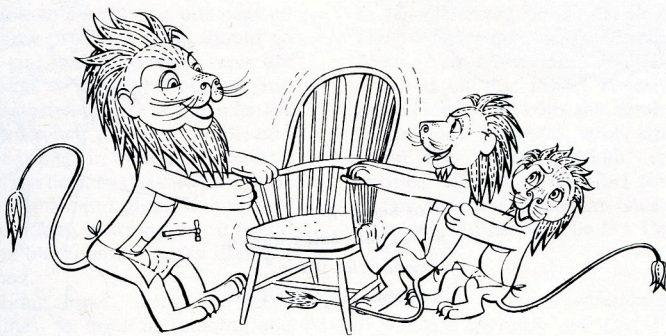
Looking at his big sons makes The Old Man feel he is looking in a triple mirror.

'I see in Lucian my steady side, my inventive side, the side of me that is sound common sense and reliability. Barry is the volatile me, the poet, the dreamer, the emotional one.'

The fiery but friendly little lion which is Ercol's well-known trade mark is affectionately thought, in High Wycombe, to resemble The Old Man.

Having spent a day with the Ercolanis I would suggest they change their sign to a pride of lions.

*'It's a family affair,'
pants the ERCOLion.*



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from
DIE TAT, Zürich
12th February, 1963



Mit einem Eisenwerkzeug werden die Handgezeichneten Bretter für die Verankerung dieses, massenproduzierten...



Die ausgestellten Bretter werden im Breitere zerlegt. In diesem Bereich, wenn die Arbeitsergebnisse im weiteren...



Der ungeliebte Teil des Arbeitslebens ist durch Menschen, die sich nicht lassen ihre Tätigkeit auszuüben, über jeden nachdenklichen Mensch zu sein. Für die...



Einmalige eine Zeitungsnummer: Johann die Stelle werden ihm gegeben



BEHAGLICHES WOHNEN

Wir besuchten: Furniture Designer Lucian Ercolani in England

Es ist ein Mann, der nicht in die...
...die Welt...
...die Welt...
...die Welt...

A.Z. Zürich Dienstag, 12. Februar 1963

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'I'm keeping
my export tail wagging
all over the place,'
proclaims the **ERCOLion**.

Comfortable Living

WE VISITED FURNITURE DESIGNER

LUCIAN ERCOLANI IN ENGLAND

SOME months ago during the Windsor Furniture Exhibition held by Jelmoli, we were talking shop with some interior designers about the machine manufacture of furniture and could come to no conclusion. Mr. Lucian Ercolani, businessman, philosopher, designer and manufacturer of Ercol chairs, was of the opinion that, with less discussion of 'pros' and 'cons' and more enthusiasm and initiative, ideas that are still a long way off could become realities; it is, in general, an evil of our time that there is too much talk by too many people, from the cleaner up to the director, about certain things - leaflets, design, advertising, copy, etc. - and too little action.

Mr. Ercolani went on to talk about himself and his internationally-known factory in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

He was born in Italy and came to England as a young child. He started work with Frederick Parker (later of Parker-Knoll) as a designer. His work was also his hobby. He saw the old Windsor chair (today, the oldest and most elegant pieces are kept in some of the London museums) and designed his own 'Windsor' style. Today, he is one of the leading furniture manufacturers. He and his sons invented modern, up-to-date machines, rationalised the whole manufacturing process and made such progress that they are now able to produce daily a vast number of modern Windsor Chairs. The timber from the surrounding forests is dried in huge kilns and then processed into chairs and other furniture.

It is impossible to describe on one page all the many working processes. One should go to the forests and watch how the trees are felled, loaded on to railway waggons and taken to the factories. There the trunks are borne by conveyor belt to the saw-mills and suitably cut for storage in drying-rooms. At a later stage they go back to the saw-mill to be cut into small planks and glued in a special way. This makes them so strong that it would need very many blows with a heavy hammer to split the wood.

A large labour force, using the most modern machines, is used for planing and

polishing, each workman being allocated to a particular stage. Special machines bend the steam-heated timber as it comes out of the oven, to form arm rests. Before component parts are joined together, the wood is treated and goes to another department for final polish.

In England Ercol Furniture has been well known for a long time and is to be found in countless homes. In Switzerland, too, this furniture has already become widely popular.

On our tour through Mr. Ercolani's factory, which we found rationalised down to the last item, we noticed the dynamic way in which he runs his business. In this day of mass-production and stereotyped methods, there is still great scope for private initiative in producing new ideas and implementing them.

When Mr. Ercolani saw how difficult the shifting of furniture, particularly the larger pieces, other than chairs, could be, he had the idea of providing his chests of drawers and sideboards with concealed rollers, so that even the heaviest pieces can now be moved with one finger.

He departed from his traditional style, which is still very popular in England and in which he still works, and created simple modern furniture. His contemporary chairs, both elegant and comfortable to sit in, are particularly well suited to our times. This is all that the old gentleman from Italy wants. He is satisfied when his customers can sit down on a comfortable chair and relax after a hard day's work. Leading daily papers, monthly magazines and trade journals, such as *The Observer*, *Punch*, *Art & Industry*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Illustrated London News*, *New Homes* and *The Scotsman* have reported on this model business. In 1960, Alice Hope, who edits the home supplement in the *Daily Telegraph*, wrote enthusiastically about the 'Windsor Chair' in an article entitled 'Clear-Cut Comfort for Furniture'. A famous Swiss Designer once said of Mr. Ercolani: 'In his field he is a Dutti'.

This is a direct translation of the article reproduced opposite.

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HOUSE BEAUTIFUL
March 1965

A FAMILY OF CRAFTSMEN

IN THE days when woodmen still whittled chair legs from Buckinghamshire's beech trees, a small, stocky cabinet maker stood on a ridge overlooking the village of High Wycombe. In his mind's eye, he saw the ridge laid bare, with red brick buildings crouched against its slope and the air musical with the busy hum of great 'up and down' saws.

Today, vision and reality merge on that hill above High Wycombe. The brick buildings are there, so is the sound of the saws; but the jagged outlines of the streamlined new factory now hug the hill for a third-of-a-mile and here and there slender chimneys or a crane hoist rake the sky.

The man who overlooks it all has hardly changed. Now 76, bald and squarish, his eyes still sparkle behind black-rimmed spectacles and he brims with confidence and fervour. Lucian R. Ercolani, OBE, founder and present chairman of Ercol Furniture, is today one of the country's biggest and best-known furniture manufacturers. He has watched his early dream turn into reality but in the process has lost none of his ardent, youthful belief in the value of a craftsman's skill.

It was this belief, aided by canny appreciation of the possible powers of mechanisation, that led Lucian Ercolani to base his furniture designs on the simple, rustic shapes which seventeenth-century Buckinghamshire farmers first fashioned from the wood around them. One result is Ercol's range of Windsor furniture which echoes the graceful hoop or comb-back and stick-and-spindle lines of the original English and later American Windsor chairs. Another is their 'Old Colonial' range which is derived from the sturdy, unadorned craftsmanship of Cromwell's period.

'What we are trying to do', explains Italian-born Ercolani, 'is to put ourselves in the place of a craftsman living in Cromwell's time. What would that craftsman have done if he had lived as long as we have? We are allowing the experience of those extra 300 years to help us to do a job today probably a little better even than that man, had he lived long

THEIR INFLUENCE IN YOUR HOME No 2

A FAMILY OF CRAFTSMEN

by Anne Barr

In the days when woodmen still whittled chair legs from Buckinghamshire's beech trees, a small, stocky cabinet-maker stood on a ridge overlooking the village of High Wycombe. In his mind's eye, he saw the ridge laid bare, with red brick buildings crouched against its slope and the air musical with the busy hum of great up-and-down saws.

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It was this belief, aided by a savvy appreciation of the possible powers of mechanisation, that led Lucian Ercolani to base his furniture designs on the simple, rustic shapes which seventeenth-century Buckinghamshire farmers first fashioned from the wood around them. One result is Ercol's range of Windsor furniture which echoes the graceful hoop or comb-back and stick-and-spindle lines of the original English and later American Windsor chairs. Another is their 'Old Colonial' range which is derived from the sturdy, unadorned craftsmanship of Cromwell's period.

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42



enough, would have done.'

Ercolani's insistence on craftsmen's standards coupled with high-speed production methods has led to some thumping design headaches. 'When the villagers first heard we were going to mechanise the Windsor chair', he beamed, 'they sent me notes and messages saying "Tell Ercie he'll never make a Windsor chair".'

It took a year of intensive research, specially built machines and as many as 200 separate machining operations to make one of the simplest designs, but today Windsor-style chairs whirl off the production line at the rate of one every 10 seconds. Each chair, although machine made and hardly touched by hand except in the final finish and polish stage, bears the mark of the craftsman. Joints are glued; chair legs, arms and backs are inserted into holes drilled into the seat, wedged with wooden wedges tapped into the projecting split ends, and then sanded smooth. Easy chairs, couches and beds float on reinforced rubber suspension, the webbing fixed to the frame with a patented up-to-date method of fixing which creates a shock-absorbing effect. And all the foam-rubber upholstery cushions have clip-off or zip-off covers.

Along with quality, Lucian Ercolani loves wood. Solid and natural. His love of wood

not the only ones who made this furniture. A lot of people copied them. There were many makers of Chippendale furniture, many makers of Hepplewhite furniture. Each contributed a part of his individuality, yet always there was an affinity between them and so we get a style produced'.

All this has built up in Ercolani a belief that no design is wholly new, no idea completely original. Rather, he feels, design is a natural evolution and progression from all that has gone before. 'At the moment there is a tremendous cry for originality', he smiles. 'But where is the man who can do something so different that no one else has done it before, so new that he is not recapturing a long-ago thought of some kind?'

'There is nothing new in the *idea* of a chair. The trick of putting three legs up and making a stool like a milkmaid's so that one leg could be long and the others short and yet it would stand – *that* may go back before history was written. But it has taken hundreds of years for that stool to progress into the kind of chairs we are making today'.

It is part of the natural progression, Ercolani believes, that talent should travel from father to son. This shows every sign of running on in the Ercolani family. Himself the son of an Italian furniture maker, Lucian Ercolani's own two sons now play major roles in the management and master-minding of their father's booming business. Lucian, named after his father, is machine designer as well as Joint Managing Director with his brother Barry, who directs the sales.

Mixed in with Ercolani's rich blend of design philosophy is one other important theme: that pleasant surroundings are a great civilising influence because people tend to 'live up' to them. Says he: 'Money is no longer a barrier where buying furniture is concerned. With hire purchase you can afford pretty well what you like. But cheap furniture is always a bad bargain. It wears out after a few years and has to be replaced, so you end up buying two lots of furniture. On the other hand, the most expensive thing may not be the right answer either. Beautiful, costly things are delicate and need a lot of care. You cannot, after all, flop down on a damask sofa in gardening clothes.'

'No, to my mind, the medium-priced furniture is always the best buy. And it should be chosen to last a lifetime. The table that your children have drawn on and maybe even scratched a little, the sofa that you have covered and re-covered dozens of times, the vase that has held thirty summers' flowers – these are the things that make a home come alive'.

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MODERN WOMAN

April 1962

CHOOSING FURNITURE THAT WILL LAST

*The best of today's skill
the best of yesterday's designs
for tomorrow's
gracious living*

IN MY review last month of what I found in New York I reported on an outstanding new trend. The word to describe it was 'derivative' – a reversion to the past from the point of view of design but with materials and skills that are mid-20th century.

'Derivative' furniture is distinct from 'reproduction' in that a reproduction tries to look exactly like an antique whereas a derivation takes the beauty of an old design and improves on it by using today's techniques. Now this trend is taking over the English home furnishing scene.

Some of today's furniture manufacturers underestimate the taste of the British public and try to fob them off with poor workmanship and materials or stereotyped design. Many of these are now finding their warehouses overflowing with unwanted furniture.

At the opposite end of this scale is a manufacturer of integrity who has consistently given the homemaker the best of materials (solid wood), workmanship (a good deal of hand craftsmanship) and design and who is now building a further quarter-mile of factory to cope with his orders.

This is Lucian Ercolani, head of the family business of Ercol. He told me: 'The basis of design is three-way: racial, social and functional. Nothing is absolutely new. Chairs, for instance, are based on human anatomy. Their shape hasn't changed much since the first cave man made three-legged stools and used the wall of his cave to lean against. Later,

It was never that much of a feat to find in New York a chair so interesting and useful. The seat is made of a woven material in the pattern of a spider web. The seat is made of a woven material in the pattern of a spider web. The seat is made of a woven material in the pattern of a spider web.

Choosing furniture that will last

The best of today's skills, the best of yesterday's designs for tomorrow's gracious living



On the opposite side of the world is a manufacturer of furniture who has been largely forgotten. The furniture he has made is a great deal of hand craftsmanship and it shows in the quality of the work.

The antique of tomorrow

The second chair to be developed by Ercolani is a Windsor Grandfather. The Windsor chair is a favorite of Mr. Ercolani.

The "grandfather" Windsor chair was developed by Ercolani in 1934. It was a great success and it has been made ever since.

Good design is a science

Designing a chair is a science. It is not just a matter of making a chair that looks nice. It is a matter of making a chair that is comfortable and useful.

The "grandfather" Windsor chair was developed by Ercolani in 1934. It was a great success and it has been made ever since.

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than it is today (because of the patina that age will give it) people of that day will wonder how it could have been made for the price.

'The Windsor chair design goes back over 300 years. My new chair is inspired by an old one that I bought 40 years ago for £35. I tried to buy a similar one at an auction recently and it went for £400. The old chair is badly warped because when it was made craftsmen did not know how to condition wood, but it is still a comfortable chair. I have wanted to use its basic design for many years but only recently have we had the machines able to make it better than the old craftsman.'

'We took 40 photographs and made over 700 drawings before we discovered how we could pleasantly modernise it. We wanted to fill today's requirements at a price anyone could pay. One improvement on the original are the "flying arms" which curve upwards; our problem was how to make them of one piece of wood.'

'Early Elizabethan furniture was honest and completely English,' Mr. Ercolani continued. 'If the English had not travelled and brought back German "beer mug" legs, elaborate French and Italian carving, we would have a purer English style.'

'Cromwell was told that much of the decoration on Stuart furniture was idolatrous and fortunately condemned it and a new simplicity was reached. But during the Restoration the ornate French-Italian-classical style was revived. So that even today's antiques are not necessarily "original".'



when greater skill was attained, another leg and a back were added.'

THE ANTIQUES OF TOMORROW

The newest chair to be developed by Ercol is a Windsor Grandfather. The Windsor chair is a favourite of Mr. Ercolani.'

'If you can find something really sound that has been done before (and which in its turn was probably derived from an earlier period) you have a result which is both honest and inspired. If you make it well so that in a hundred years' time it will be better



'Wherever shall I appear next?' asks the ERCOLion.

THE WOODEN CHAIR

It was of the Shaw's play -
 The Devil's Disciple, I think, but I
 am for once open to contradiction -
 there is mention of a seat
 'conventionally moulded to the sitter's
 curves.' This is undoubtedly a Windsor
 chair, with its bowed back and seat
 of adzed elm, and the master's
 definition is magnificently apt.

The Windsor bow-back chair has been made in England for at least four hundred years. It was the chair that our first chairmen sat in, at a time when the lower orders, the fetchers, carriers and hewers, were thought to be invertebrate and sufficiently comfortable on their stools and backless benches.

A careful examination of these old chairs can be most instructive to the student of anatomy: he learns, I am told, that our remote ancestors differed very little from us in matters of curvature and spread. We must remember that until very recently these chairs were bespoke jobs, made to measure or custom-built, whereas to-day they are turned out by the thousand to a standardized concavity. At one of the largest chair factories in Wycombe the output is one chair every twenty seconds, three a minute, and the cycle of operations, from tree-felling to the dispatch of the com-

pleted chair, occupies no more than a week, and often less. One minute, it seems, ancient trees of beech and elm browse contentedly on the chalky soil of the Chilterns, and the next they are rolling off the conveyers as Windsor chairs.

To the ordinary observer there is something almost indecent in this swift translation. We English are great tree-lovers (even if we have allowed our country to become the most treeless in Europe) and such unceremonious execution goes against the grain with us. Incorrigible sentimentalists that we are, we regard our trees almost as domestic animals.

'I say, that's rather quick, isn't it,' I said to my guide, 'I mean to say . . .'

'Seasoning? Don't worry, we season the stuff very carefully.'

'In a week?' I said incredulously.

'In less. I'll show you.'

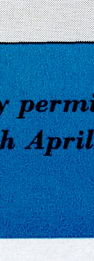
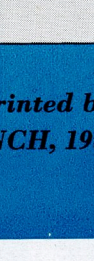
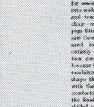
And he led me away to the kilns. Thousands of chunks of wood lay supine and flaccid in the racks of a monstrous turkish bath - like flabby boxers trying to reduce just before the weigh-in. They sweated profusely and gave off an intoxicating odour of brewing. In a few hours they would be 'done' and their

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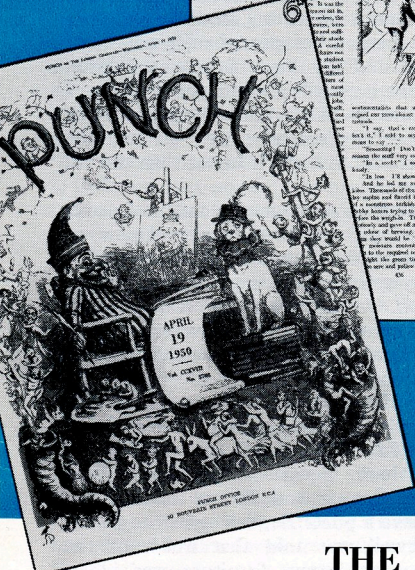
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PUNCH, 19th April, 1950

THE WOODEN CHAIR

IN ONE of Mr. Shaw's plays - *The Devil's Disciple*, I think, but I am for once open to contradiction - there is mention of a seat 'conventionally moulded to the sitter's curves.' This is undoubtedly a Windsor chair, with its bowed back and seat of adzed elm, and the master's definition is magnificently apt.

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moisture content would be down to the required ten per cent.: overnight the green timber would become sere and yellow.

Seeing all this with the naked eye made me wonder whether the British reverence for such processes as maturing, weathering, seasoning, drying out, lying fallow and settling ('Let it stand a while') might not, after all, be merely an excuse for sloth or inactivity. I mean . . . well, can I really claim that the undercoat of paint in the spare bedroom is still drying out, or that the vegetable patch is still prospering under 'natural' subaerial cultivation? I don't want to press this point unduly, but sociologists and productivity experts may well find it worthy of attention.

In man-hours it takes about twice as long to make a Windsor by quantity-production methods as it does to read this article. This means that each of the sixty or so men engaged on its manufacture and assembly affords it some thirty seconds of his time. From most of the workers it gets no more than a perfunctory tap with a mallet or a momentary shove as it is injected into a shaping machine. In fact the worker's chief role in modern furniture making is to stand by and see that there is fair play between the wood and the machine. Left to themselves the machines would not always treat the material with the respect it deserves: they would rub it up the wrong way.

I wish Brooker my old handwork master could have seen these mechanical planes, levellers, joiners, turners and shapers. We never got on well together, Brooker and I. He maintained that my indifferent planing ('peneplaning,' he called it, the old cynic) and my fits-where-it-touches joinery were attributable to bone idleness coupled with congenital clumsiness. But he was wrong: I knew that there was no future in woodwork *per se*, and that to take Brooker's handwork classes too seriously would be to engage in a losing battle with the machine. Here at Wycombe the machine is the complete master. The fifteen component items of the chair, the bow, seat, sticks, legs and struts, are all turned out by specialist machines, and when they are brought together for assembly they fit like eye-balls into sockets. There are no mortise and tenon joints in the Windsor chair - merely a succession of round pegs fitted into round holes - but I saw them being made by the thousand in another shop devoted entirely to sideboards. The operation comes over badly on paper because it is so staggeringly simple: machines fed with pieces of wood shape the two halves of the joint with the ease and speed of a bus conductor

punching a ticket. And the finished job is as precise as a skilled craftsman could achieve in an afternoon's work.

After assembly the chair is sprayed with cellulose and rushed away to be sat on. As the conveyor belt discharged its burden to the delivery department and the trucks dashed off to the railway station with their loads I fancied that half of Britain must be waiting with aching calves to sit or flop down. These were urgent supplies being rushed to a foot-weary populace.

Only in two departments did I see men working on the wood by hand-and-eye method, that is *without* a battery of automatic machines at their elbows. In the bow-bending shop two men combined as a team. The length of steaming-hot ash (or beech) was placed tangentially to the curve of a horse-shoe pattern. Then the partners - one at each end - grasped the rod with both hands and pulled it round into conformity with the pattern.

'Like to try it?' said the elder workman.

So I heaved at the wood, and very slowly it began to move. Soon, though, there was more steam rising from my head than from the bench, and I had to admit defeat.

'It's just a trick,' said the first workman, a fellow with biceps like boulders; 'you can't do it without you have rubbers on your shoes' - which I thought a most generous and considerate gesture.

In the other hand-and-eye department real old-fashioned craftsmen equipped with nothing more than chisels, mallets and sandpaper were trimming the products of the machines, removing blemishes and patches of glue. And these workers were more numerous than the machine operators not because the blemishes are numerous but because the two groups, machinists and finishers, must work at equal speed.

I might add that each worker in the factory is supplied with abundant compressed-air power, which he uses at every opportunity. I saw men blowing shavings from their benches with it, and I have no doubt that it is also used at times to break in new instruments for the works' brass band.

Only one practical tip emerges from this investigation, and that is how to mend the leg of an unstable chair. Observe, please, that it is 'leg', not 'legs': if a chair wobbles it is because *one of the legs is too long*. (Official.) At Wycombe the levelling job is done by an ingenious machine which identifies the rebel and cuts him down all in one movement. At home the same result can be achieved, I suppose, by . . . half a minute, please, while I put this to the test.

Furniture Ltd. have doubled production in the last two years and are now extending their capacity by a further 100 per cent. which it is estimated can if necessary be achieved in another two years. No target date has been set because Ercol believe that compulsive expansion creates more problems than it solves.

The Ercolani family may be very proud of their phenomenal growth record, at a time when other manufacturers have been forced to retrench and economise, but if so they keep it to themselves. However, when it comes to talking about the art of producing good furniture quickly, efficiently and economically Mr. L. R. Ercolani the founder and chairman, his son Lucian who is in charge of the works, and Barry who is responsible for sales, are all extremely articulate and fascinating to listen to. They subscribe to a humanitarian and progressive philosophy about furniture making and selling which in these cynical and disillusioned days cannot be put across in print effectively without doing less than justice to those who base their working lives on its tenets. To give a brief and topical example: in the not too distant future cabinet pieces from the Ercol Old Colonial range will be supplied with solid backs and drawer bottoms instead of the plywood which, for partly historic and partly economic reasons, is traditional in this style of furniture. They told the trade about the proposed change at the last Furniture Show and were extremely gratified to find that buyers welcomed it. At the time it was not known how the change to solid wood backs would affect the prices of the items concerned but not a single buyer opposed the plan on this or any other score. The vast majority of retailers said they were glad to know that the company had decided to switch to solid wood throughout the Old Colonial range as it would bring this furniture into line with the Windsor range, and reinforce Ercol's reputation for consistency. That viewpoint was warmly endorsed at every level of the organisation from directors to apprentices.

Two thousand pieces of furniture a day are produced at the Ercol factories in High Wycombe, and a Windsor chair comes off the assembly line every ten seconds. But so keen are costings that each kitchen chair contributes less than a penny to the company profits. Even so, the fact that large quantities of chairs can be manufactured and marketed economically helps to subsidise the production of cabinet goods which by themselves do not bring in sufficient revenue to pay for the quality and craftsmanship that goes into each and every piece. In view of this the imminent

improvement, or perhaps we should say refinement, of the Old Colonial sideboards and dressers surely suggests that Ercol face the future with full confidence in their ability to step up sales of Windsor chairs.

Like all manufacturers, Ercol receive many requests from retailers who are thinking of stocking their products. Unlike most other manufacturers, the Ercolion's stock reply is . . . 'Come and see our factory and watch us making furniture.' And when the enquiry is from overseas Ercol prefer to send air tickets rather than catalogues. They are convinced that no catalogue, even such a colourfully illustrated and well-produced one as their own, is a substitute for seeing the furniture made and meeting the makers. Over the past ten years or so, many buyers visiting this High Wycombe factory have been surprised by the leisurely approach to opening new accounts. Fairly recently some Continental buyers who whipped out their order books shortly after arrival were astounded when Ercol executives suggested they might be rushing their fences. In the first place the Ercolion wished to introduce them to his furniture properly, and this could only be done by seeing it made and testing it out for themselves.

Only then could they know whether it was the sort of furniture they would be able to recommend to their customers who are the people that really matter most to the Ercolion and his cubs. Of course, every manufacturer prizes public esteem because without it no worthwhile business can for long exist. But at Ercol Furniture that old phrase about looking after the customers - both trade and public - really comes alive. Its full meaning cannot be captured in a balance sheet, for this company's interpretation of the words go beyond the call of duty to the furniture industry and of service to the furniture buying community.

'I take steps to maintain perfection in every detail,'
says the
ERCOLion.



operator's fingers well away from the work-face.

An ingenious machine at Ercol's identifies and trims the leg of an unstable chair: *this machine also has an ingenious but simple guard, a spring-mounted disc which slides back to cover the cutter immediately the leg is trimmed.*

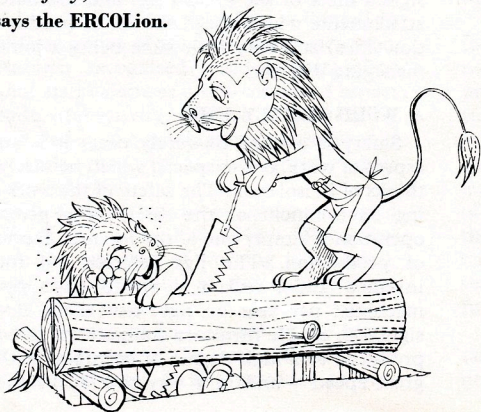
The first impression on entering the works is the cleanliness of both the atmosphere and the surroundings of the workshops. Extensive exhaust ventilation is installed throughout the works. Walkways are well maintained and uncluttered. Components and offcuts left to pile up would impede the rapid production flow: *they could also cause collision, cuts and bruises as men tried to steer trolleys through the crowded aisles.*

Great use is made of static roller conveyors. This means that furniture units can move round easily and quickly on a pre-determined course for each process: *it also means that no one need bend, heave or push heavy weights about.*

Work containers are of a height which enable an operator to pick up components from his left without effort, feed them to his machine and place the finished article into another container on his right - which is so arranged as to make the quantity of work completed self evident, thus avoiding counting. Wasteful movements are cut down to a minimum: *so are the chances of a man lifting or carrying too much and tripping over into the machinery.*

High quality industrial adhesives are extensively used. Cheaper compounds are less reliable: *they are also more likely to create health risks.* In the sections handling

**'I always
keep an eye
on safety,'
says the ERCOLion.**



adhesives warning posters about health dangers from synthetic resins and the like are not prominent; PVC gloves in use are.

Flameproof lamps are installed throughout the spraying shop. A few simple masks were in use but efficiently exhausted spray bays mean that masks are a sensible additional precaution for those who want them, not an essential item of equipment.

One of the few notices on display in each shop carries the name of the nearest qualified first-aidier. They have 30 at Ercol's; a doctor visits the factory every two months.

Another example of how safety is inherent in the organization at Ercol's is provided by the factory's tool and maintenance shop. Jigs and machine fixtures are developed and produced in this small but well-equipped department. It is as scrupulously clean and tidy as any I have seen, each machine appropriately guarded and goggles and eye-shields within easy reach.

Back in his little-used office (furnished, of course, by the ERCOLion) Lucian Ercolani set out the principles which have guided the firm in building up an atmosphere in which overseers, as such, are unnecessary.

'As you've seen, we don't have any people in white coats walking up and down the shops to maintain production', he said. (His own shirt-sleeve order during our tour of the works was obviously not an affectation - simply the natural gesture of a man taking his jacket off to get down to work.)

'We have senior men carrying high responsibility, of course, about 70 of them, but they are also working in the shop and are available on the spot should production problems arise. Not one of these men has been appointed from outside; each has grown up with us.'

But this does not mean that production at Ercol relies only upon people working with a will. Every job is broken down to individual operations, and each operation in turn is studied carefully to reduce movement and handling to a minimum. To a great extent the jigs provided govern the way the job is done - a way in which the operator's hands are kept well away from spindles rotating at anything up to 24,000 r.p.m. And these jigs are designed in consultation with the men who will eventually use them.

And the unions? 'I am a firm believer in trade unions', says Ercol's joint managing director. On occasions he has personally pointed out the benefits of membership to non-members and there is, for all practical purposes, 100 per cent. trade union membership in the Ercol workforce.

'We have extremely good relations with the

designer with Frederick Parker (Parker-Knoll of today).

We would venture to suggest that Mr. Ercolani knows about design too. And we timidly suggested that, judging by a lot of furniture in the shops, some Englishmen just do *not* know.

But our host would not hear of this. 'Look at a garden spade,' he said. 'Have you ever seen such a beautiful piece of functional design? What could be more perfect than that? And look at an English handsaw, or a wheelbarrow, or the wonderful old English farm wagon. No-one was taught how to design those things. They just happened. And they're English.'

English, too, is the Windsor chair for the revival of which the Ercolion is so famous. Originally produced at a time when there was no longer sufficient skilled labour in England to carry on the traditions of the Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Adam and Sheraton schools, this chair made use of the peasant labour available in High Wycombe.

It was the farmers and farmhands who, throughout history, in the winter-time, had been making their own woodware, constructing it within the capacity of their tools to be strong and durable. For instance, the milking stool goes back to the beginning of history, but it was the farmer who thought of placing four legs on it instead of three. He then thought of bending a willow, placing its ends in the solid seat, and providing sticks with which to support the willow bow.

And that was a Windsor chair. At least it was the elementary foundation on which Mr. Ercolani built his research. He realised that this particular article had great possibilities of design development, free from symbolism and stylisation of the ages which pull against honesty of design and fitness for purpose.

He had a prototype chair made, by local

people, on the land that is now his vastly efficient factory, and had it photographed from forty different angles. Next he had all the photographs enlarged to life-size and mounted on a wall so that he could study them in complete detail.

On the question of form and space, he asks, 'Have you ever noticed the fascinating angles a chair makes from this position?' he asked. 'And from here - and here?' Soon we - and he - were grovelling about on the floor getting an entirely new aspect of a chair, marvelling at all the rectangles, triangles and many other shapes made by the supports, the verticals and the back - what Mr. Ercolani describes as the space shapes within the form.

Mr. Ercolani sounded as if he could write a thesis on the importance of all these shapes being a delight to the eye and, when we came to look at them, we had to admit that they were just that.

After the war, when he was still perfecting his design, and still developing his production techniques, Mr. Ercolani had realised that he had a chair that was suitable for the mass market. For a mass market that would need to be educated in the finer points of design, and whose purse was definitely limited. So he set himself the task of producing a chair, a simple Windsor style.

This was no mean ambition considering that all the machinery had to be bought specially, and some even made in the factory to his own design, and, initially, his costs were high. Even today, a new prototype Ercol chair costs so much to make that they need to sell 50,000 to cover the initial expenses.

'Do you ever miss?' we asked. 'Does a chair or a piece of furniture ever not pay?' 'Up to now we have been lucky', said the ERCOLion. 'Somehow the public have liked what we have given them.'

Naturally - the English *know* a good design.

ERCOL FURNITURE LTD
HIGH WYCOMBE · BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
ENGLAND

