

# FURNITURE WARS

## UTILITY FURNITURE



LIVING ROOM



KITCHEN



BEDROOM

## NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Both Gordon Russell and his brother Dick volunteered to join the Worcestershire Regiment during the First World War (1914-1918). Both were injured but survived the fighting in France. Gordon was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. His experience led him to the conclusion, 'that my generation, which had destroyed so much lovely work, had a constructive duty to hand on to those coming after us, good things of our own creation'. And so he set up his furniture company.

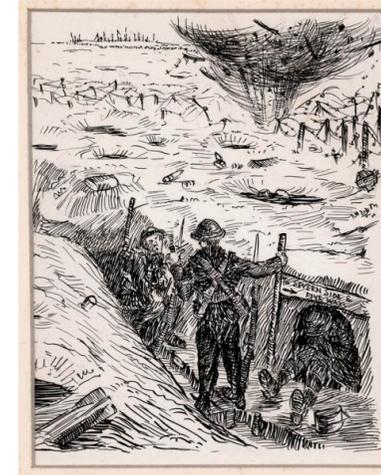
### AIMS OF THIS UNIT

To explore what life was like during WW2 for the Gordon Russell Company in Broadway and the affects on the everyday lives of people in Britain.

Using the story of the furniture company this unit's workshop looks at the immediate affects of Britain at war and some of the impact it had on domestic life.

Supply of timber became more erratic in the early 1940s as existing supplies were diverted to the war effort, fewer men were available to cut the trees and imports were under attack at sea.

The air raids destroyed the homes and furnishings of many thousands of people across the country resulting in



*Sketch of life in the trenches by  
Gordon Russell 1917*

a 'furniture famine'. A national solution was sought and Gordon Russell joined the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee whose responsibility it was to control the design and production of wartime furniture.

### CURRICULUM LINKS

KS2

History – Unit 9 (What was it like during WW2?)

KS3

Art and Design - Unit 8C (Shared views)

Design and Technology – Unit 09bii (Designing for markets)

## QUICK NOTES

During WW2 nearly all furniture making stopped in Britain.

All materials were taken up by the war effort - there was little manpower as able men signed up to join the services.

Women played a greater role by becoming the new workforce in the factories.

At Gordon Russell Limited they stopped making furniture and started on war work.

They made very accurate wooden models of aircraft for service-people to be able to recognise enemy and friendly aircraft in the skies over Britain.

They also made wooden models of plane parts for aircraft manufacturers to test out new components or parts.

Much of the furniture stock brought from the London showroom to Broadway was destroyed by stray bombs off-loaded by German aircraft on their return from a bombing raid on Coventry.

The Utility Furniture Advisory Committee was set up in 1942 with Gordon Russell advising and then leading it. Utility furniture was a set of designs using the best modern ideas but the most economical of materials that could be



*Buying permit issued by the British Government for the Utility Furniture Scheme.*

followed by any furniture-making company in Britain.

Utility furniture could be bought, using Government coupons, by people who had lost everything in bombing raids or were newly-married.

Many of the Utility furniture ideas influenced post-war furniture design in Britain.

## DESIGNING

### STARTING POINTS

The gathering clouds of war in 1939 saw furniture production virtually cease. All work was now directed towards supporting the war effort. The wood engineering skills developed through the accuracy required for producing the radio cases for Murphy were now used to create mock-ups and models to use in wind tunnels for testing aircraft engineering.

Many of the male work-force left to join the services and local women were employed for the first time. They worked on making wooden models of aircraft to help train observers in the civil defence ack-ack brigades in recognising different enemy planes. The models had to be accurate.

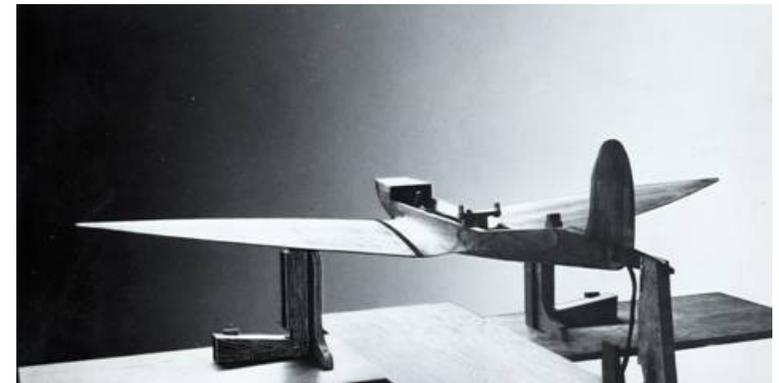


*Grace Collins worked at the Gordon Russell Workshops (this image was taken after the war)*

### BROADWAY BOMBED

By the autumn of 1940 the Gordon Russell Company had moved all the stock of fine furniture and textiles from its showroom in London, because of the intense bombing by German aircraft, to the 16th Century thatched tythe barn in Broadway. Unfortunately, one night a stray incendiary bomb, meant for Coventry, landed on the great barn and everything was destroyed. Some of the drawings were rescued from the drawing office.

By this time Gordon Russell no longer ran the company he started back in 1918 and was spending time at his house in Kingcombe. In the midst of WW2 he was elected as a Royal Designer for Industry in 1940.



*One of the precision models for wind tunnel testing*

## MANUFACTURING AND MATERIALS - ONE

### THE WAR EFFORT

The Second World War created shortages of materials and man-power within furniture manufacturing. All raw materials were diverted to the war effort and the workforce was depleted as men joined the services. Manufacturing companies, such as Gordon Russell Ltd, now made wooden prototypes of machinery, ammunition boxes and model aircraft for recognition training.

Some positive things that resulted from the wars were the increased impetus in the creation and development of new materials and technology and changing attitudes to women in the workplace.

### NEW MATERIALS

Non-traditional materials were being developed in other industries that began to be used in furniture design and manufacture.

- 1907 Bakelite is patented
- 1920 Tubular steel is developed for use in the Fokker Spider Mark I aeroplane
- 1925 Chromium is made commercially available
- 1937 Polyurethane is developed
- 1940-45 PVC, polystyrene, Perspex and polythene are developed

### NEW MANUFACTURING

The introduction of the Utility furniture programme during the Second World War was a perfect vehicle for Gordon Russell to promote his modern ideas, developed pre-war, and encourage their adoption by a wider audience.

This was about surviving commercially without compromising the quality of design and craftsmanship. Working in the confines of a shortage of capital; the necessity to create a skilled labour force; move from hand to machine workmanship and from single unit to mass production. There was also a move from single designers to teams of designers working as managers.



*Wooden under-carriage prototypes made for the Dowty aircraft company in Cheltenham*

## MANUFACTURING AND MATERIALS - TWO

### NEW ATTITUDES

Collaboration with the Murphy Radio company before the outbreak of WW2 had blended cabinet-making and technology in a new and effective way. The radios were eventually made in a purpose-built factory opened in 1935 in Park Royal, London.

The cabinets to house the radios had to be made accurately to exacting standards and in large quantities. The manufacturing techniques were adapted to allow the new rounded curves of the modern designs to be made. This involved steaming wood to enable it to be bent and as it cooled it would keep its shape.

Many of the designs were created by Dick Russell, Gordon Russell's brother and newly qualified architect. Other radio companies including Bush and Pye also worked with Gordon Russell Ltd.

Whilst wanting to make furniture in greater number and sold at lower prices the company did not want to sacrifice high quality workmanship. Many of the production methods prepared the way for later important war work.



*Bush Radio, 1947*

## INNOVATION - ONE

### UTILITY FURNITURE

With the scarcity of materials and manufacturing capacity, along with the number of people losing their homes and furniture, the government used a coupon system for those newly married or bombed-out needing new or replacement furniture.

The Utility Furniture Advisory Committee was set up by the Board of Trade and was made up of designers, manufacturers, government spokesmen and consumers. Gordon Russell was



*Walnut veneer dining room suite, c.1939*



asked to join in 1942, eventually becoming Chairman of the design panel. Escalating war damage and acute shortages of materials created a pressing situation.

Gordon Russell saw this as an opportunity to break with the pseudo-Victorian tradition of reproduction furniture to create a range of austere, less ornate and modern style of furniture. He thought this was the only way to meet the challenge of producing well-designed furniture made in economical and robust ways.

## INNOVATION - TWO

### UTILITY FURNITURE

The plan was to limit furniture production to a small range of 'state-approved' designs that could be mass-produced by a whole range of woodworking businesses - not all had furniture making skills! Around 700 producers were used in the end.

#### PRE-WAR

Ornate Carving

Elaborate

Retro Tudor, Georgian or Victorian design

Vast choice

Often poor quality

Tradition of pattern

#### UTILITY

Relying on pure form

Straightforward

Efficient

Economical

Standard designs

Rigid Specifications

Limited to less than 100 designs

This was an opportunity for Gordon Russell to start re-educating the public's taste towards the 'modernist' ideals he was so passionate about.

Two designers from High Wycombe, H J Cutler and Edwin Clinch, were chosen to design the furniture range. The idea was to provide clear and simple designs and instructions to manufacturers who made and sold the furniture in the their locality as transport was difficult.

The popular press were lukewarm when the furniture was launched on 1 January 1943 - they were unimpressed with the hardboard backs and drawer bases, labelling the furniture as 'made of cardboard'.

Effectively there was now a new national style of furniture design. From this came a Design Panel, chaired by Gordon Russell, to explore the longer term influence of Utility furniture beyond the war. Work continued with the formation of the Council for Industrial Design with Russell an enthusiastic participant.

## ACTIVITY 1 - PRE AND POST WAR FURNITURE

**TASK!** Choose a piece of furniture made before 1939, then look at one made during WW2 (1939-1945) and a piece made after 1945.

	Made BEFORE 1939	Made DURING 1939-1945	Made AFTER 1945
Name of furniture chosen			
Materials it is made from			
Date furniture made			
Describe the furniture			
What is similar? (style, material, function)			
What is different? (style, material, function)			

**TASK!** Make a quick sketch of the three pieces of furniture on the back of this sheet.

## ACTIVITY 2 - INTERIOR FURNISHINGS

**TASK!** Take a closer look at the information about Gordon Russell and his company during WW2

The company made aircraft models to test designs in a wind tunnel. What else did they make during WW2...?

### UTILITY FURNITURE

A 'Permit to Purchase' was given to people who had lost furniture during a bombing raid or those getting married. A permit had 60 coupons.

Look at the Utility Furniture on display - how would you spend yours

WARDROBE  
12 Coupons

ARMCHAIR  
6 Coupons

DINING TABLE  
6 Coupons

UPRIGHT CHAIR  
1 Coupon

SETTEE OR SOFA  
12 Coupons

KITCHEN TABLE  
4 Coupons

BED SETTEE  
15 Coupons

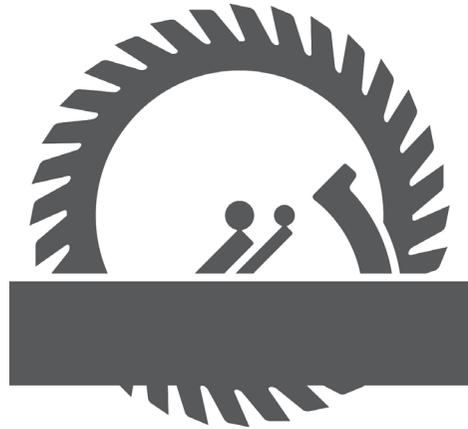
**TASK!** Write your shopping list on the back of this sheet

## FOLLOW UP IDEAS

These are ideas to try out back in the classroom or studio:

- As an experiment to see how different designers use limited materials in creative ways allow everyone to use the same amount of material to make the same piece of furniture. It could be balsa wood sections and heavy-weight cardboard, recycled materials or construction kits. Compare the results.
- The issue of using precious natural resources and the impact of man-made materials is a good discussion area for circle time. What should we do with furniture no longer needed or how to limit the impact of materials on the environment? Use web research skills to find current designers addressing these issues.
- Make links between the idea of the 'utility' furniture during and after the war and set a project to design furniture for use in disasters (both natural and man-made) using simple construction and material ideas.
- Create a school exhibition to share ideas with the rest of the school community.





GORDON  
RUSSELL  
DESIGN  
MUSEUM

[www.gordonrussellmuseum.org](http://www.gordonrussellmuseum.org)