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THE BETULA LTD

The Forgotten Radicals of 1930s British Furniture Design

TONY PEART

Much of the avant-garde, European-influenced, modernist furniture designed and manufactured in Britain during the 1930s has been well documented and exhibited, with a focus invariably falling on two related enterprises: Jack Pritchard and Wells Coates's Isokon company (which commenced manufacturing furniture in 1933) and Gerald Summers's Makers of Simple Furniture (established 1931-32). However, this is only part of a more complex story as Bauhaus-influenced, rational design was not the only European avant-garde style to make its way across the English Channel. In 1931 The Betula Ltd., a small woodworking company was established in London, producing furniture influenced by the design ideas of the Austrian philosopher architect, occultist, and educational reformer Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). The expressionist furniture they manufactured exemplified 'anthroposophical' design, a term coined by Steiner from 'anthropo' (human) and 'sophia' (wisdom). This was an all-encompassing approach to design and architecture evolving from the wider spiritual movement founded by Steiner that is part philosophy, part mysticism, and is focused on an intellectual and creative pursuit of the spiritual world.

The Betula Ltd. had four co-directors; Gladys Mayer, Francis Nevel, David Haes and Marjorie Turner but it is Mayer (1888-1980) (Fig. 1), who must be regarded as the prime instigator of this remarkable venture.¹ Born in Alsager, Cheshire but moving to Liverpool at an early age, hers was a large, comfortable, middle-class family (her father worked in the chemical industry) but following his bankruptcy and early death in 1902 the family lived in somewhat straitened circumstances. Nonetheless, Mayer studied at Liverpool School of Art for six years followed by a year spent in Spain, Egypt, Greece, Italy and France, studying in art galleries and museums. In 1915, in the British Museum Library, she read *The Way of Initiation*



9. (left) Chairs designed by Gladys Mayer for Betula Woodwork Association c.1932. Image courtesy Rudolf Steiner House and Sheffield University Special Collections.

1. (right) Gladys Mayer c.1970. Image © Charlie Lawrie.

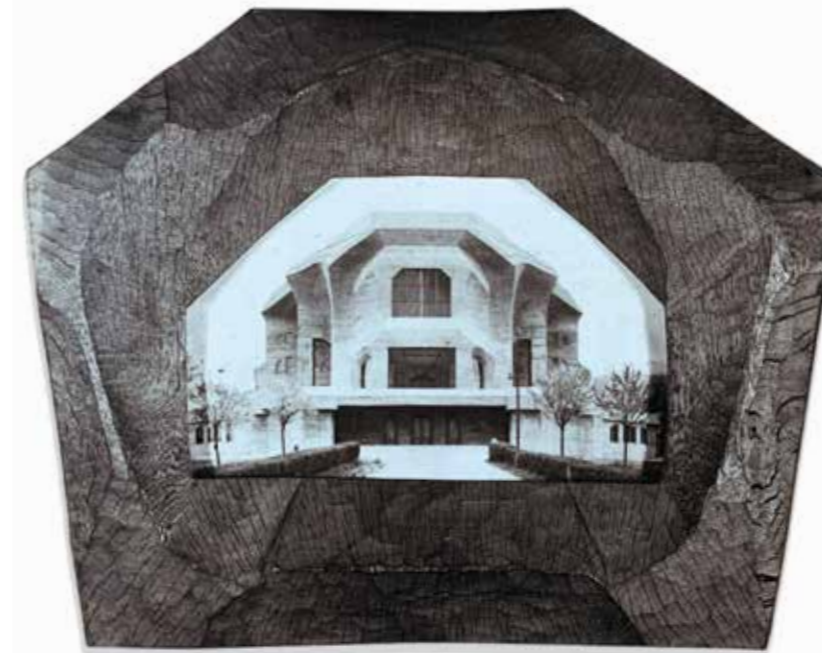
by Rudolf Steiner.² Although she was somewhat sceptical of its message, it left a lasting impression. During World War I she enlisted as a Red Cross nurse but following the cessation of hostilities and disillusioned with contemporary art, she began to study political economy, writing and lecturing to help promote the limited women's franchise, recently established by the Representation of the People Act of 1918. Mayer's study of political economy led to the study of sociology under the influence of Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) followed by active campaigning for The Liberal Party during the early 1920s. Gladys Mayer developed a strong social conscience, finding she had a natural gift for education and social enterprise that could be applied to the development of society on new lines. In April 1922, aged 34, she attended a meeting that set in motion a series of events that were fundamentally to alter the course of her life. As a delegate to The *New Ideals in Education* conference held in Stratford-upon-Avon, Mayer came across a copy of the Steiner book she had read in 1915 and discovered that the author would be delivering two papers at the conference. Although Steiner spoke in German (with an English translator), he was a mesmerising orator and his two lectures *Drama and Education* and *Shakespeare and the New Ideals* had a profound effect upon her. Steiner's first book on educational theory and practice, *The Education of Children*, appeared in English in 1911. The original Waldorf School, the first to put his ideas into practice, opened in Stuttgart, Germany, in September 1919. The Stratford conference presented the ideal opportunity for Steiner to plant the seeds of Waldorf education and his anthroposophist views within the Anglosphere. Taking place so soon after the end of the Great War, there were few in the conference audience, who had not been directly affected by the tremendous loss of life and injury. However, Steiner described an alternative vision of society and explained that:

'from 1913 until now ... through the whole period of the war, while nearby the thunder of the cannon was heard, members of no less than

seventeen nations have been working together at Dornach (Switzerland). That seventeen nations could work together peacefully during the greatest of all wars, this, too, seems to be a great ideal in education. What is possible on a small scale should be possible on a large scale.'³

Steiner's charisma and vision were enough to prompt Mayer to visit Vienna a few weeks later to hear him speak at the International Congress of the Anthroposophical Movement's 1922 conference, *East and West*. However, the decisive turning point came the following year when she first visited Steiner's community at Dornach in Switzerland. Here Steiner had designed and overseen the construction of the Goetheanum, a remarkable example of expressionist architecture, which served as a cultural and artistic centre and as the international headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society. The building housed performance spaces, a library, educational facilities, and artists' studios. During this visit Mayer was given personal instruction by Rudolf Steiner and decided that her future lay with the Anthroposophical Society. She returned to England to settle her affairs before moving to live in Dornach in 1924. Her arrival coincided with the construction of a second, larger Goetheanum (Fig. 2), built between 1924–28 in cast concrete after the original, largely wooden building was destroyed by an arson attack in 1922. In Dornach Mayer studied anthroposophical painting and gave art lessons while continuing her personal instruction with Steiner. As she later explained:

'When we talked together, I felt that I had known him for all time. I told him of all the terrible and wonderful experiences I had gone through... He listened quietly, and one had the impression he made his whole being receptive, soul to soul. Then explained my experiences with the simple words: "*Dies ist eine karmische sache!*" I felt enormous relief. Here, at last, is someone who understands, who takes all these astounding events calmly, and is competent to give advice. This is a matter of Karma.'⁴



Like William Morris before him, Steiner reacted to industrialisation and materialism by idealising the craftsmen of the Middle Ages, seeking to achieve spiritual renewal for society through art and design. His approach to creating a healing environment emphasised organic motifs to benefit those living in an overtly industrial age. As an architect he strived to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), in which there was to be no distinction between art and design, believing that both affected the body, mind and spirit. Steiner also maintained that the arts were most socially effective when put to use by the people. Far from being luxuries, anthroposophical art and design were spiritual necessities.

Although primarily engaged in painting, it is clear that during her stay at the Goetheanum Mayer closely scrutinised the anthroposophical furniture, picture frames and objects being produced by the architects and designers who had been drawn to Steiner, who included Paul Bay (Fig. 3), Felix Kayser, Oswald Dubach, Hans Itel and Herman Ranzenberger.⁵ To them, an anthroposophical approach meant considering equally functional utility, spiritual function and individual artistic expression. As the designers absorbed Steiner's teachings, they developed individual approaches to

2. (left) The Betula Woodwork Association anthroposophical frame, designed by Gladys Mayer c.1932. It features a photograph of the second Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland. Image courtesy Rudolf Steiner House.

3. (right) Paul Bay (1891–1952), anthroposophical sideboard and picture frame c.1928. Image courtesy Sheffield University Special Collections

furniture forms born of these shared values. Although difficult to define, anthroposophical furniture exhibits certain traits. These include the avoidance of the confining, right-angled 'box', a love of asymmetry and irregular flowing forms and a belief that the creator's soul is captured in the work. They also celebrate the essence of the natural material (wood), revealed through lively relationships and the use of double curves, which transition from convex to concave and give surfaces (often textured with the use of an adze) an organic, kinetic quality. Steiner saw a direct correlation between furniture and the human form. For him, the uppermost portion of a piece of furniture corresponded to the human head and mind and as such had a spiritually uplifting role and should be carefully considered by the designer and shaped accordingly.



Rudolf Steiner died in 1925, but his disciples, including Gladys Mayer, carried on their teacher's artistic vision, ensuring the continuity of his philosophy of design. Some became teachers at Waldorf/Steiner schools (which were rapidly being established across Europe) and imparted anthroposophical ideas to their young pupils. Although The Anthroposophical Society would be banned in Germany by the Nazis in 1935, the international movement survived World War II and continued to expand. Mayer was dismayed at the factionalism and in-fighting that developed in the Dornach community following Steiner's death and returned to England, determined to devote herself to promoting the cause. The timing of her return proved fortuitous as the Britain of the late 1920s was proving remarkably receptive to Steiner's ideas, resulting in a rapid growth in anthroposophical-inspired initiatives and social enterprises along with the establishment of many Steiner schools.

The Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain was established in 1923, based at 46 Gloucester Place in London, accommodation which soon proved inadequate. A purpose-built headquarters, Rudolf Steiner Hall (later House), was opened on 1 June 1926 at 35 Park Rd, adjacent to Regent's Park, in London (Fig. 4). Designed by the architect Montague Wheeler (1874–1937), an active member of the society, it was constructed in stages between 1926–37, and remains the capital's only expressionist building.⁶ Mayer took a flat nearby in Gloucester Place, enabling her to devote herself fully to the work of the society. The close of the decade saw her pursuing a punishing schedule, commuting between London and her mother's house in Liverpool from where she ran weekly, fee-paying classes in Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Llandudno, Harrogate, Leeds, Bradford and Ilkerton. Alongside her anthroposophical art classes, Mayer would lecture on a wide range of Steiner-related topics, offering instruction in

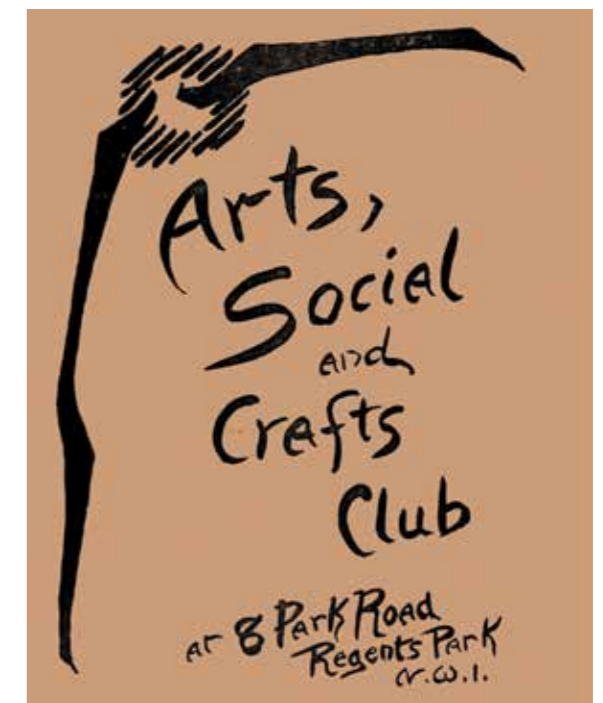
4. (left) Rudolf Steiner House: the main staircase designed by Montague Wheeler c.1926. Image the author.

Eurythmy (a form of expressive dance created by Steiner) and German language lessons (for those wishing to better comprehend Steiner).

As Steiner House evolved, Gladys Mayer lobbied to have an upper floor added to provide studio and workshop space for the informal arts and crafts club she established. Ultimately, she was displaced from the building when Ita Wegman (1876–1943) the co-founder (with Steiner) of anthroposophical medicine requisitioned the space. Mayer immediately, and somewhat provocatively, rented accommodation for her classes at 8 Park Road, located immediately opposite Rudolf Steiner House, putting The Arts, Social & Crafts Club (as it was named) on a more formal footing in 1930 by issuing a promotional leaflet (Fig. 5). This stated it was,

'founded to bring together people interested in Rudolf Steiner's work, especially in the domain of Art, and in making Art the bearer of a more spiritual impulse in social life as a whole.'⁷

5. (below) Promotional leaflet for Gladys Mayer's Arts, Social and Crafts Club, 1930. Image courtesy Sheffield University Special Collections.



Its objectives were:

1. To develop the impulse given by Rudolf Steiner in the Arts
2. To make a study and application of the principles given by Rudolf Steiner in *The Threefold Commonwealth*⁸
3. To develop economic activities arising out of the new impulse in Arts and Crafts.

It was also stated that, 'The Club contains a Studio, Workshop, Tea Room and Club Room open to members daily, afternoons and evenings.' Mayer ran a Saturday afternoon class in painting and modelling and lectured on anthroposophy and art. Significantly, interior decoration and furnishing were to be the basis of the crafts work and Mayer also used the leaflet to promote private classes she would give in painting, modelling, metal work and embroidery design.

The postscript of a letter written in London on 31 August 1930 to Arnold Freeman (1886–1972), founder of The Sheffield Educational Settlement and a fellow disciple of Steiner, captures Mayer's excitement and shows her attention was turning to the creation of anthroposophical furniture,

'I have a great scheme of development for the Arts & Crafts here this winter, I am trying to see how the provincial group work can fit in so shall be interested to discuss it with you when possible. There's going to be a good deal of furniture required before long (Anthrop) – I wonder would it be possible for any of your wood workers to tackle it, with my designs to go on! It's got to be good workmanship of course too – I wish I could see a way to bring them in, hope it may be possible.'⁹

The 'good deal of furniture' was required to satisfy a newly established market comprising members of The Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain wishing to furnish their homes along anthroposophical lines, for Steiner House and other anthroposophical initiatives

(such as the Sheffield Settlement) and also for the growing number of Steiner Schools being established at the time.¹⁰

The small-scale production of anthroposophical furniture must have commenced at 8 Park Road shortly afterwards as, by December 1931, it was thought necessary to hold a meeting of 'all those interested in the furniture making'. Here it was proposed and carried that, 'An association should be formed to put the furniture making on a¹¹ firm basis and extend it. It should be called the "Betula Woodwork Association".' The name Betula was chosen as it was the Latin genus of the birch – a pale wood much favoured in anthroposophical circles. It was also stated that, 'The Association shall be an Association of Producers and Consumers to further the impulse given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner in the sphere of Wood and Craft work.' A committee of five was duly elected, the most significant name listed being 'Mr. Knefel' (Fig. 6).

Franz Knefel (1911–1993) (anglicised to Francis Nevel during the mid-1930s), was born in Czechia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His mother, a family governess, placed him in care as the result of an affair with the married father of the household.¹² At the end of World War I a group of Red Cross workers, including Gladys Mayer, came across him in a camp near Vienna and sponsored his relocation to England. The Famine Area Children's Hospitality Committee, a charity that helped starving refugee children by bringing them to England for temporary foster-care, became involved in his case. Most of the children supported by the charity were returned to their native countries during 1921 but Francis Nevel was not. His continued stay was jointly sponsored by Marjorie Turner (1889–1972) and her younger, married sister Ruth Mallory (1891–1942), wife of the climber George Mallory, who perished attempting to climb Mount Everest in June 1924. The Turner sisters' father was the Arts & Crafts architect Hugh Thackeray Turner (1853–1937), a friend of William Morris and a prolific designer

and decorator of ceramics, which were often shown at the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society exhibitions.¹³ Both sisters were close to their father; Marjorie lived in the Turner family home, Westbrook, a large house designed by Thackeray Turner, near Godalming and Ruth in her home, The Holt, nearby.

Probably on the recommendation of Chris Fraser Davies, (Gladys Mayer's right-hand-woman in the Arts, Crafts and Social Club), Francis Nevel initially attended Priory School, King's Langley, where Davies taught, spending his school holidays with the Mallory family in Surrey. This independent school was run by Margaret Cross (1866–1962), the first headteacher in Britain to adopt Steiner/Waldorf methods. Nevel was later removed from the school over concerns he was becoming malnourished and from 1926–29 he attended Rendcomb College (established in 1920), in the Cotswolds. The Founder and the first Headmaster, J. H. Simpson, fostered a keen interest in the arts and crafts and encouraged his pupils to use their hands. From its earliest days Rendcomb developed links with the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen and with Loughborough College, particularly in the field of furniture-making. Thus, the young Francis Nevel became familiar with Cotswold furniture, both at school and during the holidays spent with the Turner family, for following George Mallory's death, Marjorie Turner took over the role of his principal guardian. Westbrook, where he spent his holidays, contained much fine furniture by Gimson and other members of the Cotswold School.¹⁴

After leaving school, Francis Nevel moved to London, gaining a job on the reception desk of The Waldorf Hotel. Although never a committed anthroposophist, he renewed his connection with Gladys Mayer and attended social events at Rudolf Steiner house and 8 Park Road, becoming part of her close social circle. He joined the committee of The Betula Woodwork Association and notes in the surviving, committee minute book, show that Nevel was both motivated and had a sound head for business. Having been appointed



6. Francis Nevel c.1935. Image courtesy Ternex Ltd.

company secretary, one of his initial tasks was to locate suitable premises for the nascent enterprise, since both the first workshop, (in a derelict building in Park Street near Baker Street) and the second (in a cellar beneath Swiss Cottage Underground station) had proven inadequate.¹⁵ The architect Montague Wheeler suggested locations in Kennington and Bray but eventually a lease was taken on a workshop centrally located at 1a Sharpleshall Street, Primrose Hill, a 30-minute walk from the company's registered office and showroom at 8 Park Road. This narrow, two-storey building, with a cellar, comprising former stables and coach houses, accessed through large gates down a cobbled side street, would serve as the company's primary workshop for the following 30 years. The cellar was used for timber storage (English hardwoods with an emphasis on walnut, sycamore, and oak), the ground floor had space for woodworking machinery, workshops and packing while the upper floor housed offices and a photography studio.

With the enthusiastic support of the close-knit anthroposophical community orders were received, including architectural woodwork for Rudolf Steiner House (Fig. 7), and work commenced. Gladys Mayer provided most of the designs for furniture, which was initially made only to commission, avoiding the need to pay regular wages. Funds were sufficient to purchase the company's first woodworking machine, costing £30, during the summer of 1932. A promotional flyer was produced for a small, three-day exhibition held at 8, Park Road in early June. Clearly aimed at anthroposophists it opened with a short paragraph introducing the company as one which had, 'the object of developing the impulse given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner in the sphere of woodwork'.

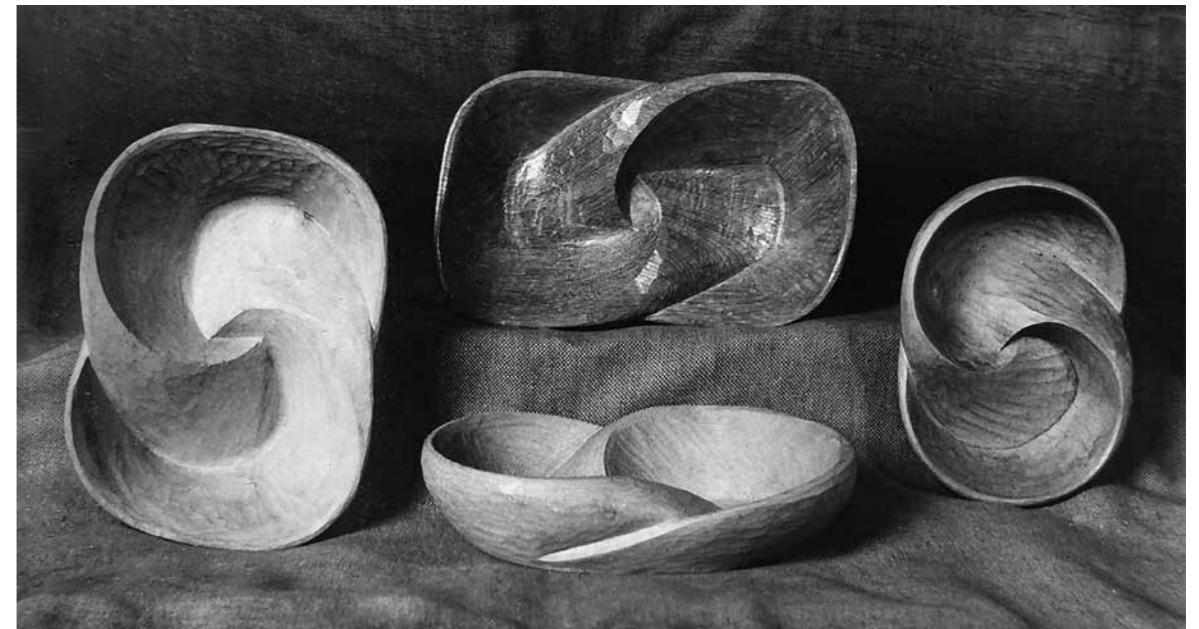


At around this time David Haes (1912–2002), a former schoolfriend of Francis Nevel's from Rendcomb College joined the enterprise. Haes had embraced furniture making while at Rendcomb and upon graduation had become an apprentice cabinetmaker at A E Winter & Co. of Norwich.¹⁶ Made redundant during the economic slump of the early 1930s, which severely hit the furniture industry, he had moved to London looking for employment. As the company grew, he assumed responsibility for overseeing the manufacturing side of the operation and joined Gladys Mayer and Francis Nevel as the third of four company directors. The fourth director (a sleeping partner) was Marjorie Turner, Nevel's former guardian, who provided much needed financial investment when required.

At the committee meeting held on 16 June 1932, it was proposed to exhibit Betula furniture at an anthroposophical gathering at Glastonbury on 18 July and recent orders were discussed. Attempting to control the nature of the furniture produced, Gladys Mayer proposed that responsibility for designs should not rest with the maker but should be approved by the committee or by 'one appointed by the committee' who could assess quality from an artistic point of view. Mayer was duly appointed to this role. At the following meeting in October 1932, it was considered necessary to ask the company's financial backers to subscribe more capital, which was 'needed for extension' and permission was given for the workshop to make 'utility furniture' (i.e. utilitarian) alongside the bespoke anthroposophical furniture. It was also decided that an exhibition of recent work should be arranged for the following month.

The Betula never seems to have published a catalogue and the company appears to have promoted its output primarily by word of mouth, favouring studio photographs of completed pieces, which could easily be posted to potential clients, or in substantial

7. Betula Woodwork Association double door installed in Rudolf Steiner house c.1932. Image the author.



8. Betula Woodwork Association carved wooden fruit bowls c.1932

photograph albums to be consulted and returned, three of which survive.¹⁷ The earliest of these albums contains only anthroposophical furniture designed by Mayer and indicates that until around 1933, 53 different designs had been produced. Although neither Steiner nor his ideas are mentioned, this album's anthroposophical credentials are established from the outset. The first image of a striking, heavily carved frame (see Fig. 2), is modelled on the front elevation of Steiner's second Goetheanum and displays a photograph of the building. Other examples of a deeply carved surface can be found in a set of 'yin and yang' fruit bowls (Fig. 8). This highly labour-intensive surface treatment was applied to much of the furniture made in Dornach, which was often executed without the use of machinery. However, the clean lines and smooth surface finish of The Betula furniture shows that from the outset it was designed with machine production in mind. Most of the furniture appears to be for domestic use and includes many chairs with hard or stuffed seats, folding variants (probably for institutional use) and even fully upholstered examples (Fig. 9). Washstands, beds and combination wardrobes also feature and found a market with flat-dwellers and were also used to furnish the dormitories of Steiner boarding

schools. A highly asymmetric writing desk (displaying a framed portrait of Steiner) and a simple but stylish, faceted bookcase (decorated with Steiner's Eurythmy figures) also feature in the album (Figs. 10, 11).¹⁸ Garden structures were also undertaken including an anthroposophical gazebo or summer house and a garden bench (Figs. 12, 13).

In February 1933 David Haes was co-opted onto the committee and there was much discussion regarding the design of furniture for The Betula. The committee Minute Book records some revealing observations,

'It was felt that a good deal of the furniture which has been made was not either designed or sanctioned by Miss Mayer, nor strictly utilitarian. But owing to economic difficulties, the furniture produced was in many cases for outsiders, and made according to the customer's taste. If the demand for furniture designed by Miss Mayer were big enough and continuous, then probably no furniture made to customers or other persons designs would be executed. There appeared to be no clear definition of what is "utilitarian furniture" and



10. (above left) Betula Woodwork Association desk designed by Gladys Mayer c.1932. Note the framed photograph of Rudolf Steiner.



11. (above right) Betula Woodwork Association bookcase with picture frame above, both designed by Gladys Mayer c.1932. The bookcase supports a selection of Rudolf Steiner and Edith Maryon's coloured plywood 'Eurythmy' figures.

- Who may or may not make designs for furniture?²⁰

In these early exchanges one gains a strong sense of what would become an on-going, underlying tension between the company's instigator, Gladys Mayer, who clearly wanted The Betula to be an exclusively anthroposophical venture and the more pragmatic Francis Nevel who was keen to broaden the company's client base and produce designs that appealed to a wider audience. This friction would continue while Gladys Mayer was closely involved with the company. The second photograph albums of The Betula designs, dating from slightly later, contains a few examples of 'utilitarian furniture' (Figs. 14, 15), alongside a selection of more restrained anthroposophical pieces, and a large selection of Mayer's original designs.

At the Committee Meeting held on 27 February 1933, there was a discussion as to whether The Betula should be closed down owing to lack of funding for advertising purposes, or to carry on and attempt to raise £700 of additional capital. It was unanimously decided to pursue the latter course.

A general meeting was held on 15 March 1933, in the Studio of The Arts, Social & Crafts Club which had recently relocated

what is "Anthroposophical furniture" but it was obvious that a good deal of the furniture made was in between the two, being neither one nor the other. Mr Knefel (Nevel) always thought that the customer should be allowed to choose the design they liked for furniture they were going to buy, and that it wasn't the Betula's business to impose designs on the customer which the customer didn't like. He thought that the policy of Betula should be as Mr Dunlop said in his speech at the opening of the Arts Social & Crafts Club to "cater for all tastes".¹⁹ Miss Mayer did not feel in the same way about it. The problems facing the committee were:

- What is utilitarian furniture?
- What is anthroposophical furniture?
- Who is to be the judge as to what furniture the Betula may or may not make?



12. (above left) Betula Woodwork Association anthroposophical summer house c.1932.



13. (above right) The Betula Ltd. garden bench, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1936.

the short distance to 33a Park Road. The balance sheet showed a net profit of £43-14-7 for the year and discussion centred on the possibility of issuing a small catalogue of anthroposophical furniture for the members of The Anthroposophical Society of Great Britain, and that a separate catalogue should be issued for 'other' people. It was suggested (most likely by Gladys Mayer) that the aim of The Betula should be to make furniture of 'quality and distinction' which one could not obtain from any other organisation, which would be better than trying to make everyday furniture in competition with mainstream commercial manufacturers (Figs. 16, 17, 18). However, it was also pointed out (probably by Francis Nevel), that The Anthroposophical Society alone could not keep The Betula fully employed and that the general public must be approached. At the same meeting it was agreed to launch an appeal to raise £800 of essential capital investment. At a subsequent meeting in July of the same year, it was decided that, 'Mr. Knefel (Nevel) should bring forward a

14. (right) The Betula Ltd. combination wardrobe, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1936. An example of the 'utilitarian' furniture the company could produce, and a type often found in the dormitories of Steiner Schools.



suggestion for a new payment basis for Miss Mayer's designing and forward the suggestion to her for acceptance or rejection.'

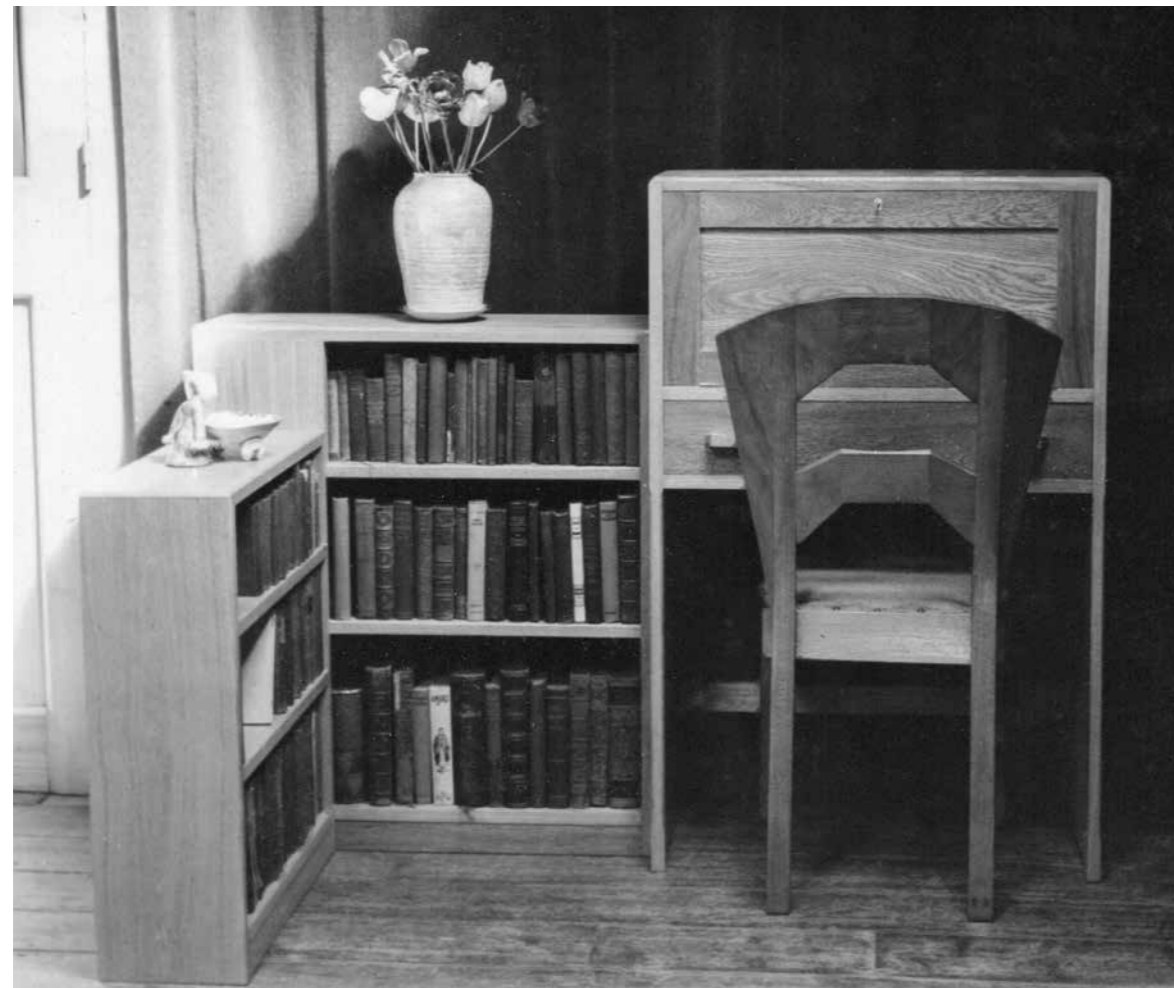
At the committee meeting held on 31 May 1934, accounts were accepted showing an increased annual profit of £66-13-0. Francis Nevel questioned the commission paid monthly to the Arts and Crafts Club run by Mayer, feeling that commission should only be payable on orders received. Mayer disagreed with his suggestion on the grounds that, 'since her Arts and Crafts Club had given The Betula the "send off" in the first place, it would be rather a pity to break away now, especially at a time when the position of the Club was in its present condition.'

The final meeting documented in The Betula Woodwork Association Minute Book, held on 13 December 1934, recorded a proposal that the association become a limited company, which was agreed to be a sound idea and approved

unanimously. It was pointed out that the cost of converting the company would be between £20 and £30 and because there were some sixteen shareholders (many living outside London), the limited liability would be a wise move. This would make it easier for the company to raise more capital which was badly needed.

By 1935 the day-to-day running of the company had transferred to Francis Nevel and David Haes with the freehold for the Sharpleshall Street workshop, previously rented, purchased with capital supplied by David Haes's father. There had been no falling out with Gladys Mayer, but her

15. The Betula Ltd. combination corner bookcase and writing desk, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1936. Another example of 'utilitarian' furniture, the chair is an earlier anthroposophical design by Gladys Mayer.

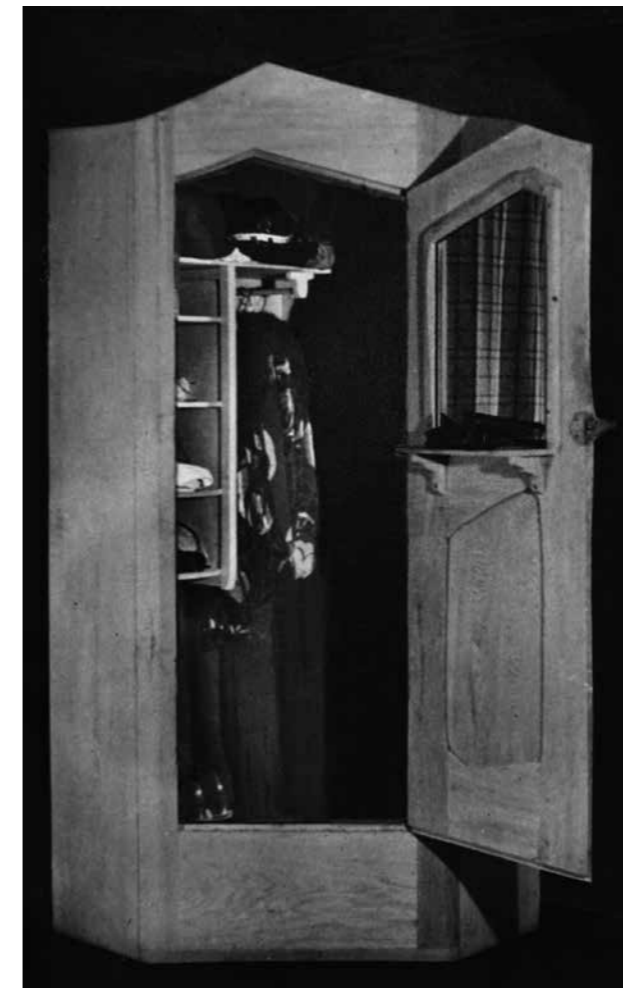


16. (right) The Betula Ltd. combination bed and side cabinet, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1936, pictured in the Sharpleshall Street workshop.



17. (below left) The Betula Ltd. corner wardrobe, designed by Gladys Mayer c.1932.

18. (below right) The Betula Ltd. dressing screen, designed by Gladys Mayer c.1932.



attention had shifted back to promoting the wider Rudolf Steiner movement through her tireless lecturing, art teaching, writing and involvement with various Steiner inspired initiatives.²¹ She continued to provide occasional designs but most of the later furniture designs were provided by Haes and Nevel. The less assertive David Haes was content to focus on the making side of the business (he had his own workshop at Sharpleshall Street), leaving the more outgoing Francis Nevel to develop a role (never officially sanctioned) equivalent to managing director. There was still a focus on anthroposophical design, demonstrated by a letter written in 1935 from Nevel to Captain Michaele, a potential client. The correspondence reveals how business was conducted and the flexibility of the company,

'Enclosed is a selection of photographs, perhaps from them you could form some definite ideas as to what you would like. Please let us know the number of pieces of furniture required, approximate sizes and descriptions. Also whether you would like the furniture in Oak, Walnut, Beech, Birch, Maple or Mahogany etc. And further, do you like what we know as Anthroposophically designed furniture, or would you prefer something with hardly any forms in the design, or even something more in a period and conventional style? We rather assume that you would like something Anthroposophical. We would forward you drawings for anything required.'

An invoice from August 1935 relating to the loan of capital from David Haes's father, records the company as having the following departments: 'Furniture Manufacturing; Panelling; Upholstery; Furniture Repairing; Garden Furniture; Summer Houses; Decorating and Removals.' On 31 January 1936, the restructured limited company, now simply titled 'The Betula Ltd.' commenced trading.

With Francis Nevel at the helm a more serious attempt was made to market the company; a logo and promotional flyers were designed (Fig. 19). He also consciously sought to move away from a predominantly anthroposophist clientele. The company exhibited with the long-running Home Arts and Industries Association in November 1936 at their annual exhibition held at Dorland Hall, London. The company's exhibits found favour with *The Cabinet Maker* which illustrated a chair and writing table in walnut (Fig. 20). The anonymous reviewer stated,

'Excellent "grown-up" furniture was displayed by The Betula, a small firm now in its fifth year of working. The wood used is for the most part English walnut, but oak, maple, birch, beech, sycamore and yew are also employed. A particularly good exhibit was a chair in walnut with its comfortable curved



19. A selection of Betula Ltd. promotional material c.1936–39. The embroidered maker's label (middle) was fixed to the interior of cabinet furniture.



back splayed at the top and filled with squared slats, its square tapered legs and pleasantly shaped arms. A sideboard, a cabinet, a nest of occasional tables and other occasional tables in various designs were also shown, and there was an interesting selection of standard and table lamp pedestals in wood, many of which were of an unusual seven-sided pattern, which was curiously attractive. The designs are by Francis Nevel and D. B. Haes.²²

Surviving photographs and examples from this period demonstrate a new-found vigour and a widening in both the scope and ambition of the furniture. Anthroposophical designs still predominate but are now more streamlined and make a greater use of symmetry demonstrated by a glazed bookcase (Fig. 21) and a remarkable, large school cupboard (Fig. 22). A huge, anthroposophic boardroom table (Fig. 24) was also executed, probably for the Scott Bader chemical company, a large, multi-section wardrobe (Fig. 23) for Francis Nevel's home at South Mimms and a series of remarkable anthroposophic, upright pianos (Fig. 25) were also made.²³

20. (above left) The Betula Ltd. partners desk and chairs in walnut, exhibited at the Home Arts and Industries Association, exhibition at Dorland Hall, London, November 1936.

21. (above right) The Betula Ltd. glazed bookcase, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1937.

Following the first year of trading as The Betula Ltd., the Directors' Report and accounts for 31 January 1937 showed a small profit for the year of £26-17-3, less the company formation expenses of £30 resulting in a small net loss. The company's auditor was Basil Mayer, Gladys Mayer's younger brother.

Building on the success of their exhibition at Dorland House the previous year, the company ambitiously took a stand at the Ideal Home Exhibition held at Olympia between 30 March and 24 April 1937. They exhibited furniture in a room setting, decorated with understated, anthroposophical domed panelling along with a built-in rectilinear fire surround. The following year the company also took out



22. (above) The Betula Ltd. large school cupboard with book matched veneers, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1937. Image the author.

a full-page advertisement (Fig. 26), and were also featured in, *Furnishing & Re-Furnishing...*, published by *Country Life*.²⁴

Unfortunately, the Directors' Report for January 1938 found the company posting a loss of £343-3-1 but this was largely put down to the heavy expenses incurred in exhibiting during the previous year. However, it was hoped that the company would eventually benefit from such costly activities through increased turnover. More significantly, commencement of the manufacture of 'small woodware' during the latter part of 1937 was noted. The report continued,

'this will be of benefit from several points of view. The goods are readily saleable and their manufacture requires little capital. It will provide work during slack periods, and so enable the business to retain its craftsmen.'

23. (below) The Betula Ltd. wardrobe in walnut, probably designed by Francis Nevel c.1937.

Image courtesy Woolley & Wallis Auctioneers, Salisbury.



24. (above left) The Betula Ltd. large boardroom table, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1937.

25. (above right) The Betula Ltd. anthroposophical upright piano, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1937.

Designed by you — made by us

Easy chair in natural oak.

Woodware in walnut, sycamore, blackbeech, maple, yew.

Corner dressing or writing table in sycamore.

Built-in bureau with chair, in silky oak, walnut handles.

Betula Furniture is designed to your own individual needs—made-to-measure, in fact. If you send us a sketch or description of some special piece you want, we bring your idea to life in the form of lovely furniture.

Betula Furniture is made by hand of solid Empire timber, which makes for great strength and resistance to wear and tear. If preferred, however, veneers can be used.

Betula Furniture looks delightfully modern without being self-consciously so. Its lack of unnecessary detail gives it a quiet simplicity which makes it a pleasure to live with.

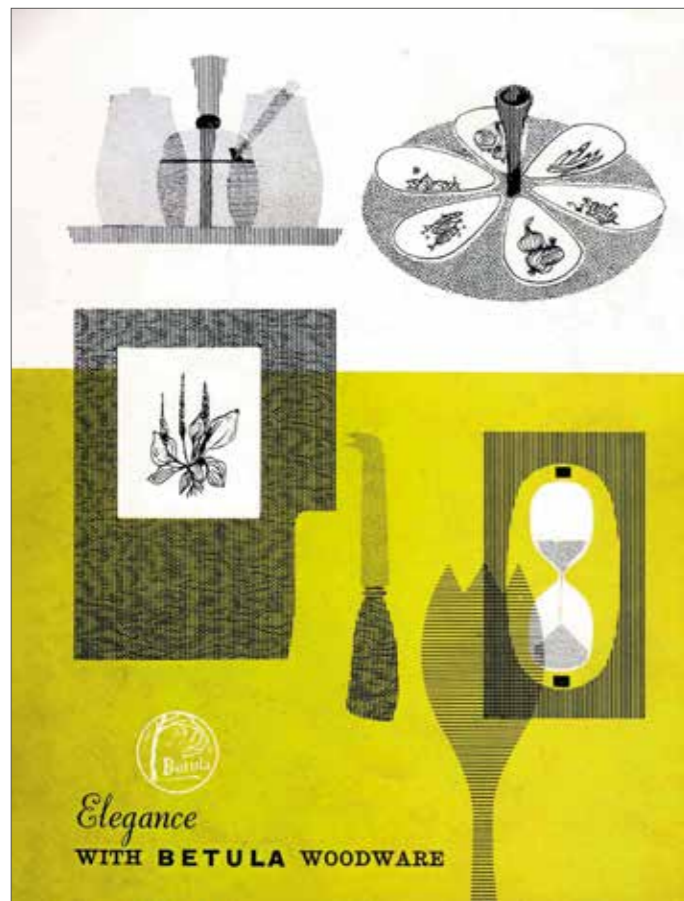
Betula Furniture costs less than most modern furniture, a little more than cheap mass-produced furniture, but if you tell us how much you wish to spend, we estimate accordingly.

Betula Woodware is the perfect complement of Betula Furniture and makes an ideal gift. Dishes, bowls, boxes, cruet, candlesticks, breadboards—all are hand-made in our own workshops in lovely silky woods, either to your own or our designs.

The BETULA LIMITED
 Sharpleshall Street, London, N.W.1.
 TEL.: PRIMROSE 5019

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26. (left) The Betula Ltd. full page advertisement from *Furnishing & Re-Furnishing*, 1938.



27. The Betula Ltd. *Elegance with Betula Woodware*, cover of a 16-page tableware catalogue, early 1950s.

This strategy proved relatively effective as evidenced in the accounts delivered in January 1939. Increased trade had resulted in, 'an increase of nearly 40% in turnover, due mostly to development in the small woodware side of the business.' It was also noted that, 'This satisfactory result, has, however, been obtained at the cost of sales at unremunerative prices.' To counter this, a revised price list was issued with more accurate costings. Sadly, there was to be no time to improve the ailing furniture manufacturing side of the business as war was declared in September 1939.

The Sharpleshall Street workshop was requisitioned by Woolwich Arsenal, which, because of its vulnerability on its Thames-side site below Greenwich, was being dispersed to the north. At one stage during the war, The Betula were employing approximately 50 people, nearly half of them women, along with Jewish refugee teenagers from Germany and

Austria.²⁵ The firm made rifle butts, dummy aircraft shells and assembled ammunition boxes. The contract work proved profitable and other nearby properties were purchased. A second workshop in St. George's Mews was used to paint the ammunition boxes with olive green 'dope paint' and a nearby terraced house was purchased where Nevel, Haes and some of the staff could live, as commuting proved difficult. This building also doubled as a works canteen.

Following the end of the War, and in a stable financial position, the company took the opportunity to re-invent itself. Gladys Mayer and Marjorie Turner remained as directors (but in name only) as the company was now managed entirely by Francis Nevel with David Haes overseeing manufacture. Production was focused on smaller tableware and the turned items that had proven so profitable during the pre-war period. Although the manufacture of furniture was still advertised, little seems to have been produced. August 1948 saw the publication of an extensive wholesale woodware price list itemising over 100 different items including, ash trays, biscuit barrels, bowls in various shapes and sizes, bread boards, butter dishes, cheese boards, cruet sets, wooden handled cutlery sets, egg cups, jam pots, serviette rings, trays, table lamps and toast racks. These were available in oak, elm, cherry, chestnut, walnut, maple, sycamore or rosewood and proved popular with a public still subject to post-war privations, being seen as an 'affordable luxury'. Effective marketing of Betula Woodware (as it styled itself) (Fig. 27) saw the products available in gift shops nationally and in leading department stores such as Harrods, Fortnum & Mason and Selfridges.²⁶ This allowed the company to post annual profits of £9,395-17-10 in the year ending 31 January 1950. The streamlined design aesthetic of the Betula Woodware caught the zeitgeist for Scandinavian-influenced design, ushered in by the 1951 Festival of Britain, and during the 1950s the company became the UK market-leader for fine, wooden tableware. Specialist turners were employed, many of them subcontractors working from their own

premises. Designs also came from in-house sources including, from 1953 the Swiss-born Marianne Nevel (née Koch), who had married Francis Nevel the previous year. Although not from an arts background, she designed a particularly successful range of Coronation-themed tableware (Fig. 28) in English walnut that were vigorously marketed. At its height, the company was exporting its wares worldwide, supported by The Design Council who endorsed and exhibited many of its products both internationally and at The Design Centre in Haymarket, London.

The decline of The Betula Ltd. was gradual. The import of cheap, wooden tableware, manufactured in teak in India, grew in the late-1950s, stealing much of the market share. Concurrently, the public's taste had moved away from high maintenance, hardwood tableware (each Betula item carried instructions, 'NEVER WASH Wipe with a cloth damped in vinegar, and polish with clear wax polish') to the much more practical, and washable, stainless steel. As sales declined the company shifted its focus. The Betula purchased Ternex Ltd. a woodworking company that had both competed with, and subcontracted manufacture for The Betula, for its stock and machinery. Much of the company's supply of English hardwood, mostly English walnut, which was hard to come by, was sourced by Francis Nevel with the logs being sent to the Brocket Sawmill in Ayot Green, Hertfordshire to be cut into planks and air dried. The well-seasoned timber could then be delivered to the Sharpleshall Street workshop when it was required. The company that leased the Ayot Green sawmill went bankrupt in 1959 and, sensing an opportunity, Francis Nevel used Ternex Ltd. to take on the lease from the liquidators and so entered the timber business. This shift in direction proved the perfect opportunity for David Haes to amicably leave the business and focus on his main passion for furniture making. To release the capital he had tied up in The Betula, the Sharpleshall Street premises were sold and Haes subsequently established his own furniture workshop in Guildford,



28. The Betula Ltd. Coronation tableware in walnut, designed by Marianne Nevel in 1953.

producing much work for churches. Francis Nevel soldiered on, still primarily focused on the manufacture and sale of wooden tableware and giftware. The Betula and Ternex operated in parallel for a short time but to streamline the business and simplify accounting, the two were merged and trading continues to the present day under the Ternex Ltd. brand.²⁷

The Betula Ltd. ceased trading in 1965 and was officially wound-up on 26 March 1968. Today, if remembered at all by the wider community, the company's reputation rests on the production of the stylish, high-quality, wooden tableware that proved so popular with the British public during the 1950s and early 1960s. Its pre-war role as a manufacturer of radical, Steiner-influenced, expressionist furniture was never widely known or advertised. The company primarily catered to an appreciative but closed, audience of anthroposophists and today, it is only in certain



29. The Betula Ltd. glazed, breakfront side cabinet in walnut, probably designed by David Haes and/or Francis Nevel c.1937. Catalogued as 'Cotswold Style' when sold at auction in 2009.

sections of the Steiner community, that it is remembered and valued. On the rare occasions that examples of The Betula Ltd. furniture have appeared on the open market (Fig. 29) their anthroposophical credentials have not been recognised by auction houses or vendors. They have been sold as either 'Arts & Crafts' or, unsurprisingly considering Francis Nevel and David Haes's Rendcomb College background, 'Cotswold School'. It is the author's hope that the term 'Anthroposophical Design' can finally, and belatedly, enter the lexicon of British design styles and movements.

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memories of the Nevel family and Ian Botting, librarian at Rudolf Steiner house was very helpful, as was Sibylle Eichstaedt, Editor of *The Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain Newsletter* and Jane Gunner, Editor of *The Old Rendcombian*. Finally, thanks are due to Jonathan Meades who, in 1990, made a passing reference to the 'Betula Company' in his BBC documentary *Right is Wrong*, twenty seconds of airtime that provided the impetus for 34 years of research.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Gladys Mayer's remarkable life is partially documented in: 'Gladys Mayer Memorial (1888-1980)', *Mercury Arts Group Journal* (Easter 1982). This special edition contains tributes from friends, selections of her own writing and is illustrated with many examples of her anthroposophical painting and graphic art. A follower of Steiner to the end, she died, aged 92, in London on 21 January 1980 following a traffic accident as she walked home from an exhibition devoted to Rudolf Steiner's architecture.
- 2 Rudolf Steiner, *The Way of Initiation* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1908), translated by Max Gysi. In this work, Steiner provides a detailed, structured introduction and guide to personal development on the spiritual path.
- 3 Dr. John Paull, 'Stratford-on-Avon: In the footsteps of Rudolf Steiner', *Elementals - Journal of Biodynamics Tasmania* (Spring 2013), pp. 12-18.
- 4 Gladys Mayer, 'The Initiate and the Teacher', *The Golden Blade* (1959) pp. 27-34.
- 5 European anthroposophical design has only recently been subject to academic research and public exhibition. For further information see: Mateo Kries, (ed.) *Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg et al., Rudolf Steiner: Alchemy of the Everyday*. (Vitra Design Museum, Zurich, 2000); Reinhold Johann Fäth, *Dornach-Design*

(Futurum, Dornach, 2011); Reinhold Johann Fäth and David Voda, (eds.), *Ænigma - One Hundred Years of Anthroposophical Art* (Arbor Vitae, Prague, 2015).

- 6 See: Anon, 'The Rudolf Steiner Hall, London, W.', *The Architect & Building News* (15 Oct 1926), pp. 425-428.
- 7 The University of Sheffield, Western Bank Library: *The Sheffield Educational Settlement Papers*, 91/39/12/12.
- 8 Rudolf Steiner, *The Threefold Commonwealth* (London, 1922). Steiner thought it crucial to make a distinction between three spheres of society - the political, economic, and cultural. He believed that when each is relatively independent of one another, they check, balance, and correct one another, leading to greater social health and progress.
- 9 The University of Sheffield, Western Bank Library: *The Sheffield Educational Settlement Papers*, 91/39/13/7. The Settlement in Shipton Street, Sheffield, was founded by the YMCA in 1918 under the Wardenship of Arnold Freeman. The YMCA, concerned about debts accumulating under Freeman's ambitious Wardenship, dissociated itself from the venture in 1921, at which point Freeman, who became a committed anthroposophist, was able to proceed with his educational plans.
- 10 In the years leading up to World War II Steiner Schools were established in Kings Langley (Priory), London (Michael Hall, which later moved to Forest Row), Ilkeston (Michael House), Selly Oak (Elmfield), Hampstead (Waldorf), Gloucestershire (Wynstone's) and Edinburgh (Rudolf Steiner).
- 11 *Betula Woodwork Association. Minute book of Committee and General Meetings* (1931-34). Uncatalogued, hand-written booklet in the possession of Ternex Ltd., Ayot Green, Herts. N.B. Unless noted, all subsequent archive material quoted in the text relating to The Betula Ltd. is from the same source.
- 12 Peter and Leni Gillman, *The Wildest Dream* (London, Headline Pub., 2000), p. 225. Later his mother married her lover (following the death of his wife) and tried to reclaim Franz, but he chose to stay in England with Ruth Mallory supporting his decision.
- 13 Robert Prescott-Walker, 'Hugh Thackeray Turner: Professional Architect, Amateur China Painter', *Decorative Arts Society Journal* 27 (2003), pp. 22-35.
- 14 Francis Nevel inherited much of this furniture.
- 15 David Haes, *Old Rendcombian Society Newsletter* (May 1994), p. 14. Written in memory of Francis Nevel.
- 16 *Rendcomb College Magazine* (Vol. III, No. 2, January 1930), p. 3.
- 17 Three of these albums survive, the earliest (c.1932) labelled *The Betula Woodwork Association*, is in the library at Rudolf Steiner House. The second, identical in format but including a few different designs, is at The University of Sheffield, (as note 9) 91/39/38/4. The final, disbanded album, dating to c.1936, is in the collection of Ternex Ltd.
- 18 Around 1913, Rudolf Steiner created Eurythmy, a new form of movement to represent, physically, the experience of speech and music. The English sculptor Edith Maryon (1872-1924), a close collaborator of

Steiner's, attempted to represent gestures in sculpture but Steiner suggested using stylised painted, two-dimensional cutouts on plywood. In late 1922 he made a series of sketches and Maryon and others eventually produced a series of figures in 35 different poses.

- 19 Daniel Nicol Dunlop (1868-1935) was a Scottish entrepreneur, founder of the World Power Conference and other associations, and a theosophist-turned-anthroposophist. He was the father of artist Ronald Ossory Dunlop.
- 20 Committee meeting held 14 Feb 1933 at the Sharpleshall Street workshop.
- 21 A partial bibliography for Gladys Mayer comprises: *Sleeping & Waking and the Life of Art* (1930); *New Ways of Thinking About Social Problems* (1938); *Reincarnation and Our Future* (1958); *Colour and the Human Soul* (1959); *The Mystery-Wisdom of Colour* (1962); *Behind the Veils of Death & Sleep* (1965); *Colour and Healing* (1971); *The Gifts of the Season* (1971); *How Art Speaks* (1972); *Universal Science for our Coming Age* (1982); *Colours: A New Approach to Painting* (1983).
- 22 Anon, 'British Handicrafts - The Home Arts and Industries Association', *The Cabinet Maker and Complete House Furnisher*, (5 December 1936), p. 350.
- 23 Ernest Bader was a close friend and patron of Mayer. With his wife Dora Scott he founded the chemical company Scott Bader, in 1921. In 1951 the company was given to the employees under common ownership, becoming the Scott Bader Commonwealth.
- 24 *Furnishing & Re-Furnishing, a guide to contemporary furnishing* (London, Country Life Ltd., 1938), pp. 19, 76.
- 25 David Haes, *Old Rendcombian Society Newsletter* (May 1994), p. 14.
- 26 Walnut was sourced from The Sandringham estate, metalware for cutlery from Sheffield and Bernard Leach provided ceramic containers for some of the *hors d'oeuvre* sets.
- 27 Ternex Ltd. continues to thrive under the management of Francis Nevel's son, Vincent, who has diversified, modernised and expanded the timber company. It undertakes bespoke joinery, furniture and cabinet making, the manufacture of timber framed buildings, staircases and bespoke CNC machining.

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