

Furnishing a Legacy

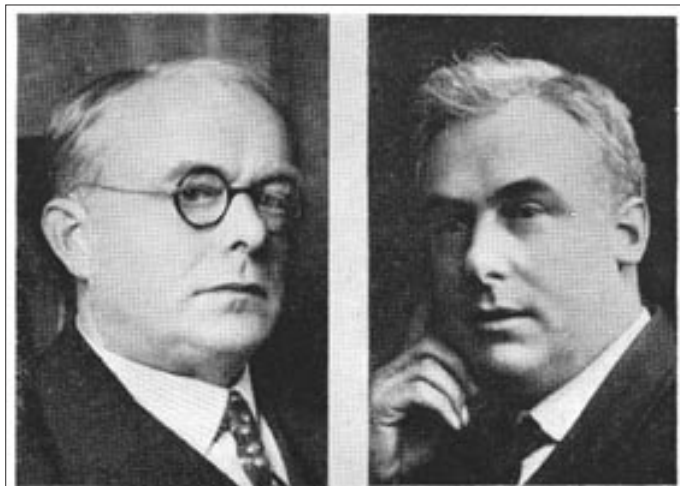
The E & A Wates Story

Anyone travelling down Mitcham Lane in Streatham and glancing into the windows of E&A Wates may be surprised to see a large furniture shop with some pretty creative window displays. It might seem a little out of place and few would imagine the contribution that this local business has made for over 100 years and the fascinating history it has to tell.

The company was founded by Edward Wates my great uncle in 1900 when he was aged 27. He came from humble origins; his grandfather was a bankrupt licensee of the Prince of Saxe-Coburg in the London's Old Kent Road and his father, William the 11th child in the family, was a carpenter and joiner. William moved several times in the course of his work and finally settled in Mitcham Lane. His crowning glory was to set out the dome of Croydon Town Hall. He also fathered an 11 strong family with five sons and six daughters.

Edward and Arthur were his eldest boys and whilst they got on very well it was during a school boy scrap that some boiling water was knocked off the living room stove over half of Edward's face resulting in acute deafness in one ear. Because of this disability he was taken out of school aged 11 and sent out to work gaining employment with a fishmonger in Croydon. We next hear of him cycling to a different job, this time a daily trip from Addiscombe to Shepherd's Bush working in a furniture shop.

By the late 1890s he was engaged on a salary and commission basis as a salesman in a furniture shop in Kennington Rd. He had developed a keen nose for business and took an order to completely refurbish the nearby Antelope Pub. His employer said the commission was too high to pay and consequently Edward resigned on the spot, rented



a shop on Mitcham Lane and started his own business.

His brother Arthur was his best man at his wedding and one of his duties was to deliver the wedding cake to the home of the bride's parents. This simple

task was made more difficult by that winter's heavy snow fall. Arthur, stumbling blindly through the swirling flakes, clutching the cake, lost his footing and fell on top of the fragile parcel.

Their close friendship survived despite the incident but times were hard and Arthur lost his job with Freeman Hardy and Willis. In his best suit he was running to attend an interview for a city appointment and again tripped, this time into the murkiest of puddles, he abandoned the interview, returned to Streatham and joined Edward in 1902.

Sarah, Edward's wife made curtains and roller blinds and the brothers sold furniture. Cash flow was always tight and one day Edward had no hesitation in selling their own bedroom suite complete with bed to a customer who insisted on immediate delivery!

Brothers William and Herbert were builders but were also laid off around this time; they too joined the firm and persuaded the older brothers to invest in some land in Purley. There, it is said, in approximately 1904 Wates built their first two houses.

Others quickly followed in Streatham and Croydon and by 1914, 139 houses had been built. The demand was high as the suburbs were being created and whenever possible people wanted to move away from the polluted centre of London. Houses became a great investment and the phrase "as safe as houses" was born. Where possible Wates furnished the new proper-

ties, provided linoleum flooring and undertook the removal work.

It was now that a one-horse, four-wheeled canvas-covered van was acquired and only one man, a Nero Simpson was able to control the splendid black Shire horse called Boxer who pulled the vehicle. He was kept in the yard and his stable can still be seen today.

The oldest article that we have in our archives appeared in the Streatham News dated 1909 described the complete house furnishers as "able to show a tremendous lot of furniture, the value of which is marvellous"! It also describes freehold residences as available from £635.

Needing to expand the staff an advert was placed in the shop window "smart lad wanted, five bob a week". Frank Harvey obtained the job and was still employed 53 years later after seeing service in Egypt in World War II.

All building work stopped in the First World War. William Wates joined the navy and Frederick, the fifth brother joined the Royal Naval Air Service. He was however in charge of an armoured car division in France and on his way there he billeted in his whole division in the shop in Mitcham Lane! Sadly, his was the only car to survive in France.

It was between the wars that the building side mushroomed with 26,000 properties being built, most of them being in Norbury and Streatham. Some five million bricks were supplied in nine months and sixty houses were sold in one week. A reputation for fairness was gained and Irish staff were paid at the standard rate, not as some contractors, who paid at 4d per hour less.

It was in the late 1920s that the building activities of the firm became a separate legal company from the furnishing business as building had become a rapidly expanding activity in its own right. They were to become experts in pre-cast concrete and consequently heavily committed to the war effort building air raid shelters, coastal defences, army camps, aerodromes and RAF stations. They were commissioned to build large parts of the Mulberry Harbours for the D Day landings including 450 pontoons, 500 mooring bouys and 12 bridgehead pontoons. These were constructed in secret by 3000 staff who worked night and day in Mitcham, Balham, the South India Dock and Southampton.

During the war news was posted on the shop windows and crowds were attracted to read the scarce material. Our shop windows were blown out and replaced with small glazed panels to avoid potential flying glass should they receive another bombing.

Peter Wates, Frederick's son joined his uncle's business after serving in India and set about securing the property, preventing the rain from entering the roof and cascading down four floors to the basement.



Selling well made utility furniture wasn't a problem but the Government allowed so little margin from the fixed selling prices that cash to pay

staff and maintain the property was always tight. Taxes were steep, 100% purchase tax on luxury items and 50% on lino, carpets and non utility goods.

In the early post war days a multitude of products were sold from radios, TVs, refrigerators, electric heaters to 'maid savers'- these were kitchen units with drop down flaps covered with an enamel surface and were ideal for rolling pastry and thus avoiding the need to employ a maid! The business did well and expanded adding another store in Tooting and one in Upper Tooting which both grew in time and traded for fifty years.

After forty years in the business Peter could name 41 competitors who had come and gone in the local area. Perhaps it was his commitment, dedication and enthusiasm for marketing that were the keys to success. He organised our own Ideal Home Exhibition, our flat roof was advertised as having "helicopter landing space available", windows were framed with mock television sets and a range of 'furnivision' furniture was created!

One of his most memorable jobs was the removal of Lord Norry in 1952 who was appointed Governor General of New Zealand. We needed to move his furniture from Tetbury, Gloucestershire to Streatham for storage and some 24 van loads were required. It was first class furniture and included 50 Queen Anne chairs. After 4 years in storage he wanted to view it. Staff were called in from 3am and moved his furniture into the yard for inspection. His furniture was viewed, the restoration work discussed and it was all stowed away again before night fall.

He also organised a competition to find our oldest customer invoice. Our winning customer responded with an invoice from the 1930's to carpet an entire house in Axminster carpet and lino for £34. Another customer came forward to say that they had bought a bedside table from us in 1901 for 2 Shillings and that it was still in excellent condition.

One letter from a customer in 1977 regarding a 4'6" Divan bought from us said "The new bed has done more for my back trouble than any doctor or osteopath have been able to do for over 20 years or more"

Nevil Yates joined the company in 1968 and his son Ian Yates three years later. They ensured its success and managed the Tooting and Streatham stores. Ian became joint managing director with Peter's son, Roger in 1990. At one stage with two Wates's, two Yates's and a carpet fitter called Thwaites it was all quite confusing.

For many years we exhibited at the Ideal Home exhibition and later the House and Garden fair but more recently we now show three times a year at the Decorative Fair in Battersea Park. This is a must for all who are interested in interiors and antiques and is a visual feast. As a result of exhibiting there we have gained some overseas work, recently supplying curtains and blinds for a villa in Ibiza. This was not our first overseas work as we have furnished entire properties in Moscow, Paris and Switzerland and supplied furniture as far away as Kazakhstan and Sakolin the Island north of Japan.

As well as a four floor furniture store displaying furniture in helpful, creative room settings the company has its own workshop on site. Here a team of craftspeople are still employed and undertake reupholstery, French polishing, antique repair and restoration together with the related skills of caning, rushing and gilding.

Having all these specialities on hand enables complicated projects to be undertaken, for example the restoration of a Bergère sofa may use our cabinet maker to re-build the frame, replace mouldings, veneer or carving work, our caner to repair or replace damages panels, our polisher to strip, stain and repolish the decorative frame and of course our upholsterer to web, spring, stuff (often still using horse hair fillings) and cover the sofa. Add to this some distressed gilding and the benefits of providing every service are obvious.

Annual tours of the workshop allow the public to

see these skills at first hand, to feel the veneers, check for woodworm, spot the needy drawer runners and smell the glue pot! Talks have been given during the local Furzedown and Streatham festivals on William Morris, Georgian and Victorian furniture, the Art Deco Movement and Interior Design.

On the first floor, three rooms hold one of the largest collections of fabric sampling in South

London and here many interior design schemes are planned. Curtains, blinds, loose covers, wallpaper and carpets complement the service. Advice is freely available and home visits frequently follow.

Whilst the majority of our customers are regular householders from south of the river we are also pleased to work for a good number of commercial clients based in town. These include embassies, casinos, hospitals, hotels and major oil companies along with property companies and global retailers. With a couple of Royal societies and some celebrities comes huge diversity to our work and from day to day you never know if you will be inspecting work in an office overlooking parliament, a basement of a London gallery or a livery company in the city. The variety of furniture that we work on is as broad as the nature of the work; from Jacobean chairs, Steinway pianos, and writing slopes through to 20th Century classics.

The furniture market is constantly changing but the help you receive for any of your furniture requirements whether it is to restore your Granny's nursing chair, curtain your living room, carpet your staircase or buy a new sofa will always be enthusiastic and straight forward. The pictures of Edward and Arthur that hang in the boardroom are sufficient to keep us on the straight and narrow!

Roger Wates

The next Decorative Fair in Battersea Park is the Winter Fair from January 24th – 29th; free tickets are available on request from our store in Mitcham Lane

