

CHARLES RICHTER AND BATH CABINET MAKERS: THE EARLY YEARS

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'We are informed that Messrs Norris & Co have discharged all the cabinet makers in their employment who came out on strike last week and that they intend to carry on their business as on non-society principles.¹ In history, there are no real beginnings, yet Bath Cabinet Makers (BCM) owes its very existence to the strike at the Albion Cabinet Works in December, 1891. By 1901 the new firm was employing a hundred men, sixty years later the staff had grown to 600.² Unlike its thirty-six fellow cabinet makers³, BCM was to trade for sixty-seven years before being taken over by Yatton Furniture. The name and the goodwill, moreover, survived for more than a century.



The growing population of Bath in the nineteenth century included a thriving service industry. Because of its rapid expansion and a rich eighteenth-century architectural heritage, the city had long been a centre for making furniture.⁴ Cabinet making is the skilled making of furniture fitted with drawers or shelves in wood. It is not necessarily concerned only with

1. Charles Augustus Richter (1867-1946).
(*Family photograph, c.1900*)

cabinets, but strictly speaking does not include the construction of chairs, which is done by specialists, or of framed-panel furniture, jointed at the corners and slipped into grooves above and below, which is the province of joiners. The joiner might supply the cabinet maker with sawn and planed planks, but inevitably there was an overlap, and a sizeable cabinet-making concern employed chairmakers, joiners and carvers along with the authentic cabinet makers, equipped to design, shape and assemble, dowel, carve, finish and, since the reign of King Louis XIV, to use veneers. Cabinet making in all its manifestations was where Charles Richter (1876-1945), artist, designer, businessman, socialist and determined idealist, chose to employ his considerable energies for more than fifty years.

JC Rogers's *Modern English Furniture* (1930)⁵ celebrated the work of forty-two designers among whom Richter takes his place with notables like Edward and Sidney Barnsley, Edwin and Robert Lutyens, Gordon Russell and Robert Lorimer. To furniture dealers and furniture historians of his period, BCM's founder and luminary has a distinguished name, but he remains strangely unsung in the annals of Bath. It is my feeling that the very spread of his talents has marginalised his recognition. Even those who know his furniture might not realise that he modelled his firm on the Arts and Crafts Society to which he was later elected a member.⁶ Basically, this meant a continuous effort to improve the standard of design, notoriously low towards the end of the Victorian period despite the example of a few notables like Norman Shaw and William Morris. Morris's Arts and Crafts business had been set up in 1861, yet art furniture was appreciated by a very small minority. But what chiefly distinguished Richter from the other proponents of Arts and Crafts, were his views on production. Morris thought that the machine itself was responsible for bad design, and since hand work was necessarily time-consuming, his furniture was too expensive for the very people he wanted to supply. Richter, in contrast, deplored asking men to perform monotonous and arduous tasks that could well be accomplished by machine. He spoke as a natural progressive and an erstwhile worker. The pace of life being no longer conducive to medieval workshop methods, it was the duty of the trade to produce designs adapted specifically for machines. This was the premise of the man whose vision, tenacity, artistic ability and commercial aptitude was the bedrock of BCM. Under him the firm won an international reputation.

Charles Augustus Richter was born on 27 August 1867, the third son and child of Sarah and Johannes Friedrich Wilhelm Richter. Although it is not recorded in the biography of Charles's younger brother, Herbert,⁷

their father was a Prussian groom, trained in the royal stables at Potsdam, who had sailed to England when he was eighteen to accompany a race horse bought from his employer King Frederick William IV of Prussia, by a client in England. The groom settled in Sussex and married an English girl. Romance and circumstance are knit in a tale of Dickensian poignance. Though Sarah Davis was working as a laundry maid when Richter met her, her background was more illustrious than her predicament suggests. Sarah's mother had been a pupil at a private art school in Chelsea run by William Davis. Her wealthy parents, the Duffields, had predictably disapproved of the match with the art teacher and the couple eloped. Thereafter, the Duffields broke off all relations with their daughter. Both Sarah's parents died in her early youth from ill health, penury, and the struggle to raise a string of children. Despite this, Charles Richter's mother was a flame of energy and tenacity.

Charles was brought up on the Woodendean estate – now 'Woodingdean' in the parish of Ovingdean – where his father worked for a wealthy race-horse owning eccentric, Mrs Strangways, who had estates both there and in Bath. The relations between Mrs Strangways and her groom were, for the time, surprising. Between the two, out of understanding and affection for the animal kingdom, there grew a close relationship that kept them together for the rest of his working life.⁸ Five Richter children reached maturity, a daughter and four sons, of whom three were exceptionally intelligent and two were artistic. Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* being the family rule, discipline was firm but not severe. Sarah instilled in her children a high standard of ethics, the ability to fend for themselves, and perhaps most important, a passion to create. Thanks especially to her, several had distinguished careers. Frederick became a teacher at Bath Technical College, Herbert (H Davis) was an architectural and flower painter, President of the Pastel Society and of sufficient repute to earn himself a *Times* obituary,⁹ and Charles's contribution speaks for itself; besides his career with BCM, he became President of the National Federation of Furniture Trades, lectured widely, and served on Lord Gorell's Royal Commission on Art in Industry, in connection with which he gave evidence in the House of Commons. What is more, he rivalled Herbert in painting.

The only check to an early life that Charles Richter was to remember as idyllic, was an irrepressible desire to ask questions, a tendency towards which not all school masters took a tolerant attitude. Charles left school at eleven and a half, by which time his two elder brothers were already apprentice joiners, a trade from which they could work their way, if they

chose, into other fields. Instead of following suit, Charles opted for the Brighton office of *Southern Weekly News*.

In the last two years of the 1870s, the rainfall was phenomenal. Poor crops on top of the abolition of the Corn Laws aggravated the decline of arable farming, and the English market overflowed with American grain. By 1880, some hundred thousand fewer farm labourers were tilling the earth than just ten years before. It is not known whether the national situation influenced Mrs Strangways, but she left the countryside and moved to her Bath estate. Here Richter was joined by Sarah and the three younger children.¹⁰ In Bath they resided in the Lodge to Lansdown Place (enlarged in 1900 to become the present house, Cresthill), at what must be one of the highest points in the city, close to its boundary and handy for the racecourse. For thirteen year-old Charles, longing to do something more creative than shorthand and bookkeeping, Bath opened the path to progress.

After an abortive spell with a firm of engravers called Wilkinsons – ‘All they did was drink beer’ – he advertised his skills in a local newspaper and in either 1881 or 1882,¹¹ he was taken on by the Norris brothers at the ‘spic and span’ Albion Cabinet Works on the Upper Bristol Road.¹² About the same time, he undertook an intensive programme of self education.¹³ Thomas Carlyle was a seminal influence. From Carlyle’s gospel of work, Richter reinforced his mother’s teaching. He read and imbibed literature, philosophy, history and politics. And with his new awakening, he acquired a determination to capture experiences. On bits of paper, in notebooks, exercise books, old envelopes, anything to hand, he charted his intellectual and emotional progress. Much as he had loved the Sussex countryside, his waking consciousness was moved at a profound level by the pale tiered city in its amphitheatre of hills. He was never to leave his second home.

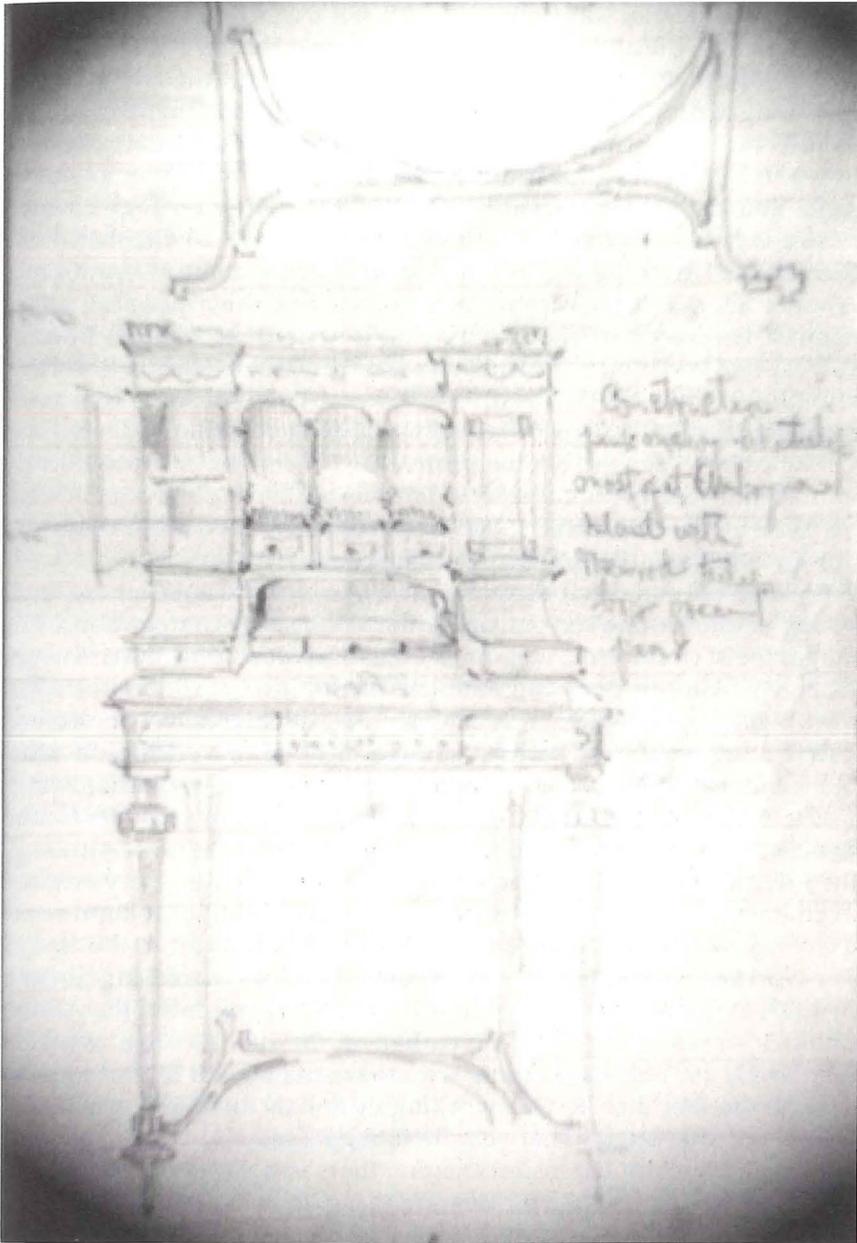
Alongside the larger cabinet-making firms, small family businesses continued to flourish, indeed specialist work was often sub-contracted to them. Simeon Norris had started in 1870 and Charles A Porter, designer and manager, was brought in some ten years later (at the same time as Richter joined the firm), when Frank and Albert, Simeon’s sons, had taken the helm. Porter’s employment was a prestigious move. So often had he won the national competition for furniture design run by the Benn Brothers publishing firm in conjunction with their publication, *The Cabinet Maker*, that he was asked to stand down to give other competitors a chance. It was observed that, ‘One of the secrets of success was ... Porter’s aptitude in giving practical guidance to the men ... Frequently in the carving

department, Mr Porter could be seen taking over the job in hand and putting it into the form he required ... Their first class cabinet work, both in design and workmanship, soon found its way to all the leading shops throughout the country.¹⁴ By mid nineteenth century the factory system of manufacture was being developed and power-driven machines were being installed. The Albion Cabinet Works was, according to Keevil, 'considerably in advance of other firms in the city, with perhaps the exception of Wadmans'.¹⁵ It was nevertheless, essentially a hand carving enterprise.

The 1860s had seen a Queen Anne revival, and latterly, a return to favour of eighteenth-century styles, especially Chippendale. After 1870, the British public wanted heavier furniture, mahogany, rosewood, ebonised cabinets, sideboards and overmantels, carved and inlaid, particularly in ivory. No single style was produced in the Albion workshops, but a variety of fashionably popular derivatives ranging from modern Adam to Italian Gothic. Most of it was 'shaped' or curved, as was the main body of the late Victorian trade, love of richness and sinuous outline being chief selling points.

Though Richter was apprenticed to Porter in business management, it was soon evident that in a general way the Norrises had an outstandingly able recruit. While busy installing the first costing system, Richter was also benefiting from Porter's expertise in design. From 1883, his notebooks are peppered with sketches of furniture, architecture, and anything else he fancied as raw material from which to extrapolate¹⁶ (fig.2). His touch was always light, nineteenth-century 'Chippendale' rather than the 'Early English' or 'Modern English Gothic' promoted by Charles Eastlake and developed by William Morris's firm. Nor was he influenced by the spindly Japanese furniture that aesthetes extolled.

On Wednesday 10 September 1884, as a contemporary jotting informs us,¹⁷ Richter performed an errand for Mr Porter, carrying volume 2 of the *Universal Instructor* to the bookbinder, Cedric Chivers, to readjust the binding so as to include eighteen errant pages. His shopping list was for 'oil colours, Painting, 3 Tools, and Screws', half aesthetic (oil colours, painting), and half practical (tools and screws) symbolizing the balance of his activities. On 13 December, 1884 he was paid 1s 5d for a drawing of a cabinet, and the following January he received 16s 9d for a drawing of a casquet. On 11 September 1885, he was paid 7s for a drawing of a satinwood cabinet. A few days later he received the same amount for a drawing of a mahogany cabinet.¹⁸ The earliest piece of his furniture of which we have a record is a cabinet of 1900,¹⁹ which means there are only his notebooks to fill in the sixteen intervening years.



2. Design for a cabinet from C A Richter's notebook of 1883. (*Family archive*)

Another of Porter's apprentices at Norris's was Frank Keevil, father of H T Keevil, the author of *The Cabinet Making Trade of Bath 1740-1964*. Keevil was seven years older than Richter and had the advantage of receiving from his father a training in ecclesiastical furnishing, architecture and furniture trades. After his term with Norris, he went into partnership with his brother in Bristol. Then, in 1891 or 1892, the same time as Richter started his first venture, Keevil set up his own business on the Lower Bristol Road. On Monday, 20 October 1890, Richter and Keevil discussed Emerson and Carlyle at the Twerton Club. A week later, and on various other occasions, they met and talked again.²⁰ It seemed at first likely that a serious occasional literary correspondence with 'Frank' was addressed to Richter's fellow apprentice, but as Keevil is always noted by his surname it is more probable that his correspondent was Frank Norris, under whose guidance he was rapidly being promoted. The letters were profoundly important to Richter who records dates on which he received and sent his somewhat earnest missives. Unfortunately, they add nothing to our knowledge of the writers' common trade.

Towards the end of the 1880s, rather to the Norris's amusement, their young employee entered one of *The Cabinet Maker's* competitions. The magazine's circulation was over 50,000 a year²¹ and entries were received from all over the country. Both Norris brothers sent off drawings and one of them was commended – Richter however received a first prize. In 1891, Charles's younger brother, the seventeen-year-old Herbert Richter, then also employed at Albion under Charles Porter, was to win another first; £10 for a drawing of a Dining Room in Italian Renaissance style and a prominent double-page spread.²² 'Although the prizes have not been effective in producing anything very original in character' the judge commented, 'they have brought to light some drawings which we venture to think will be of interest to the trade'. The Norrises were to feel for 'these damn Richters', increasing respect. In 1887, at the age of twenty, Charles Richter represented the Albion Cabinet Works at the Paris Exposition where his drawings were on display. By 1891 he was helping with the management of the business despite the fact that he was working only half time. The remainder was devoted to study. That year he took, passed and won a prize for London University Extension examinations in a variety of subjects.

During the first half of the 1880s, Trade Union policy had been pacific. The big unions had won most of what they set out to win and there were a few miners' representatives in Parliament. The sense of accomplishment

was false, as Tom Mann and John Burns recognized when they set about organizing the sweated trades where unionism was weak. Pitched battles occurred in the Metropolis and unrest spread in the cities. By 1891 there was still plenty of scope for improvement. Charles Booth's analysis of London's poor showed that some thirty per cent of Londoners habitually fell below the poverty line.

A family firm such as the Norris's was in a difficult position since the management showed a certain avuncular concern for its workers. Notwithstanding, men with families to house and feed worked long hours in unskilled, poorly paid jobs, and practices long accepted were resistant to change. When a spindle moulding machine was installed, the cabinet makers were 'greatly alarmed' that it would usurp their duties, although in practice, as Keevil attests,²³ the machine created rather than eliminated work. What the men's reaction actually signified was chronic insecurity. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, timber was being shaped in steam presses and new glues were used which eradicated traditional joinery. Veneer-cutting machines were on the market, of which the rotary-slicer in particular encouraged a minor revolution. New machines minimised waste and thin veneers could form three-layer plywood construction. To the precariously balanced manual workforce, change was a threat.

Warning had come in mid-1891 that all was not well at the Albion Cabinet Works. On 25 July and for the next two days, Richter's diary records, 'Cabinet-makers agitations, locked out, work prevented'. Through his reading of Robert Owen and Carlyle in particular, Richter had become a socialist. On Tuesday 1 December, when 'the cabinet-makers struck work at twelve o'clock', he was reading, appropriately, about the Co-operative Movement. On the Wednesday, the carvers likewise struck work. Frank Norris refused to see a deputation and before the week's end, in an unsympathetic gesture, removed all tools from the works. On Saturday, reading Carlyle's *Past & Present*, Richter was moved to expostulate, 'Ah me! Ah me!'.²⁴ His sympathies were with the workers, and once again, it was Carlyle who prompted his conscience – 'Hold fast to the duty that lies nearest'. A quandary was brought to a head: attending university had been an alluring possibility but Richter now made a fateful decision. He must do what he could to help the men.

Twelve of Charles Richter's notebooks cover the 1890s, with a daily record of the hours worked, the cash made, books read, engagements undertaken (birthdays, concerts, lectures), and of his problems and

sensibilities. Other documents which show his concerns at this time include the Oxford Extension Lecture Syllabus for 1891, endless scribbled memos for cabinet making, instructions from clients, courses that Charles and his younger brother taught at Bath Art and Technical School (one of them on Period design), the minute book for BCM's first year and the Minutes of the Education Committee of the Works. In one maroon paper-covered, lined and yellowing exercise book, first penned at the *Garrick Head Hotel* on the penultimate day of 1891, lay the embryo of the later international company, launched as The Bath & West of England Co-operative Cabinet Makers Ltd under the motto 'Labour is Worship'. By 16 January 1892, Richter had been elected General Manager at a salary of £3.5.0. per week. The shareholders of the Society were represented by five committee members of whom Richter had known the Bath-born Cedric Chivers at least since he joined Norris's.²⁵ The others were T B Silcock, Edwin Hill, John Henshaw and Basil Dyer. Bath had a 'model parliament' and all were on the council. Each put in £50 and Richter contributed £100. His mother, father, sister and brother Fred joined in, and friends were persuaded to buy shares which were also advertised in the local press. The workers were represented by Messrs Oliver Hewlett, Hawkins, Milton and Coaffee, each of whom contributed £10 before work began in rented accommodation opposite Twerton Railway Station.

The other members of the Committee played no active part in the firm, but Richter was activator, promoter, bookkeeper, buyer and salesman. He it was who drew up a prospectus and solicited orders. He had been at Norris's for some years, and to his gratification he was now successful wherever he went. Eight months into the life of the firm, he was able to reveal: 'Your committee has great pleasure in reporting the continued growth of the Society and the extension of its business month by month, notwithstanding that the general state of the cabinet trade has been one of almost unprecedented depression'. There was never a dearth of orders, and good wages were being paid to the three carvers, eleven cabinet makers, three polishers, one machinist, five lads, and occasional upholsterers, chair-makers, marquetry-cutters.²⁶ The only reservation at this stage was the firm's unwieldy title. The Committee voted to dispense with the term 'Co-operative'. Whether this was Richter's wish is not known, but customers were not included in the profit-sharing so the firm was under no obligation to use the word, and the 'high principle' by which the Society [that is, Richter] stood, was reckoned by some to run the risk of alienating buyers. At all events, the name was contracted to 'The Bath Cabinet Makers Ltd'.

By September 1892, the future of the firm looked auspicious, and Richter was keen to expand:

Your committee wish to impress upon the shareholders the necessity of the society adopting and acquiring all the advantages, methods, appliances & machines which other manufacturers possess so that the Society may increase its trade & employ a much greater number of its members. Reducing laborious manual toil will enable us to produce finer & higher class work at moderate but remunerative prices. As the wet season advances, the want of machinery will be still more seriously felt.²⁷

It is known from private accounts that the Manager was frustrated by what he felt was the other shareholders' lack of vision: 'They knew they were on to something good and they wanted to keep it small'.²⁸ Richter's instinct proved correct. After eighteen months, profits at BCM began to decline. He was working day and night – at a machine, supervising packing and labelling, even helping to load crates onto the vans – but he could not entice the men to follow suit. It was a discouraging time. Richter doubted his influence and half of him longed to abandon the whole business and return to his books. In reality, there had never been sufficient capital, a situation aggravated by failure to expand when it was appropriate.

There is only Harold Keevil's version of events to attest the fact that Richter walked out of BCM, probably in late 1893 or early 1894. For a short period, the three Richter brothers set up on their own in Parsonage Lane with an office at Nassau House, Orange Grove; Fred, the eldest, who now called himself a cabinet maker rather than a joiner, Charles, and Herbert, whose late-developing talents had taken him to South Kensington's newly founded Technological Institute and to the Bath School of Art.

A music cabinet displayed in Bath's Holburne Museum in the autumn of 1985 probably dates from this period.²⁹ The design is said to have been done by Herbert, the joinery and veneering by Frederick, and the carving by Charles, but it is likely that the division of labour was not entirely clear cut. French Rococo in design, and exquisite in craftsmanship, the small bow-fronted mahogany and satinwood piece was conjured expressly to display the range of the brothers' skills (fig.3). Cabriole legs make the corner posts to a mahogany cupboard with a solid single door, protected from warping by a 4 inches wide, deeply carved, inset ebony cross. The corners are decorated with parquetry in various woods including tulip. Above the cupboard, there is a single drawer bearing a rectangular, similarly



3. Music cabinet of 1892 by Frederick, Charles and Herbert Richter. (*Family archive*)

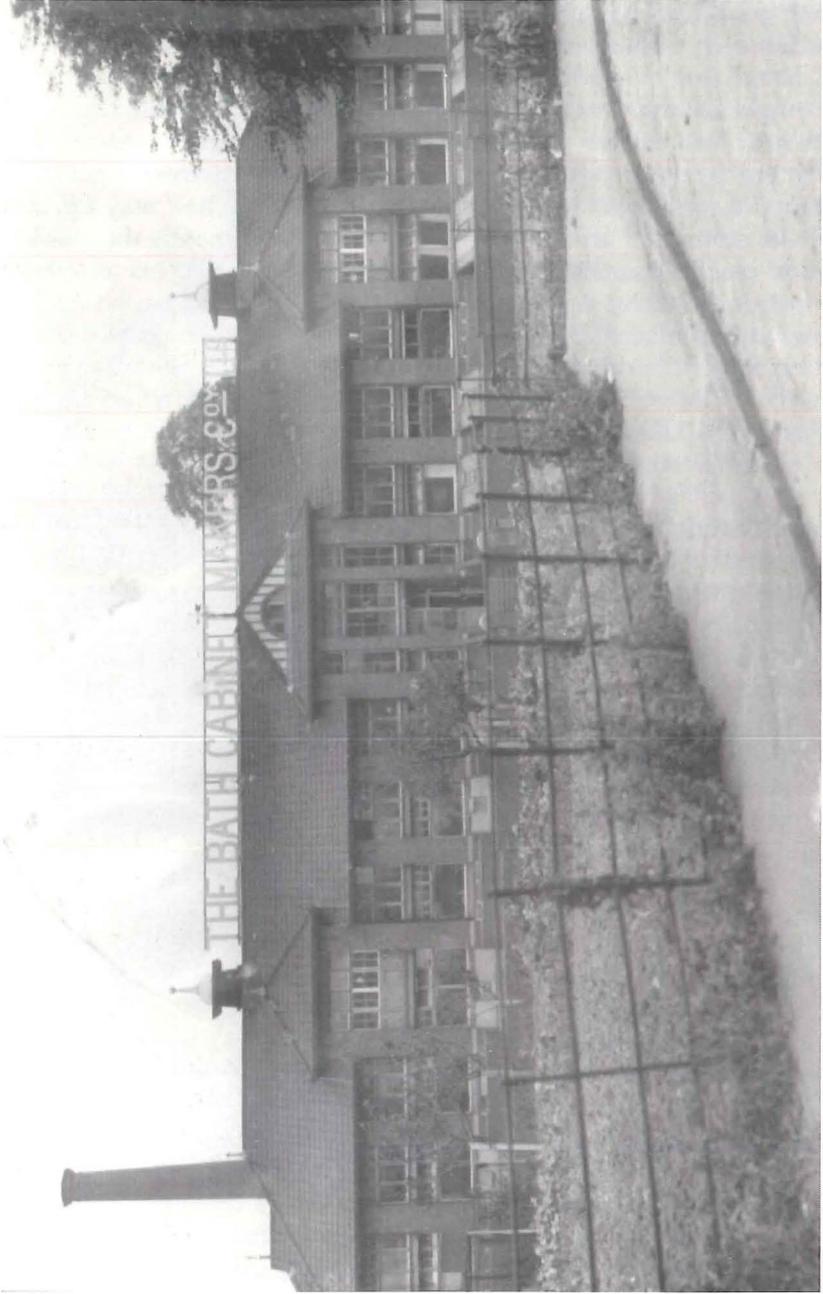
carved, central ebony plaque. The whole is surmounted by a domed vitrine of four glass panes set into a satinwood cage. The display compartment is hinged at the back, and lifted by a single carved handle at the front. It supports a plain rectangular platform on which a vase might stand. The legs, the sides of the cupboard and the ribs of the vitrine are heavily carved with fern-like and acanthus leaf decoration.

Despite the skills displayed in this individual piece, the real potential still lay with Bath Cabinet Makers. For shareholders, especially the Richter family, its failure meant more than disappointment, it involved serious financial loss. To protect his honour and save those who had helped him, Charles felt that he should try to make a fresh start, and when the Society called him back³⁰ he re-launched it as a limited liability company, taking over the assets of the co-operative society at the end of 1894. This time, he was Managing Director, and his younger brother, Herbert, head of the Design Department. All their combined energies went into the business. It succeeded and the success was long-lasting, though the company had its struggles

through, for example, the copying and pirating of designs. Richter expected a lot, both from himself and of others, and his methods were not always orthodox. On one occasion, when the men had been kept working late at night to get an order dispatched, the vanmen, who were waiting to load up the goods, refused to stay any longer. After other methods of persuasion had failed, Richter gave some pretext to get them into the lift, quickly closed the doors, pulled the lift half way up, and left them stranded until the goods were ready. Fortunately they took it in good part. Richter 'struck a hard bargain' as one of his long-time employees remarked. At the same time, he engendered a good deal of loyalty amongst his men. It is said that when Tom Mann, the Trades Union leader, addressed his members at Bath, one of BCM's workers named Hewlett hurled a jug of water at him for casting aspersions on 'the Management'. Like its predecessor the new firm paid good wages. Every employee, on becoming a shareholder of the Society, was eligible for a share of profits, and as before, an Education Committee was set up to broaden the quality of the workers' lives. The *Minute Book* tells of weekly lectures on subjects like 'Co-operative Vistas' (C A Richter), 'The Land Question' (Mr Gilbert), and 'The Miners of '43' (Mr Cannings), and a library for public reading including Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*. Before the year was out the Committee was renting additional rooms, one for draughts and chess, another for the use of a cricket club.³¹

In 1895 Richter collaborated with local architects Messrs Silcock & Reay on the design of a factory in Bellotts Road, a grand stylish affair, flying its company name in giant letters from a low-hipped roof (fig.4). From a machine shop that was one of the largest and best equipped in the West of England, flowed luxury furniture, often elaborately carved. In 1899, BCM undertook the complete interior decoration, woodwork, fittings and furniture of Hotel Cecil in the Strand (subsequently demolished for a Shell-Mex building). A hectic period followed as one after the other, stores and hotels clamoured for a new look to embody the spirit of the turning century. Many were large-scale commissions and all had to be done at once. While Charles organized production, Herbert designed, and co-ordinated operations. His drawings were being reproduced in *The Building News*, *The British Architect*, *Academy Architecture* and other journals.³²

In 1900 the firm's reputation was consolidated with five medals at the Paris World Exhibition, a gold, two silver and two bronze. From this time forth their headed paper proudly displayed the fact. BCM's work, the *Art Journal* considered, had 'the distinction of being on novel lines, without



4. Bath Cabinet Makers Factory in Bellotts Road, Twerton. (*Family archive*)

overstepping the bounds of good taste in any instance', and the company's display 'did more than its share towards saving the situation in the British section.'³³ The gold medal went to a Mr Coy, the bronze to George M Elwood and A J Crocker, the silver to each of the Richter brothers. A writing desk from this exhibition,³⁴ illustrated in the Holburne Museum Catalogue, is a weird, top-heavy looking object with art nouveau decoration. By contrast, CA Richter's award-winning mahogany display cabinet, also shown at the Holburne Museum,³⁵ is light in appearance, (though apparently not weight) with narrow crossbars in glass doors mounted at the top and bottom with Burne Jones-type art nouveau designs in aluminium, an expensive metal at that time. Its chief interest to us is in anticipating the designer's increasingly stylish forms of the new century. After the exhibition the piece was sold at Christie's and taken to the USA.

In more ways than one, 1900 was a memorable year for C A Richter who had married in January the daughter of an Aberdeen hotelier, Frances Mann. For another thirty-four years he ran BCM, through good times and bad, with extraordinary industriousness, daunting energy and great personal mobility. Some of these qualities are revealed in extracts from his papers.³⁶

Selected Extracts from Letters and Memoranda, C A Richter's Notebook, June-July 1911

Mr Pidgeon: call a board meeting for Monday July 31. Notices to be sent the middle next week ... Get cigars from Caters ...

Mr S Trier: Are you following up Mr O's enquiry for hotel furnishing & for chairs for the Imperial Hotel, Regent St. or can I do anything in the matter. I asked you if we had heard anything about the Buffet we made for him ... Ask Mr Lansdown if already written to M Trier [Dr M Trier].³⁷

Mr Joseph Trier in Darmstadt:

Mr H returned to Zurich on Saturday. His entire order will probably total £1400 but he is going to write me definite instructions after conferring with M. Keller. I will send you particulars. The order includes a considerable amount of plaster decoration upon which there is only a narrow [profit] margin, but no doubt we can arrange this to our mutual satisfaction. I also have important enquiries from him for which I am preparing special drawings.

M. L Huve,
Marbier
62 Rue St Sabin, Paris.

We will be much obliged if you will send us catalogues of reproductions of 18th century English Marble mantelpieces. We do a very large mantelpiece trade & could doubtless make good use of your productions.

Mr Bergnor:

We have discussed the proposed arrangements for your agency at a board meeting today and the same were approved ... I will write you fully in the course of a day or two. I cannot do so now as I am called from town on important business ... Meanwhile, if you can send the plans of the hotel at Venier [or, possibly, Venice] I shall be pleased to prepare designs for the furnishing.

Herr Prienin, Berlin.

There is a balance of 9/- owing to us on a former account. We shall be pleased if you will remit this amount & so save further correspondence.

Remind Mr Richter [Bert] to send set of drawings & photos to M Joseph Trier.

Mr Pidgeon: Please do your best to obtain a more competent typist. If you cannot get a man, engage a girl. We could perhaps do with two.

Dear Mr Robertson

I was in M last week & was surprised to see displayed in the window at Goodalls, a bedroom suite of my design (with very slight modifications) made & supplied by you. I cannot think that you would have deliberately copied my design, & I am sure you will oblige me by letting me know in confidence how this design came into your possession. We have suffered so much of late from the copy of our designs that I am determined in the interests of our customers no less than in that of my firm, to take all possible steps to prevent it ... We are registering all our more recent running designs but are conscious that this affords but slight protection as the alteration of a few details evades the law ...

Mr Wentworth: A German customer living in London is to call at the L.S.R. [London Show Room at 18, Berners Street] to buy lacquered cabinet. Quote plus 20%.

BCM furniture was on constant display in London stores like Maples and Harrods, and trade became ever more far flung, with sales in North America and on the Continent. To complement the external network, every department within the firm was intricately dovetailed by the links and responsibilities of men like Mr Coaffee, Timbershop and Machinshop Foreman, under whose supervision wood was selected, sorted, pointed, planed, grooved, mortised, tenoned, moulded, veneered, sandpapered and generally prepared for the cabinet fitters; and Mr Williams, Foreman of the Cabinetmakers, who saw the mantels glued and screwed together. The business of Mr Marsh, the General Foreman, was to colour, polish, and dispatch, whilst Mr May, a spindle moulder in the company's employment, entered on a time sheet every day the work on which he had been engaged.³⁸

The firm had grown, but it was unwieldy and Richter was increasingly away from home. In the latter part of 1912 he knew, quite suddenly, that he would have to instigate a series of reforms. The least pleasant of his duties was to dismiss a number of loyal workers, some of whom had been with him since the inauguration of BCM.

September 1912

I did not finish till after 11.p.m. I had made some important decisions, so necessary, though regretfully performed. – I cannot describe the sadness which invaded me & which I could not shake off at having to beat a retreat from the proposed course & parting with those I so much valued and respected. Men who had served me to the best of their ability. So willingly. – How heavy my heart none can tell.³⁹

Richter was an old-fashioned master – a dwindling species. Unlike the new management, who knew all about a balance-sheet but little about how the product was made, he understood every process from start to finish and kept the organization tightly under his control. For him, there was no other way, yet the price he paid was a strain upon his energies. With keen interest, he had watched the progress of his younger brother. Though he still provided drawings for the firm, the reputedly cautious Herbert had left it in 1909 to try his luck as a painter. Four years later he was holding his first one-man exhibition. With a view to following suit, Charles travelled to London to attend classes at the London School of Art and at Heatherleys. Unfortunately, his plans for early retirement were interrupted by the First World War.

A Prussian background and a German name were not the most comfortable attributes for a prominent businessman. To guarantee his own and his family's survival, Richter sought safety in Government commissions. The factories were converted to manufacture aircraft parts and wooden boxes for munitions, and afterwards restored to panelling, joinery and high-class furniture. Some of the unskilled labour taken on during the war was retained on contract work, making gramophone and wireless cabinets. A further concern, the Bath Guild of Handicraft and Design Ltd,⁴⁰ was launched under the able administration of Herbert's wife, Gertrude Barber, and Charles's sister, Florence Schottler,⁴¹ to make tapestries, cushions, and the fabrics required for interior decoration in the large restaurant, hotel and shipfitting contracts then being taken on.

Even before the war, BCM had been shipping furniture to America, India and Germany. When it was over, Richter travelled to Italy to negotiate an order from the Italian Government for luxury liners. The panelling and decorations were all constructed in Bath, then transported to Trieste, where they were installed by a body of workmen sent over from BCM. Orders were subsequently obtained for work on other liners, including the giant Cunarders, the *Queen Mary* and the *Queen Elizabeth*. Interiors were also provided for London's County Hall and the new Bristol University buildings.

Once again, Richter was able to spare time and thought to his work as a designer. He could probably be called eclectic, since he designed inspired period furniture. Indeed, he was on one occasion amused to discover that a cabinet he had made for a Louis XVI setting so accurately caught the spirit of the age that it was acquired as authentic by a South Kensington Museum. But his first interest was increasingly in moving from Victorian extravagance, through Art Nouveau and Art Deco, to the graceful lines and good proportions of modern design (fig.5). No mere draughtsman, Charles chose his material at the time of conception – besides weather oak, he had a penchant for exotic woods like French walnut, figured mahogany, paroba and laurel. At the other end of the range, he draughted a good deal of simple, moderately priced furniture, some of which he mass-produced in tubular steel. He also designed cut glass and china ware, which was specially made for him by Wedgwood. Further recognition was obtained at the Wembley Exhibition of 1924 and the Paris Exhibition of 1925, whilst year after year, he aired his views in the trade journals, at lectures for the Royal Society of Arts, through organizing exhibitions of industrial art, and at meetings of the Furnishing Trades Federation of which he became President. An undated photograph shows him wearing the decorative chain and medal of his office.



5. Sideboard designed by C A Richter, probably in the 1930s. (Family archive)

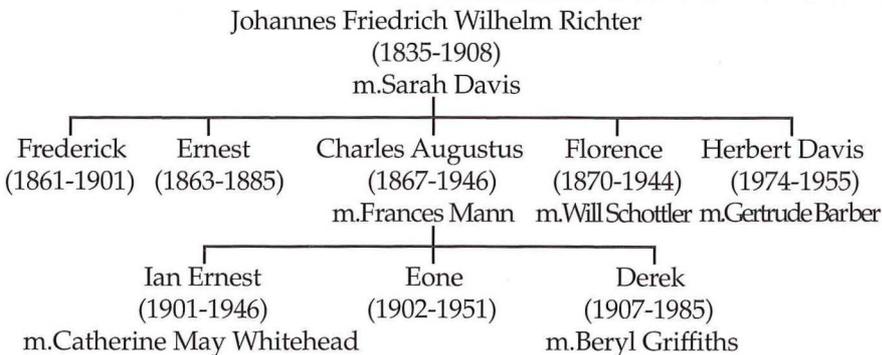
All was not well, however, as 1922 brought the boom to an end, with the years that presaged the big industrial slump. With large-scale unemployment, business everywhere came to a standstill, and the last thing anyone wanted was luxury furniture. Profits were seen gradually to be drying up, leading to profound dissatisfaction and unrest among company shareholders, but under Richter's leadership the company survived, continuing in family ownership after his retirement in 1934.

Perhaps it was ironical that an erstwhile pacifist should have aided the war effort, and a socialist made a private fortune. About 1920 Richter had bought a distinctive Georgian house, once the home of the Duke of Cleveland – Bathwick Hill House, at the top of Bathwick Hill, where he and the family lived for many years surrounded by furniture and

furnishings of his own design. Despite his personal achievements he continued to demonstrate his egalitarian principles with dramatisations at BCM. He was acquainted with George Bernard Shaw who travelled down to Bath when they put on *Caesar and Cleopatra* – a performance, incidentally, for which Richter was responsible for the stage settings.

Charles Richter was intensely alive until he died, on 28 May 1946. Typically, his twelve-year retirement was spent in painting, gardening and study. He never achieved Herbert's success as a painter, perhaps due in part to the younger brother's ease among his clients. Herbert was close to the actress, Maud Allan, and had a very wide circle of friends. From Nietzsche Charles learnt that 'Nothing is true; everything is possible.' In order to read his favourite philosopher in the original, Richter taught himself German, which, strangely, he had not learnt as a child. He is buried in Lansdown Cemetery, together with his wife, father, mother, and two cabinet-making brothers. Charles and Frances's gravestone lies a few paces west of the large cedar tree. It is a simple, horizontal, blue fossil limestone with typical Art Nouveau lettering in lead around the perimeter. The gravestone of the other four Richters lies in the old, overgrown part of the cemetery, between the road and Beckford's Tower.

Appendix: The Richter Family



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Philippa Bishop and Geoffrey Beard for reading the article, Desmond Brown for his guidance in Lansdown Cemetery and my cousin, Nicholas Richter, for helping to describe the music cabinet stolen from my father.

Notes

- 1 *Bath Chronicle*, 10 December 1891, p.8.
- 2 *Bath Critic*, Vol.3, 'A Story of Craftsmanship', p.254.
- 3 Numbers fluctuated. According to *Post Office Directories*, there were 36 in 1892, the firm's first active year. Twelve years before, there were 48, and six years later there were 60.
- 4 See *Furniture Made in Bath* (Holburne Museum Exhibition Catalogue, 1985).
- 5 J C Rogers, *Modern English Furniture* (Country Life Publications, 1930). A classic in its time.
- 6 Information about Charles Richter and Bath Cabinet Makers comes largely from private and business papers in the possession of the author, including notes taken down by her father Derek Richter from the family, chiefly his father, C A Richter.
- 7 H Granville Fell, *The Art of H. Davis Richter* (Benfleet, 1935).
- 8 Mrs Strangways was recorded in the 1871 census as 'widow', and later as unmarried.
- 9 *The Times*, 24 August 1955.
- 10 *Post Office Directories* show J F W Richter in Bath by 1878-9. It seems probable that his wife and children did not follow him for a year or so.
- 11 Harold T Keevil's *The Cabinet Making Trade of Bath 1740-1964* (Bath, 1964) says 1887. This account of furniture-making in Bath, though valuable for the inside material about the industry, contains many inaccuracies about BCM. Whether these permeate the whole text is uncertain, but the possibility is alarming since much research has relied upon this text. It is likely that a certain competitiveness existed between the families.
- 12 *Bath Chronicle*, 10 January 1889, p.5.
- 13 Every book Richter bought is listed in Cash Accounts of this period, and the titles of what he read daily.
- 14 Keevil, p.15.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Notebook, 1880s-1.
- 17 Notebook, 1880s-1.
- 18 Notebook, 1880s-6.
- 19 *Furniture Made in Bath*, Exhibit 12.
- 20 Notebook, 1890s-7, pp.49, 53, 59.
- 21 *Cabinet Maker*, July 1891 and others.
- 22 *Cabinet Maker*, July 1891.
- 23 Keevil, p.14.
- 24 Notebook, 1890s-5, pp.35, 69, 71.
- 25 Minute Book of Bath & West of England Co-operative Cabinet Makers Ltd., pp. 1.4. Eleven years younger than C A Richter, Chivers had started a book-binding business, first in Union St and then in 1886 at 39 Gay St in 1886. In 1890 he joined the city council as a Liberal member for Kingsmead ward and served on it except for a short break until 1914. In 1922 and 1924 he was to be elected Mayor.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.42.

- 28 See note 5.
- 29 *Furniture Made in Bath*. Exhibit 11 is dated c.1892, which is probably a couple of years too early. The cabinet is described as 'Mahogany, with domed glass top and cabriole legs. height overall 50 in/127 cm; width 22 in/55.9 cm. [Some time after 1946, when my grandfather died, this extraordinary little piece (delicate but somewhat 'over the top') came into my life. In my memory, the vitrine always contained, on a base of pale green velvet, the ivory chess set that my grandfather and then my father played. It remained in the family until 1995 when it was stolen from my father's home. The sadness is that whoever now possesses this unique piece of furniture has no idea of the affection with which it was conceived and wrought by three young brothers. In a way it carries its own legend; Bert's refined aesthetic, Fred's precision-conscious execution, and Charles's imaginative spark. S.F.] Keevil, p.17.
- 30 Minute Book of Education Committee, pp.9,11.
- 31 Fell, pp.13-14.
- 32 Fell, p.12, from a special edition of the *Art Journal* published for the Paris World Exhibition, 1900.
- 33 *Furniture Made in Bath*, Exhibit 13, and described on p.22.
- 34 *Ibid.*, Exhibit 12, and illustration in Christie's Catalogue, *British Decorative Arts from 1880 to the Present Day*, January 1986, where it is described as a 'mahogany display cabinet ... with overhanging dentilled cornice and moulded frieze above two hexagonal columns inlaid with brass stringing, the faceted bowed cabinet with two glazed cupboard doors mounted with pierced metal bands 198.2cm. high, 163.7cm. wide, 57.5cm. deep'. It was sold for £2,500.
- 35 Notebook, 1911-2.
- 36 Four of the Trier family worked for or helped BCM in various capacities, a father in Darmstadt and his three sons. Owing to Richter's Prussian origins, he made a point of employing immigrants who might otherwise have found it difficult to obtain work.
- 37 Notebook, 1912-2.
- 38 Notebook, 1912-1.
- 39 At first the Bath Guild of Handicraft and Design was established on the Lower Bristol Road. In the late 1920s, its upholstery department was based at The Pavilion on North Parade and the firm also acquired the premises of The Bath Artcraft Company at 6-7 Avon Buildings; the Bellotts Road premises is described in the 1929 *Post Office Directory* as a wholesale and timber yard. (*Furniture Made in Bath*, p.25)
- 40 Even Richter's father-in-law, Charles Mann, was brought into the company, not, as Keevil suggests (p22), as a 'sleeping partner' in Baker and Mann. Mann went bankrupt in 1901, shortly before Richter married his daughter, so providing a job for him was a kindness, even if Mann did not receive very much. In March 1910, when Mann started work, Richter wrote 'I intended paying you 25/- per week since you started at Bakers ... I fervently hope to give more time to help you and send you out travelling.'