

The Heron Family Simpson Furniture



Contents

Introduction	3
The collection	4
Armchair with spoon arms	4
Cabinet	5
Chair with arms	6
Chair with curved arms	7
Chair with round back	8
Chest of drawers	9
Corner display cabinet	10
Desk	11
Dining chair	12
Dining table	13
Dressing table	14
Hall shelf	15
Magazine rack	16
Sideboard	17
Stationery holder	18
Stool	19
Tea caddy	20
Tray	21
Wardrobe	22
The story of the Heron Family's Simpson furniture	23
References and further information	26

Introduction

Furniture-maker Arthur Simpson of Kendal was one of the most prominent craftsmen of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th century. The devotion to style and extraordinarily high standards of workmanship of his team – more than a century later the drawers slide in and out as smoothly as the day they were made – make Simpson furniture highly valued and sought after by Arts and Crafts enthusiasts.

This fabulous collection, made in 1918, comprises the greater part of a commission for Tom and Eulalie ('Jack') Heron. The collection, originally over thirty pieces of oak furniture, ranged in size from tea caddy to dining table. Most of it remains within the family who are looking for a home where the furniture can be kept together as a collection on public display.

The collection was commissioned by the Herons at the time of their marriage. The young couple cycled over the Pennines from Leeds and stayed in the Simpson's Voysey designed home 'Littleholme' on the old Sedbergh Road in Kendal while discussing and firming up the commission in the Simpson's town centre workshop. They ordered a complete set of furniture in well-seasoned Austrian oak for bedroom, dining and living rooms.

Tom and Eulalie lived with their furniture in Welwyn Garden City for most of their lives. When in their final years they left Welwyn to live with daughter Joanna in Cumbria, the furniture was divided up and given to three of their children; Patrick, Joanna, and Giles (Mike, a Benedictine monk, did not want his share).

The black and white photos used in this document were mostly taken in 1977/78 by Philip Sayers at 38 Brockswood Lane, Welwyn to record the collection before it was distributed by Tom and Eulalie to their children. A few were taken more recently by family members to fill in gaps and are noted as such.

The furniture is currently at private homes in Cumbria, Yorkshire, Sussex and Cornwall.

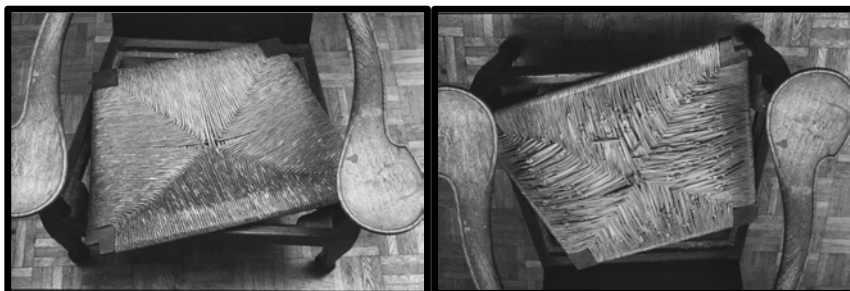
Where given, dimensions are in centimetres.

All enquiries to:

Rosalind Wates
Malberet, Bar Lane, Owlswick, Princes Risborough, Bucks HP27 9RG
roz@rosalindwates.co.uk
07802 790907
01844 274417

Armchair with spoon arms

Armchair with solid back and removable rush seat. Has line of pegs on the back to hold antimaccassar cloth. H88 W77 D80. Sussex.



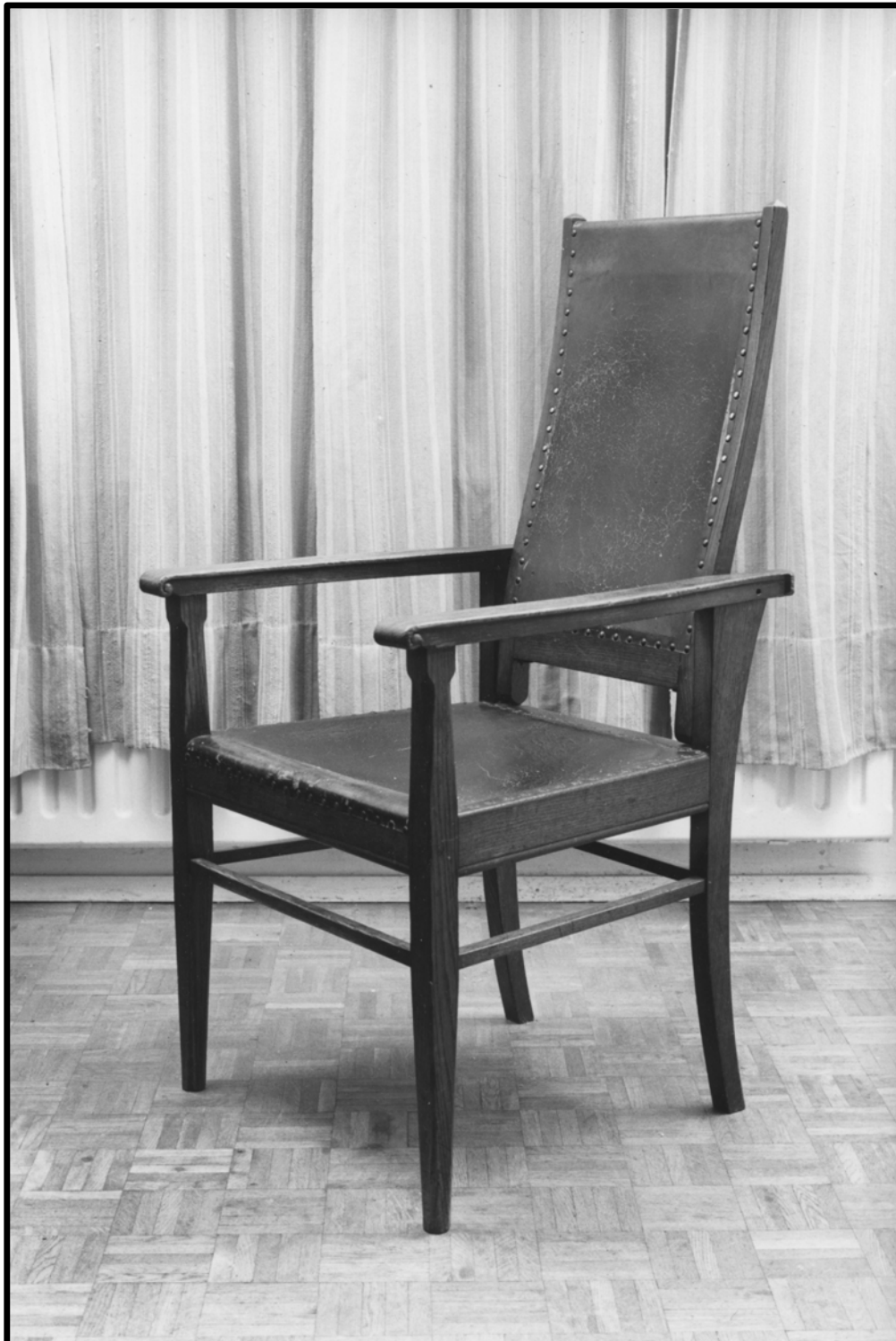
Cabinet

Small cabinet with fold-down front. H61 W46 D46. Cumbria.



Chair with arms

Dining chair with leather back and seat – known as the ‘Carver’ chair because it went at the head of the table for the person carving the joint. Cornwall.



Chair with curved arms

Arm chair with leather seat and back. H101 W60 D70. Yorkshire.



Chair with round back

Chair with semi-circular back and leather seat to go with desk. H74 W53 D45.
Two similar: Yorkshire and Sussex.



Chest of drawers

Chest of drawers with three large and four small drawers. H118 W109 D52.
Cumbria. Photo 2024 OW.



Corner display cabinet

Cornwall.



Desk

Desk with five drawers. H75 W160 D69. Yorkshire.



Dining chair

Dining chair with leather seat and carved back. Set of six. Cornwall.



Dining table

Shown with three of the dining chairs in bottom photo. Cornwall.



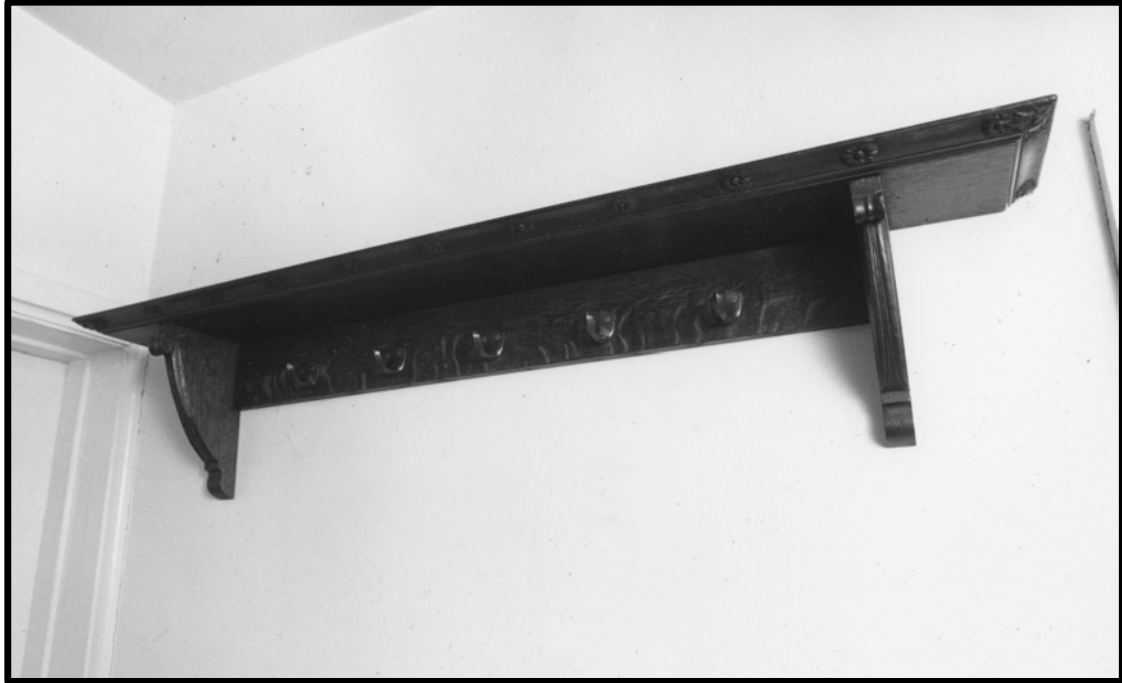
Dressing table

Dressing table with freestanding adjustable mirror. H92, W107, D59. Mirror H59 W58. Cumbria.



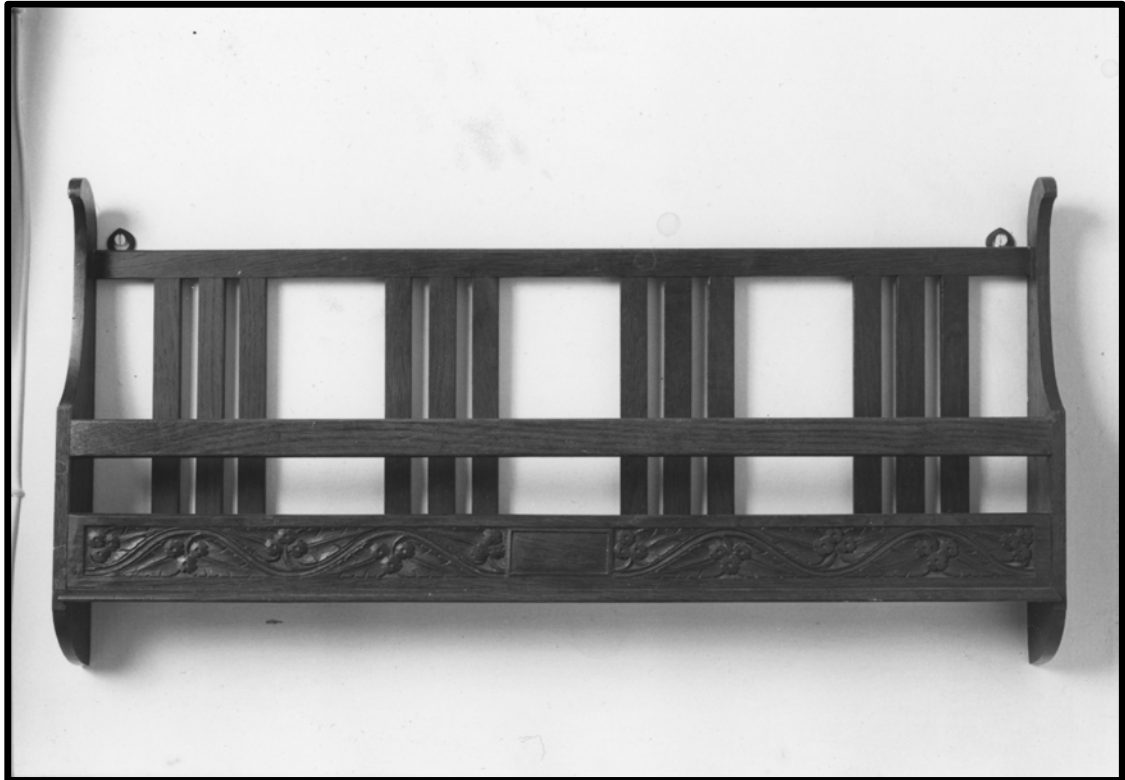
Hall shelf

H26 W122 D18. Yorkshire.



Magazine rack

Wall mounted rack for newspapers and magazines. Cumbria.



Sideboard

Sideboard with two shelved cupboards and three drawers. Cornwall.



Stationery holder

With compartments for different sizes of stationery. H30 W36 D14. Yorkshire.



Stool

Easy stool with woven leather seat. H31 W41 D31. Two similar: Yorkshire and Cumbria. Photo 2024 JW.



Tea caddy

Lidded and metal lined. H18 W12 D12. Two similar: Yorkshire and Cornwall.
Photo 2024 JW.



Tray

Cornwall.



Wardrobe

Large wardrobe with hanging rail. Each protruding carved handle is part of plank framing the door. H194, W164, D65. Cumbria.



The story of the Heron Family's Simpson furniture

by Giles Heron

My parents Tom Heron and Eulalie Davies were brought up in Bradford, fully exposed to the ferment of public debate that was threatening to break up the long-established era of Victorian conventions. They were also aware of the degrading living and working conditions of the majority of their less fortunate fellow citizens while they themselves enjoyed the benefit of the prestigious education of their respective Bradford Grammar schools, though in the case of Eulalie and her siblings this was always dependent on their winning personal scholarships. Both families were predisposed to welcome many of the reforms being debated because of their own entrenched traditions of nonconformism. My father's father was an elder of his presbyterian church and my mother's father a charismatic unitarian Congregationalist minister who forbade his children to stand and sing the national anthem daily at school during the Boer war because he was an ardent "Pro-Boer".

Two further other causes supported by both of their families linked them together. One was the issue of "Votes for Women" for which Tom often honed his public speaking skills adopting the label "Suffragist" to dissociate himself from the more violent Suffragettes. The other cause was the loose development known as the "Arts and Crafts Movement", spearheaded by John Ruskin and William Morris. Tom never forgot the sense of pride with which his father named a gentleman they watched getting out of a carriage in Coniston village. "That's the great Mr Ruskin!", he said. Just how strong this influence was became clear when Tom's younger sister Kathleen embarked on a career as an independent hand weaver. She spent two years with the Ditchling community in Sussex, apprenticed to Ethel Mairet, the doyenne of the revival of that craft. She dedicated the rest of her working life spinning, dyeing and weaving wherever she lived, producing some of the finest work in England.

Off-setting these similarities of interests were stark differences of character. Where the Herons usually kept their feet on the ground, the Davieses were tempted to try to fly. There was a palpably Bronte-like element in the tense life of the Davies' household under its clerical roof, with its five sisters and only a single brother, with their beloved moors always within reach to lend reality to those well-thumbed novels. Fortunately, they were all devoted to each other, which didn't mean they didn't need to develop defences. Eulalie became the tomboy who jumped across the notoriously dangerous narrows in the River Wharfe known as The Strid when she was twelve. More permanently, she took to day-dreaming, ever able to stay lost in her books, oblivious of the hubbub around her. Eulalie was deeply romantic and adored the poetry of William Morris as well as his medieval fantasies.

Tom preferred Walt Whitman, and what inspiration he drew from Morris came from the social utopia of “News from nowhere” and from his development as a socialist while creating a business renowned for its superb craftsmanship in many media and its employment of living artists.

Eulalie was heading for a university education unlike Tom, who, disregarding the strongly-expressed disappointment of his teachers, was set on starting a business of his own which he saw as a contribution towards improving a badly flawed society, so he insisted on leaving school at sixteen and entered his father’s cloth agency. His impatience and ability were very evident when he opened his own company on the first day permitted by the law, namely his twenty-first birthday. It was to be a factory making silk blouses, in Leeds, and the year was 1911.

That was hardly a propitious moment for his courting when Tom began commuting daily for long hours in his new factory as Eulalie disappeared to Birmingham to start on the four-year course that was to end with her gaining a first-class history degree. Worse obstacles were to follow. Contact had been fairly easy between their homes while both were in Bradford, not too far apart, but those days were now numbered. The Davies parents had to move to Oldham and when Tom’s father retired, the Herons too left Bradford to settle in the moorland village of Eastby near Bolton Abbey, an exciting sea-change to an entirely rural community, where morning was heralded by the sounds of cows and milk churns instead of mill hooters. To cap it all, war broke out in 1914 only to inflict its full impact two years later with the revolutionary introduction of compulsory military service for all men.

Eulalie’s wartime experience was to take her to South Wales to teach for two years and thereafter to a Shropshire farm for a contrasting two years of very strenuous physical farm work replacing men who had gone off to war.

Tom’s wartime story was barely credible: he simply continued running his business throughout the war, comparatively profitably too. This happened because of his very rare registration as a conscientious objector after he convinced his tribunal that his motives were utterly genuine. His passionate principle statement remains most impressive. This even left him free to make regular business trips to London throughout the war which enabled him to meet up with artist friends at the Café Royal and to patronise the Avant Garde emporium of Roger Fry’s “Omega Workshops”. Coincidentally, Roger Fry’s sister Margery, was the highly reputed head of Eulalie’s students’ hostel in Birmingham and had to vet Tom once or twice as a visitor! All of which explains why they were in a position to afford to buy quality furniture when at long last my parents got engaged as the end of the war became imminent.

The end of their extended courtship left them eager to make up for lost time. They already knew the sort of furniture they wanted for the home they were planning and their first step towards achieving it was to arrange a visit to

Simpsons in Kendal. They literally got on their bikes and the Simpsons very generously put them up for the night in their own home.

It was by no means a simple matter of just buying ready-made goods from a showroom. Much more creatively, it was to learn of all the possibilities the Simpsons could offer from their life-long experience. For every item on my parent's shopping list, discussion went back to the drawing board, establishing the functional purpose and likely usage, before settling on style, size and decoration, if any. What most strikes people today about the final commission made in September 1918 is simply its sheer size. There were to be over thirty separate pieces, all in oak, ranging from small tea caddies, unusually inlaid with delicate motifs of holly wood, to the major, plain furniture such as the full-size dining-room sideboard and the tall bedroom wardrobe with ample room for all the suits of the six-foot gentleman whose job and status required him to dress well.

What was less obvious was that this big order, besides serving their own interests, was also a conscious act of patronage on the part of my parents, who knew only too well what a struggle the Simpsons had had to survive through the war at all, having lost so many skilled men. They hoped that a commission of this magnitude might secure the employment of the remaining present staff and even add to their numbers thus helping to revive the firm's peacetime prosperity. Books and articles about the Simpsons company indicate the importance of the Heron commission to Simpsons, but what about the reverse? It is not easy to describe the very considerable importance of the Simpsons furniture to the Herons.

To be brought up using, and surrounded by, things of lasting worth and beauty is a privilege and education which exercises a degree of influence well beyond the aesthetic and the economical. It has extended even to moral influence. Three Heron generations have now been proud of the powerful aura of Simpson quality that characterises our homes. I remember one of the Simpson's set of identical dining table chairs that was distinguished by a collar of red wool tied round its top, to warn off unwary visitors. Its message could have been translated: "Beware of jam and grease! This is Giles' chair!". It was an early lesson in the respect due to the work of distinguished craftsmen. Most of the Simpson work is in excellent condition after a century of use. What more could anyone ask for?

Giles Heron, January 2021

References and further information

Davidson, Eleanor, (1978) *The Simpsons of Kendal: Craftsmen in Wood 1885-1952*, University of Lancaster.

Heron, Patrick (1980) 'Tom Heron, A Biographical Note', *Journal of the Decorative Arts*, No 4.

Peart-Binns, John & Heron, Giles, (2001), *Rebel and Sage; a biography of Tom Heron 1890-1983*, Pentland Books.

Wright, Hugh (2011), *The Beautiful furniture of the Simpsons of Kendal*, Bookcase.