

Welcome to Wander About Wednesday: The World's Largest Furniture Factory! – sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Wednesday 1 April 2020

Welcome to Wander About Wednesday: The World's Largest Furniture Factory! – where we are sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Whilst we are staying safe indoors, we are - in all likelihood - doing a lot more lounging at the moment! These stylish Lebus San Remo modular sofa units (below) were the furniture-of-choice in the Autumn of 1967. Part of the Europa range, it says 'made in Britain'. In fact, this range was made in Tottenham.



From the Lebus collection of Paul Collier

So, did *you* know that Harris Lebus, described as the largest furniture factory in the world, was once in Tottenham? Making and providing furniture the world over from 1901, Harris Lebus was a household name. Maybe you have a prized piece of furniture by Lebus in your home?

Today's post has been written by **local resident and author Paul Collier** whose long-awaited new book *Harris Lebus: A Romance with the Furniture Trade* was published only on 31 March (more details far below).

Here, Paul will be kindly taking us on a virtual tour along the River Lea Navigation as we take a wander around our borough - safely from our sofas of course - exploring the industrial archaeology of the former Lebus factory in Tottenham. For this particular exploration today no stout footwear is required – but to aid your journey you might like to use the attached PDF plan and also follow routes via the links to [online maps](#) (links will be provided again later in the text as you go).

When all is safe and well, Paul is planning to take an actual walking tour in the future, along and around the River Lea Navigation in Tottenham, to see first-hand the surviving industrial heritage of the Lebus factory in our local landscape.

We will also be sharing here some wonderful photographs showing furniture production from the Lebus Archive. The images have been selected by Paul from this beautiful archive - which is now part of the collections at Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

A Romance with Furniture History at Ferry Lane

by Paul Collier

Standing on Ferry Lane in Tottenham, between Hale Village to the north and Ferry Lane estate to the south, you might never know that here stood the '...largest furniture factory in the world'.

"It was such a big place when I think about it, you could get lost in there, nobody would know you was lost, it was so big. It was like a little town wasn't it? If you go on to the Ferry Lane estate and see what they've built from there up to Stamford Hill near enough isn't it, you know...." Phyllis Roberts, canteen assistant at the Lebus factory during the 1950s.



View of the Harris Lebus Cabinet Works, from a Lebus furniture catalogue of 1913

Ferry Lane estate was finished in 1978 and the development of Hale Village has emerged over the last 10 years. It's not quite finished – a tower is still being built on land fronting Ferry Lane. Facing south, with Hale Village behind, you can't fail to see a Victorian wall, a set of iron railings and a solitary iron gatepost. These might not look much but these are the remains of the original entrance via a set of descending steps to 'Harris Lebus - Finsbury Cabinet Works' - the factory which moved from the East End to expand its works, opened here in Tottenham in 1901.



© Paul Collier

For 70 years, on this site the Lebus factory turned out wooden furniture in all shapes and sizes from their factory. Lebus was an industry leader with a renowned, iconic brand known not only the length and breadth of the land, but globally. During the firm's heyday, the *Tottenham and Edmonton Weekly Herald* described Lebus as being in '... a romance with the furniture trade'.



Bedroom furniture from a Lebus catalogue of 1913

My 'romance' with the story began by chance in 2007 when I moved to the Ferry Lane estate. From walking around, there were tell-tale signs of a forgotten industrial past. For the last 50 years *Harris Lebus: A Romance with the Furniture Trade* has been a story waiting to be told. I live in Armadale Close – where the Lebus veneering workshop used to be. Studying original archives of maps, plans and written evidence, I can tell you what was where. Let me take you then on a wander through a tranquil, green, residential area by the river to a rich, vibrant, bustling industrial past.



Veneer shop extension, 1954

A good place to start exploring is along the River Lea Navigation towpath, south from Ferry Lane. On your right is Ferry Lane estate - Reedham Close. On your left is Bream Close, which once housed a massive set of timber storage sheds that Lebus rented from the 1950s. Further along we pass Armadale Green - a pleasant green space, where the veneer shop stood. Continuing south and at the beginning of Kessock Close, here stood the 'Butters three-ton jib crane' - used from 1929 for unloading timber from barges on the River Lea Navigation.



The site today of the former Butter's crane (picture, left: © Paul Collier). And the Butters three-ton jib crane, 1950s (picture, right)

It was 1918 when the factory commissioned its first crane for unloading timber from barges arriving from the London Docks. It was erected in the south-west corner of the timber field (now Yarmouth Crescent, by Gate 1). Iron channels were set in concrete running parallel with the Lea Navigation to guide the wheels for this huge apparatus. Special permission was granted for it to be sited on the towpath, allowing the cradle to overhang and swing over to the barges, where it could be stacked with timber boards. It remained in continual use until 1934.



© Paul Collier

Iron ring used to tie up barges – by the River Lea Navigation

Unloading the cargo from barges, horses were used to pull wagons of wood running along iron rails. The route followed Yarmouth Crescent and went through the timber field and under the Tottenham and Forest Gate Railway via a tall, brick-built arch to connect with the factory's drying kilns. The horses were replaced when electric locomotive tractors were used from 1929 onwards.

Below - picture shows timber in the field with the brick arch in the distant, seen pre-World War One; and the same view today (© Paul Collier).



In 1901, a young architect called Samuel Clifford Tee (SCT) was commissioned to design the factory. He had a much smaller plot of land to work with than the current size of the Ferry Lane estate. SCT's factory design had to fit into an 'upside-down, slightly misshapen, elongated triangle' - an amalgam of four adjoining plots (see his layout in red below). This triangle 'floated', south of Ferry

Lane but was strangely not connected to the road or the River Lea Navigation. But SCT soon negotiated two further strips of land connecting to these very useful transport networks.



The Barking to Gospel Oak over-ground railway line ran right through the middle of the site. Except for a couple of access arches, it split the plot in two.

To describe the layout of the factory, we will refer to:

- Island A = land south of the Barking to Gospel Oak railway; which contained a timber field, the raw materials store
- Island B = land north of this and south of Ferry Lane
- NB (Islands A and B now equate to today's Ferry Lane estate)
- Island C = where the factory expanded onto land now occupied by Hale Village; this once contained a colossal warehouse, built in 1956, as well as a sports field and pavilion.

During the Lebus years, Island A and Island B were the main production area.

To help you understand the site further, you might like to take a look at the online maps of today - the links are below. You can use them to zoom in and out of the area, and look at StreetView too.

[Ferry Lane Estate](#)
[London N17 9QD](#)

On today's street map, the original 'Harris Lebus Finsbury Cabinet Works' stretched from Jarrow Road in the north (Island B; running parallel to Ferry Lane), over to the other end of this road, just south where it divides into Yarmouth Crescent (Island A).

Part of Island A was largely set out as the timber field. Where Runcorn Close and Queensferry Walk residents now live, stood the original timber sheds.

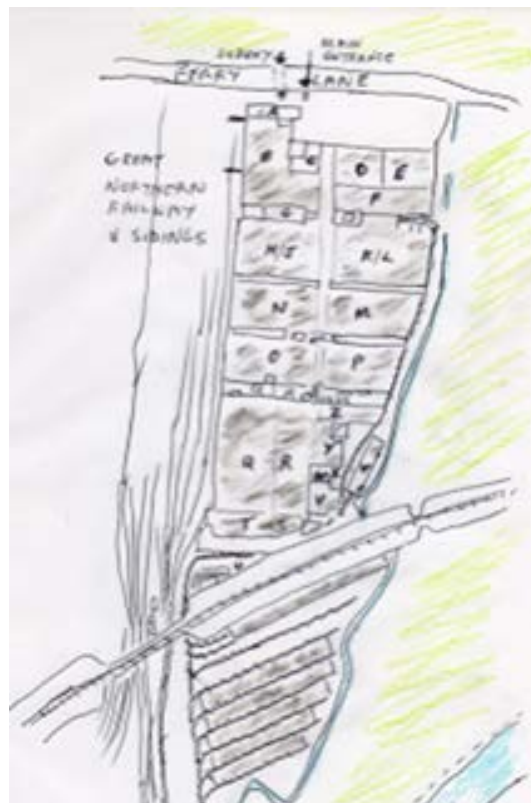
During World War Two, on what is now the wildflower meadow, was a very large shed in which Handley Page and Vickers Vimy planes were made.

Across the front gardens of Yarmouth Crescent, trucks with flanged wheels ran along iron rails following the route the road now takes. The bulk of the SCT's

original factory was on the western part of Island B - from Erskine Crescent to Jarrow Road.

Pymmes Brook marked the eastern boundaries of the original factory. Montrose Walk roughly follows the original flow of Pymmes Brook from the top of Reedham Close, diagonally through the school buildings and under the railway line. This brook was redirected in the period between the wars to prevent regular flooding of the factory.

The progression of furniture manufacture was directed northwards - wood was delivered by river in the south-west timber field, moving up through the buildings labelled Z to A on the diagram below. This is a modern sketch based on architect Samuel Clifford Tee's original design from 1901. A PDF version of this plan is attached for you to use.



The first buildings north of the railway line were the steam factory's powerhouse, occupying buildings W, X, Y and Z. This was located where Ferry Lane Primary School is now. The factory machinery was powered by steam produced by coal (mains electricity did not arrive until the late 1920s). It would have been impossible to miss the new tall brick-built chimney at 140 feet high (just under 43 metres) with the word 'LEBUS' in light-coloured bricks.

Imagine a steam works right where the school is now!

From when the factory opened, it had three huge boilers heated by coal producing enough steam to drive the machines in the manufacturing process. One powered all the woodworking machines in the mill and machine shop. The 'engine driver' was Edward Daughters. He controlled it like a bus conductor - his code was one ring on the bell to stop the engine, two rings to

start it. This boiler was taken out of service in 1934 and replaced by a 2,700 horsepower turbine.

The kilns to dry timber were in Building V, the stables and truck storage were in U, and the carvers were accommodated in T with pattern cutters in S. The school playground, multi-use games area and W4 bus stand are there nowadays.

Standing at the W4 bus stand, we can wander north up Jarrow Road, to the top of the estate.

Here were Buildings Q/R - the saw mill and machine shop.



The sawmill, 1950s

The makers worked in Building M/N using glue cramps before the jointing of furniture in O. These workshops occupied where Erskine Crescent is now.



Makers workshop, pre-First World War

Polishing was accommodated in K/L. Fitters were supplied from stores in G, with final touching up in H/J. These workshops were the northern part of Erskine Crescent.



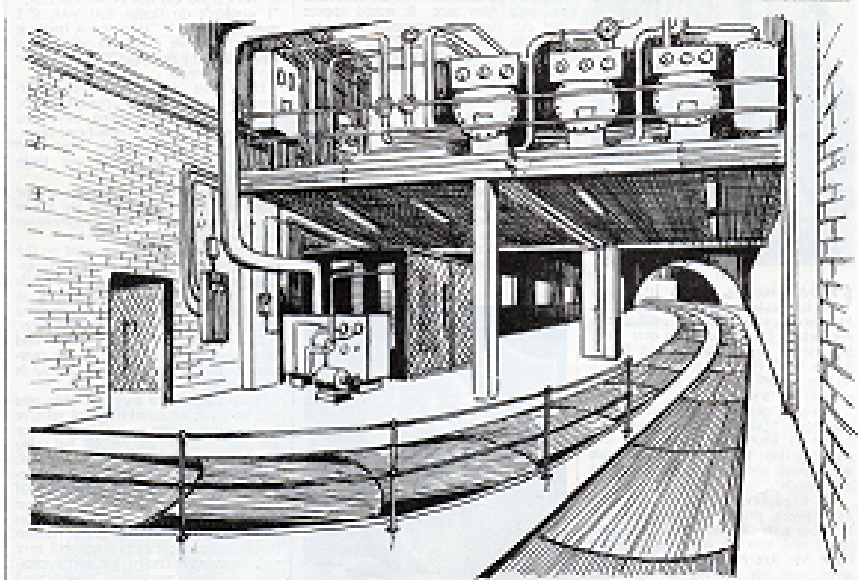
The polishing shops, pictured pre-First World War. Notice how many women were on the factory floor

Warehousing and packing happened in C, D, E and F. Despatch to private railway sidings took place at B. This was just south of the corner on Jarrow Road.

The general office, Building A, was at the point where Jarrow Road turns south. It faced the arches under Ferry Lane – most are now filled in (presumably with factory demolition rubble) - creating a grassy slope between Ferry Lane and Jarrow Road.

When an enormous brand new warehouse was built in 1956 north of Ferry Lane, (where Hale Village now is) a conveyor belt ran right under Ferry Lane itself! There were five arches under Ferry Lane providing access. One was the pedestrian walkway underneath Ferry Lane to access the underground Second World War shelters - where Hale Village now is.

From 1956, the second-tallest arch carried the new conveyor belt.



This artist's impression of the conveyor belt under Ferry Lane was drawn for the *Lebus Log* in 1957

This conveyor belt had to handle the entire output of the factory at a consistent speed with the factory output. It was 4 feet 9 inches wide, 2,192 feet in length, had 274 wood pallets. If a motor failed, it all automatically stopped.

The journey on the conveyor belt wound round from Building B to below the west end of Building A (under Ferry Lane). It then turned east, straight to the warehouse. Here the circuit rose upwards by 13 inches, merging to the higher floor level before turning east across to Mill Mead Road. At this point turned 180-degrees back to the west side, and onto Building B. The total time for a complete trip could be varied – anything from 60 to 100 minutes.

When the conveyor was installed, a new set of pedestrian steps were built from ground level to connect with Ferry Lane's humpback bridge – the steps are still used today for access by residents to Ferry Lane estate.

When the factory gradually changed from using rail to road during the 1920s, a new distribution point to load lorries was erected at the top of Reedham Close, with the entrance to and from the factory being roughly where the intersection of Jarrow Road and Ferry Lane is now.

Lebus had its own laboratory for testing products and spray finishes. It was south of the Pymmes Brook (redirected into the River Lea Navigation).

Further south of this and running the complete length of Reedham Close were large sheds. These were built during the World War Two as Lebus acquired the rest of the land, and accommodated the construction of Albemarle, Hotspur and Horsa gliders, and Mosquito aircraft. (The factory was also used during World War Two for top-secret work, building replica Sherman tanks out of wood.)

By the end of the 1950s, the factory grew so much it stretched from half-way down Yarmouth Crescent (covering Islands A and B), to half way up Island C in the north. The factory was completely covered under one roof. The order of furniture production zigzagged across the site, as shown on the diagram below.



A new tunnel was cut under the railway line to carry parts from the new saw mill and machine shop to the assembly shop. Today, this arch is one that residents use walking from the W4 bus stand to the far end of the estate.

Here are the tunnels today - the picture on the left once carried the conveyor for furniture parts. The picture on the right shows the pedestrian tunnel with Montrose Walk, the surviving remains of the factory's East Main Corridor.



Both images © Paul Collier

The now bricked-up tunnel (picture below on the right) originally had the waters of Pymmes Brook flowing underneath it. This was once the West Main Corridor of the factory.

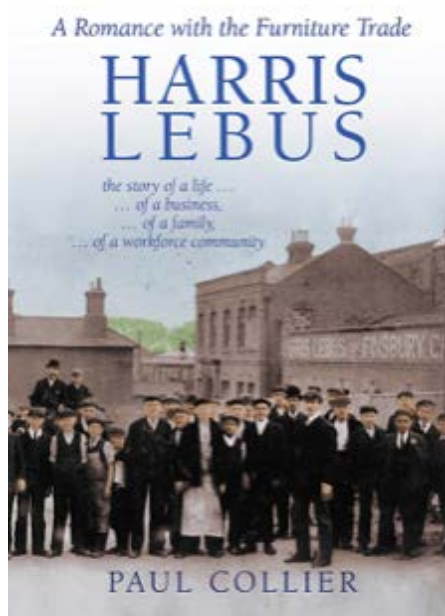


© Paul Collier

And so this is the end of my virtual tour, showing you the clues amongst everyday surroundings as we piece together the industrial past of the Lebus factory from our landscape today. You can see that if you look carefully, it is surprising what you can find on your doorstep!

February 2020 marked 50 years since the *Tottenham Weekly Herald's* headlines announced that the Lebus factory had finally closed its doors. At the outset of this post we said that the illustrious story of this factory must be told.

Half a century on after its closure, you can now read all about it. This newly-published book, with 300 pages and over 200 illustrations, *Harris Lebus: A Romance with the Furniture Trade* charts the complete history of the '...largest furniture factory in the world' - from its humble beginnings in the East End through to its final tumultuous years in Tottenham Hale. Details of how to obtain the book from Libri Publishing can be found [here](#).



The book has been inspired not only by the intriguing industrial archaeology left behind but also by the wonderful stories and oral histories we have collected at Bruce Castle as well as the archive collections for the factory - cared for so many years by the Lebus family - now deposited at Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Over the years, others too have been inspired by the craft and the history of furniture made at Harris Lebus in Tottenham, including artists at [Bow Arts in the East End](#) and furniture-makers and designers like [Nancy Hillier in the USA](#). You can see their own beautiful creations by following the links.

And so ends another post from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive. With our thanks to Paul Collier for compiling this virtual tour for us.

Keep safe and stay well.

Best wishes

Deborah Hedgecock, Curator Haringey Council

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