

# THE OFFICE



## NOTES FOR TEACHERS

The office, as a place of work, has existed in one form or another throughout history. Changes in society and technology have had an impact on the design and usage of the office in the past hundred and fifty years. Many of these more recent changes can be seen through the furniture production of Gordon Russell Ltd.

### AIMS OF THIS UNIT

By exploring the development of furniture, specifically for the office, this unit looks at the ways life has changed in Britain since 1948. It also examines designing for particular markets.



### CURRICULUM LINKS

#### KS1/2

- History- Unit 13 (How has life changed in Britain since 1948)
- Design and Technology - All units (How and who will use certain products?)

#### KS3

- Design and Technology - Unit 09bii (Designing for markets).

#### All Key Stages

- Literacy - Group discussion and interaction
- ICT - research study skills

*Desk group designed by Dick Russell, 1933. Made in rosewood with drawer fronts veneered in Japanese chestnut.*

## QUICK NOTES

The first offices as we know them today appeared in the United States of America at the end of the 19th century.

New technology has changed the style of furniture needed in a typical office with telephones, typewriters and then desktop computers.

Offices became more open-plan.

Offices changed as women joined the work force in greater numbers.



Gordon Russell Limited manufactured office furniture for individual or small scale clients.

After WW2 furniture markets changed and the company moved towards working with designers and architects on larger 'contract' projects.

Many of the contracts were to design office furniture for the new offices being built in the 1970s and 1980s

Design ideas for the modern office came from all over Europe and the USA during the 20th century.

New materials and machine-produced furniture have influenced the design too.

*Desk Group by Jorgen Kastholm for Gordon Russell Limited*

## DESIGNING

### STARTING POINTS - THE HISTORY OF THE OFFICE

The first commercial offices appeared in the northern industrial cities of the United States of America in the late 19th century. The inventions of the telegraph and telephone enabled offices to be situated away from the home and the factory. Other new technologies included the electric light, the typewriter and the 'calculating machines', which could process larger amounts of information much faster and more efficiently. These were the earliest computers.

This new prosperity saw the change from 'blue collar' (makers) to 'white collar' (office) workers.

The steel framed skyscrapers in Chicago with their elevators (lifts) enabled offices to be built in high concentrations. The offices were separate rooms leading off long straight corridors. The many floors of offices stacked one on top of another generated large incomes from small sites.

In the 1960s offices became more 'open plan' but the fashion of the day, the 'mini-skirt' caused problems. 'Modesty' panels were added to the side and front of the desks.

As computers reduced in size from one computer taking up a whole room to the desktop size we know today the desk was adapted again. Holes were needed for cabling and

pull out shelves for keyboards, printers and before email, the fax machine. Now wireless technology has removed the need for cable management within the desk.

Offices have often been designed to reflect the success, power and ethos of businesses. Throughout the long history of the Gordon Russell Company it has kept pace with, and often, influenced office design.



In the early 1930s Dick Russell (Gordon's brother) was responsible for furnishing large numbers of offices and showrooms. This desk, entirely finished in Macassar ebony, would have originally been part of an impressive interior scheme for a private office in the city.

*A single pedestal desk in Macassar ebony, designed by Dick Russell, 1934*

## MANUFACTURING AND MATERIALS - ONE

The Sycamore Series was constructed with a medium-density fibreboard (MDF) carcass and then finished with a fine veneer of sycamore, a pale coloured wood. Decorative veneers are cut from slices, cut through the tree trunk and can be halved and quartered to create decorative patterns with the grains. The slices of wood is then dried flat and applied to the furniture carcass with adhesive.

Sycamore is a tree found in the United Kingdom and Europe with a silky feel to the wood. The trees were introduced into this country in the seventeenth century. The wood is valued for being hardwearing and fine grained.

The Sycamore series was offered in a choice of finishes with the sycamore being stained a variety of colours - pale grey was a favourite choice. The lacquer was also offered in a range of colours.

The component elements of the design could be assembled in a wide variety of ways - without overwhelming the manufacturing process.

Before full-scale manufacturing was started the designs were tested as scaled down models which are on display in the museum.

*Images from the Sycamore Series brochure*



## INNOVATION - CASE STUDY

By the 1970s the Gordon Russell furniture company had moved away from the retail market and was expanding its design activity into the office sector.

Ray Leigh joined the company as Design Director in 1967 and became Managing Director in 1971. His mentor had been Gordon Russell's brother Dick Russell - both had trained as architects.

The 'Sycamore Series' was a group of desks, tables and storage units. It was one of the last designs Ray Leigh created for offices in 1984.



*The Sycamore Series, designed by Ray Leigh, 1984*

Here Ray describes some of his innovative ideas behind the designs:

*'The choice of sycamore veneer and black lacquer was quite deliberate. For some time I thought we needed a change from the timbers we were currently using. Brazilian Rosewood, Macassar Ebony and Wenge were all dark in colour and I sensed that the taste for exotic materials, particularly with young designers, was diminishing and that lighter coloured timbers were being favoured.'*

It was interesting that at the time the design was described as 'retro', with its strong geometric shapes echoing the style of the Art Deco. In fact, the choice of materials was just because the contrast was pleasing.

The group was designed to offer as many options as possible, with a combination of the component elements - tops, pedestals and storage. This provided the customer or interior designer with a wide choice appropriate to a particular office or home interior scheme.

To minimise untidy wires all cables could be threaded down the inside of the black lacquer table legs.

## ACTIVITY 1 - OFFICE DESIGN CHALLENGE

**TASK!** Take a closer look at the Sycamore Series furniture, either on display in the museum or online. Imagine you are a furniture designer and fill in the gaps in this design brief.

Who is your **CLIENT**? Are they a large or a small company, local or international, with how many people in the office?

What will the furniture be used for? This is its **FUNCTION**. Add your own ideas to the list:

- Working on the computer
- Storing books and files
- Printing out documents

What image or **PROFILE** does your client want to put across? Are they powerful, caring, welcoming, or do their job well?

What '**LOOK**' do you think your client might want? Is it sharp, soft, light, dark, everything matching? What materials will you suggest?

What **TYPE** of office do you think the Sycamore Series furniture was designed for?

## ACTIVITY 2 - WHO USED THIS?



Date:

Designer:

Wood:

Who would have used this piece of furniture?

What was the furniture used for?



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## FOLLOW UP IDEAS

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

- Working in small groups, create a 'design brief' based on potential business customers, it could be a new office for a multinational, a self-employed person working from home etc. Produce storyboards to show what, or who, might influence the design.
- Give each group a floor plan relating to the design brief and work on a series of different furniture configurations. Used squared paper and a scale of measurement.
- Make mock-up models in balsa wood and card of the furniture. Are they based on a 'modular' type or are all the pieces different?
- Set the challenge of designing an office for the future - how will working life change through technology? How will this effect the office and the design of the furniture needed.



*Scale models of the Sycamore Series office furniture, 1984*



GORDON  
RUSSELL  
DESIGN  
MUSEUM

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