

Investigating the Past...
The Harris Lebus Factory



Coming to Tottenham

Harris Lebus looked to Tottenham for his new factory. With the coming of the railways first in 1840 and with more lines in 1872, new communities had come to live in the area.

Although Tottenham had grown, there was still open countryside, with farms and market garden nurseries along the Lea Valley. Ten acres of land in Ferry Lane - the site of a market garden - was on offer to H. Herman, a competitor of Harris Lebus. The site was very attractive for a furniture-making business.

Transporting timber to Tottenham was an important consideration. On the east side was the River Lea, where wood could be moved by barge from the London Docks and the River Thames. Connections by rail and road were also nearby, with the Great Eastern Railway to the west and Ferry Lane running to the north.

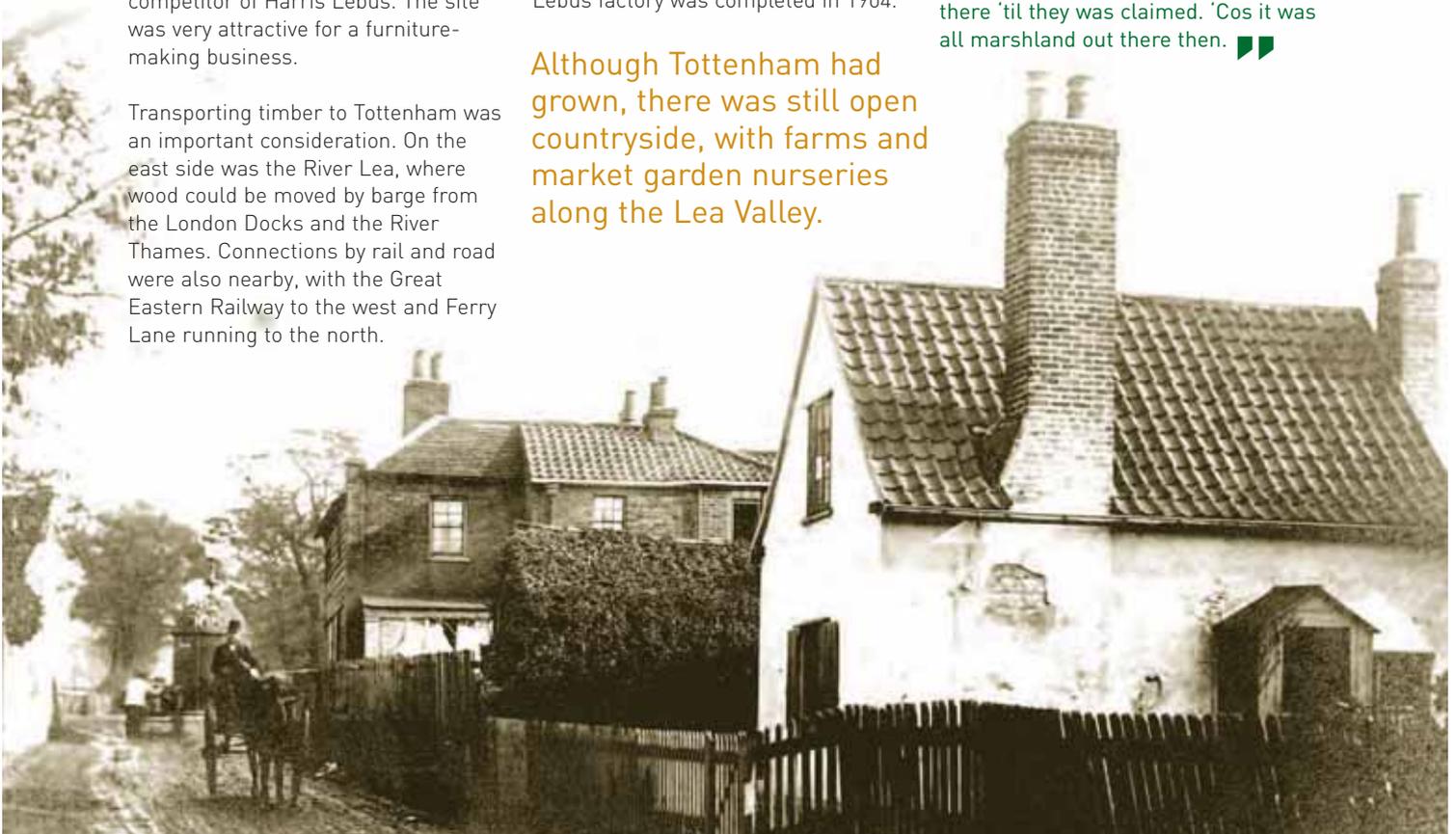


In January 1900 Harris Lebus purchased 13.5 acres of land, to the south of Ferry Lane. A pumping station was also bought along with a further 11 acres, bringing the site right up to the banks of the River Lea. The new Lebus factory was completed in 1904.

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Elsie Lambert was one of Lebus' first Tottenham workers in 1905. Here she remembers the countryside setting of the Tottenham factory:

Of course it's now all been built up and Ferry lane is a thoroughfare, but then it was a proper lane and no lights and nothing then. It was a country lane... There were no pavements, or street lamps down there... In the middle of the road, where Tottenham Hale is (I believe there's a roundabout there now) - there used to be a big shelter where they used to put stray horses. They called it The Pound. Horses used to stray and get lost and they was put in there 'til they was claimed. 'Cos it was all marshland out there then.



Building a new factory



The Lebus factory was the first of its size to be built in Tottenham. Its first furniture order was for 1000 satin walnut chests of drawers, selling at 39 shillings/6d.



A wharf on the factory's south-west corner received barge-loads of timber from the London Docks, shipped from around the world. Square edged lumber came from the US; soft wood came from Russia. The lumber was unloaded manually and taken to a field, where it was left for a while to dry out and 'normalise'. Drying kilns and sheds were also built to dry out the wood.

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The Mill was where the timber was cut. Harry Downham, of Welbourne Road, High Cross, was 16 or 17 years old when he was taken on at Lebus' mill in 1910. He helped to unload timber from barges, carrying the planks on a special protective cap on his head to the coarse-cut sawing machine. This would saw it into rough sizes for finer working. He would stock up the timber once it came off the saw.



Over the years Lebus acquired improved technology and used new materials. Designers at the factory worked on their drawings, responding to new fashions, ideas and developments in the trade. Modern woodwork machinery was purchased for planning, mortising, jointing, dovetailing, moulding, turning and carving. Wood machinists could produce furniture parts for making sideboards, bedsteads, cabinets and chest-of-drawers. These parts were then assembled by the 'traditional' cabinet-makers.



The workers

On opening its factory in Tottenham, the workforce of Harris Lebus was made up of locals and newcomers. Many skilled East European Jewish immigrants from London's East End sought work in the furniture-making industry and settled in Tottenham.

It is now Tottenham folklore that a notice hung outside the factory saying 'No Englishman Need Apply', because of the numbers of Jewish workers at Lebus. Whether this notice existed or not, we do not know for sure. But if it did then it is likely that an anti-semitic trouble-maker had put it there. Many non-Jewish Tottenham people worked there too, with some employed by Lebus for all their working life. Mr Harris Lebus too was liked in the community and worked tirelessly for local charities, helping the Prince of Wales Hospital at Tottenham Green.

Alongside her parents, Sissy Lewis began work at Lebus after leaving school at 14 years old in 1928. Her mother was a polisher, her father a labourer and Sissy became a sprayer. The manufacture processes for making Lebus furniture was hard and monotonous work, and not always pleasant.

Here she describes her work:

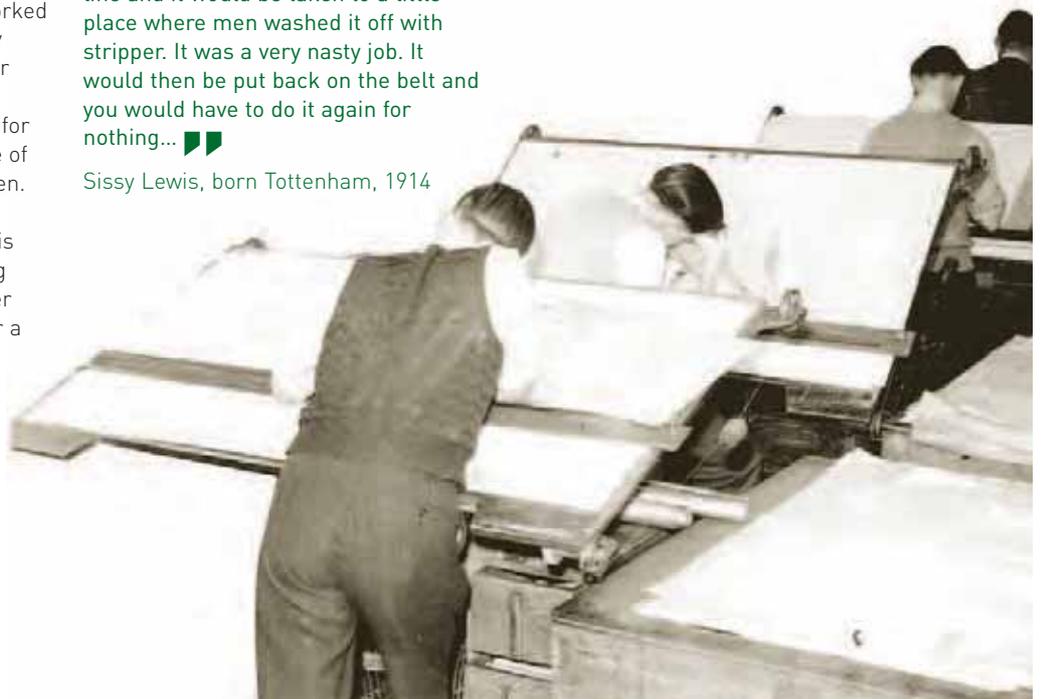
■ ■ The two spraying rooms were huge with different moving lines for beds, chests, chairs, wardrobes and tables... The first job was to spray the stain to the colour of the pattern. You had no control over the colour as it was all done special according to the work you were on. The stain dried quickly and then you'd lacquer it. Some pieces of furniture, like wardrobes, were big to do, so they got the tall girls to do them. How they got me on there I don't know but the better sprayers were put on wardrobes. I was always a wardrobe sprayer..

If you weren't careful the spray could run if you didn't control your gun. If the air pressure was too high and if you pulled the trigger back too far then you'd get a lot of runs and you'd get told off. This furniture you'd take off the line and it would be taken to a little place where men washed it off with stripper. It was a very nasty job. It would then be put back on the belt and you would have to do it again for nothing... ■ ■

Sissy Lewis, born Tottenham, 1914



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Contributing to the war effort



During the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945), the Lebus factory played an important part in the manufacturing of essential equipment and aircraft for the Allied Forces.

As men were called up to fight during both wars, the shortage of workers and the huge production of munitions saw an increase in women employed at Lebus' - and in industry generally.

In the 1914-1918 war, Lebus made ammunition boxes, sleighs and other war supplies. By 1917 Lebus manufactured the Handley Page 0100 and V1500 bi-planes and the Vickers-Vimy monoplane.

Lebus built trenches to protect its 6,000 workers during the 1939-1945 air-raids. Situated near the railway and river, and producing munitions, canoes and aircraft such as the Albemarle bomber, the Hotspur Glider and the famous Mosquito, the factory was a prime target. Top-secret operations, instructed by Lord Beaverbrook, also saw Lebus building replica Sherman tanks out of wood. The works survived the war with minimal damage from enemy action.



Sissy Lewis and her husband both worked at Lebus during wartime:

“ The first job I did in the war was white wardrobes and cupboards for hospitals in France. It was white enamel inside and out. I got covered like a snowman. Then we went onto tent poles and then telegraph poles. The telegraph poles were done with khaki paint, the tent poles red. Even our hair was red and these poles were ever so long... Then we went onto ammunition boxes. They were khaki with white letters on the front... I spent the rest of the war working from 7 in the evening until 7 in the morning. My husband worked there too on landing craft next to me but he was on days. We used to pass one another in the street, me going to work and him going home. ”

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Another Haringey woman recalls her time at Lebus:

“ We worked from 7 in the morning until 7 at night with 1 hour for lunch. Next to the factory was a slaughterhouse - the smell of horse flesh cooking used to waft through the canteen - the smell was sickening. The work was uninteresting, operating an electric saw and drilling machine, but the wages were good and we used to take the bus after work to Covent Garden and go dancing. ”



The decline and end of Lebus



From 1941 and during the post-war years, Lebus was part of the Government scheme to manufacture Utility furniture.

Bearing the Utility standard mark 'C41', Lebus offered well-designed furniture with economical use of timber. Available only to newly-weds and people who had been bombed out and lost all their belongings, this was a welcome scheme.

In post-war Britain, demand for new furniture was high. To address this, Lebus had to still face the challenge of the rationing of materials and the lack of export trade. Like other furniture firms in the Lea Valley, Lebus turned to mass production to survive.

Using plywood, particle-board and chipboard, and improved electrical equipment, there was an increase in furniture production. Lebus' workforce did not need to be as skilled as they once were. Lebus furniture was affordable, popular and followed the fashion. But for the workers, their wages were cheap.

Competition in the industry continued to be high. Other products such as moulded plastic were also being incorporated into furniture design and, along with foreign imports Lebus had to contend with this too.

From 1947, the family business had become a Public Company with some family members still on the board. During the 1960s, after the death of Sir Herman Lebus (who had steered the firm through the war years), the factory gradually fell into decline.

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The operations at Tottenham were scaled down, with its closure in 1969. Harris Lebus occupied 36 acres of land in 1969. In 1970 the land was sold to the Greater London Council (GLC). The buildings on the



south side of Ferry Lane were then demolished. This is now the site of the Ferry Lane housing estate. The depot to the north remained and the buildings used by the GLC for storing supplies.



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