

Unearthing Tottenham's past: Harris Lebus

Mustafa Suleman explores how a furniture factory in Tottenham supported the war effort

When I moved to Tottenham Hale in 2001 I became fascinated by the Harris Lebus furniture factory.

Harris Lebus was a furniture manufacturer established mid-1800s in the East End of London. As its output grew significantly the main works were relocated to Tottenham Hale, an area that was rapidly establishing itself as an industrial powerhouse due to access to the railways and working River Lea. The factory was completed in 1904 on land covering 13.3 acres (this eventually grew to 40 acres).

During both Great Wars, many industries were required to assist in the war effort; the Lebus factory was no exception. Many female workers were employed to produce essential items including tents, tent poles, wheelbarrows and ammunition boxes, as well as preparing large parts of aircraft, including the Vickers Vimy, components of the de Havilland Mosquito and the Airspeed Horsa glider. The company also built replica Sherman tanks from wood, to give Nazi Germany an inflated impression of the might of the British military.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, then factory director Herman Lebus commissioned a series of underground air raid shelters. The shelters were designed to house the factory's 6,000 workers in the event of an air strike. The underground shelters remained long forgotten for over 60 years until in 2008. Prior to the construction of a modern residential block on the site, English Heritage oversaw the unearthing of a treasure trove of wartime relics. These included: Second World War helmets, stretchers, glue bottles, pencil drawings and racy graffiti.

The government's Board of Trade, led by minister Hugh Dalton, set up a committee during the Second World War to manage the problem of a lack of timber and high demand for furniture. This scheme was titled CC41 (controlled commodity 1941).

Factory owner Sir Herman Lebus was invited onto the committee to ensure that available resources were used in a sensible way. The committee produced several approved designs, published in the

utility furniture catalogue of 1943. The aim was to ensure the production of strong well-designed furniture, which made the most efficient use of the scarce timber. The scheme was officially closed in 1952, the same year that furniture rationing ceased.

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Working for Lebus was more than just a job for many of the employees, the company maintained a successful sport and activities club called the PANDO Club (Polishers and officers). The activities ranged from badminton and bridge, to gardening, golf and youth activities. There was even a licenced club house on a dedicated sports field on Ferry Lane (now the Paddock Community Nature Park).

During the 1960s, after the death of Sir Herman Lebus, the factory gradually fell into decline. Signs of improvement showed with the launch of the Europa range, however increased competition from European manufacturers and difficult times with England's furniture industry forced the sale of the land in Tottenham to the Greater London Council (GLC). A large council housing estate was constructed in the 1970s (Ferry Lane Estate) where the main works once stood. Hale Village was constructed this millennium on what was the New Depot on the North side of Ferry Lane.

The company continued operating from smaller sites in Woodley and Walthamstow, until inevitably the iconic and well-respected Lebus brand was sold.

To find a number of articles written by ex-employees and their families and learn more about this lesser known part of Tottenham's history:

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WW1 supplies being produced at the factory Credit The Lebus family



Factory workers celebrate the Queen's coronation in 1953 Credit The Lebus family