

Race

Tale of a Modern man



The centenary of Ernest Race's birth last year provided a timely opportunity to revisit the work of this great British designer, who in a relatively short career produced some of the most iconic designs of his generation. So it was a real treat to be invited by the Managing Director of Race Furniture, Stuart Finlator, to visit the Gloucestershire factory and have a root through the archives.
By Tabitha Teuma



Noel Jordan founded Race Furniture in 1945. He ran an engineering workshop during the Second World War and believed that new engineering techniques could be utilised in the British furniture industry, which was still largely craft-based. He opened a factory in Clapham, London, and put an advert in *The Times* for a lead designer, and Ernest Race was one of around 300 people who responded. Race had studied Interior Design at the Bartlett School of Architecture. As an interior designer, he was acutely aware of the English interior tradition but was drawn to the furniture he had seen coming over from Sweden in the 1930s.

The Government's 'Utility Scheme,' which started in 1942, encouraged companies to work with alternative materials in order to preserve the country's limited reserves of timber, whereas some previously rare materials were now abundant due to the stimulus of wartime production, namely aluminium and steel. In fact the first design

produced by Race Furniture in 1945, the BA3 chair, utilised aluminium from redundant warplanes, which was recast to form elegant sections and upholstered for comfort. The 1951 Race catalogue acknowledges, "By the use of an upholstered seat and back, the coldness often associated with metal furniture has been eliminated". This design was later to win Race the Gold Medal at the Milan Triennale in 1955.

Race's designs were informed by the spaces he was designing for; Modern interiors were generally more compact. In 1946 he took the wingback chair, a quintessentially English shape, deconstructed it and rebuilt it as the 'DA chair' to fit with the smaller interiors of post-war buildings. The 1951 Race catalogue succinctly puts it, "Bulk and weight are not synonymous with comfort."

Race had an eye for how the furniture he designed would sit within a space, and this perhaps explains the sculptural qualities of his work. There is for instance

Left: Ernest Race;
Right: Contemporary BA3
chair, designed 1945.
Over page: BA3 chair
diagram from 1951
Race catalogue.
All photographs courtesy
of Race Furniture Ltd.

