

WILSON & NICHOLSON

Makers of top quality upholstered furniture for nearly seventy years

Wilson & Nicholson was formed in 1938 by two friends who had attended Newmarket and Auckland Grammar Schools together but undertaken separate upholstering apprenticeships.

Alick Wilson left school in 1927 during the Depression **and** began work on 17/6 (a very low wage) in Whitcombe & Tombs' bookshop. When he had had no raise after 18 months he left, to become an apprentice at Dawkins' upholsterers, situated behind the shops at Fairfax Road (now Alpers Avenue), Epsom. There he started on 15/- a week, but received 2/6 increases every six months and was earning £2/5/- a week five years later when he completed his time. He applied and was selected for a job with a firm in Khyber Pass where, as an accredited upholsterer, he was due to receive £4 per week; but the country was still in the grip of the depression and he had to accept less - £3/10/-. During this time he added to his income and had valuable experience restoring the seats of antique chairs for a woman who dealt in old furniture for re-sale.

He had a lifetime ambition to go to England and, when he had saved enough to pay his fare (£36) and have £100 in his pocket to live on, he sailed to London via Australia and the Suez canal. He bought a bike and, together with a friend he had made on the boat, toured to Scotland and back, camping all the way including beside gypsies at the Epsom Derby. Finally, when he was ready to try for a job, he was advised to go to the Holborn Records Library, which listed every trade address in England. He visited several job prospects, seeing some places with terrible working conditions, before he arrived at Waring & Gillow, an upholstering firm with a space for an upholsterer and a first-class reputation.

"There's a bloke from New Zealand wants a job!" announced the amazed foreman to the boss, who gave this fellow from the antipodes the chance he needed. Waring & Gillow did a lot of work for the Government and also for shipping companies. Alick became involved in making ships' furniture using specially strengthened frames, blocks, etc. Despite this, after very rough trips, they often came back smashed and needing to be repaired and made even stronger.

Alick admired the way Waring & Gillow trained their apprentices. They gave them only two years work after they had finished their time, then sent them away to do journeymen's work, which involved travelling widely and gaining varied experiences. They offered them jobs afterwards, if they wanted them. If they took them, the employees were all given turns to be shop stewards, having to work out quotes in competition with others, and develop

responsibility and understanding of rates of pay and the effect these have on the profitability of a job.

Alick also admired the strong give and take between the employers and the unions. Union membership was compulsory, and made more attractive by holding union meetings in the local pub! During Alick's time with them they generously gave him ten weeks off to holiday in Germany. He found the Germans in Hitler's time thought highly of the British and their efficiency in running their 'great British Empire'. He returned from Germany to stay with Warings for two years in all, after which he returned to New Zealand to get married. Just as well he hadn't applied for a Warings job in Paris (which came up as he left), because war broke out and he would have been stuck in Europe.

Back home, he joined furniture suppliers Andrews & Clarke on Great South Road for nine months, working in their upholstery division in Chancery Street, before leaving and starting in business on his own account in 1938.

His first premises were in a shed at the back of Finlay's Bakery in Clyde Street, Epsom. Using furniture specifications he had brought from England, he made a suite for the furniture store, Smith & Brown's, using frames from the Modern Chair Company in Mt Roskill and fabrics made available from Smith & Brown's. (This suite was known as the 'Junior Suite'. Alick had also brought home plans for the 'Senior Suite', but it turned out to be too large to go into normal New Zealand homes!) An avalanche of orders resulted.

Finding himself run off his feet, Alick grabbed Lionel when they bumped into each other, and asked him to come and work with him; but no sooner had they started together than war was declared. They both enlisted in the army, Alick serving in the Pacific and Lionel serving in New Zealand. When the war finished in Europe they were both released from service, Lionel starting upholstering again in 1944, in Finlay's old Clyde Street shed, but Alick being manpowered into the building trade! Not for too long, however; and when the bakery, needing more space, moved to Eden Terrace and Smith & Brown, at about the same time, moved to Mt Roskill, leaving their Paget Street factory empty, Alick (now out of all other commitments) and Lionel joined forces again and moved into Paget Street. They were spacious premises, with an 8 or 9 metre stud (having been built as a recital hall for two young Thorne daughters), and the building was known as the Queen's Hall.

By now Alick and Lionel had formed an official partnership. They had a sign painted:

“WILSON & NICHOLSON

UPHOLSTERERS TO THE TRADE”

and set to work to pay off the extravagant purchase price of their new building. It only took them two years. High quality Wellington interior designers, Hurdleys Ltd, opened a branch in

Auckland about that time, and Derek Hurdley, managing director, gave all his work to Wilson & Nicholson. The government had brought in restrictions which protected local manufacturers, and no imported furniture was allowed into the country; but the furniture makers still worked under disadvantages because of the shortage of springs, hessian and other vital materials for their trade. They used New Zealand flax covered with hessian for stuffing chairs and sofas, with flock (from Takle Bros) for a softer finish laid over the flax and kept in place by twine 'bundles'.

Despite the shortages, they enjoyed an era of boom times, usually employing four upholsterers and training a few apprentices in time-honoured fashion. They had 30 shops buying from them, and there was often a six months wait for a Wilson & Nicholson suite of furniture. They did not make a fortune, but did make a highly respected name for themselves.

During the next few decades the materials and procedures for furniture making were modified to meet the market. Sisal replaced flax as a much cleaner resource, then sisal and finally coil springs were phased out, being replaced by foams and steel springs and other more cost-effective components.

When the cost of continuing the 'old-fashioned ways' of creating upholstered furniture became prohibitive, new ways were examined and found to be just as effective, when teamed up with the existing skilled and careful craftsmanship.

Alick retired in 1972 aged 60. Lionel paid him out and began to supply the public direct. He subsequently retired in 1979, selling to Broadhead Bros. Unfortunately Mr Broadhead suffered a fatal heart attack, after which his new wife, Coral, ran the business for a while. But having a new baby she could not continue, so she sold out to Graham Hart and his wife, Robyn. However, he was away for long periods and she, too, found it too much to manage on her own and sold it to Allan and his wife. They sold it to Owen Wright in 1987, who sold it to present owner Philip Caughey in 1993.

After two successful decades in Dominion Road, Philip shifted the retail business to 108 Mt Eden Road and the manufacturing and rental divisions to 204 Marua Road, Ellerslie. The manufacturing and re-upholstery is carried out here as well as the storage of furniture for short- and long-term hire by people relocating to Auckland and other main centres in New Zealand, or to furnish new houses on the market as open homes – now referred to as Home Staging.