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# Vincent and Son Ltd, cabinet makers of Brick Lane, London

A short record of the firm's history, work and equipment

M T Tucker

**This article is a new version of one that first appeared in 1977 as a GLIAS report (ISBN 0 905042 05 0). It was one of several reports produced around that time, by members of the GLIAS Recording Group. Each was then available for 50p or less, plus 8p to 15p p&p. These reports have been unavailable for some time and are probably unknown to many current members.**

**Vincent's premises were demolished shortly after publication of the original report, but they represented the furniture industry that had previously thrived in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch and an industrial environment that had characterised parts of the East End of**

**London up to the period when the Society was founded in the late 1960s.**

**This article also illustrated the Recording Group's aims to both record and analyse the then fast-vanishing industrial character of inner London. We therefore decided to republish the original Vincents' article in its entirety.**

**It was then discovered with some dismay that neither the photographic prints used in preparing the article nor the original negatives had survived, except for a sample of spare prints not entirely matching the originals. The line drawings did survive and we were able to scan the body of the report from an original copy and use optical character recognition for the text. But the half-tone photos were then of poor quality.**

**Therefore, we are publishing the report as scanned, with its pages re-formatted for this journal but keeping the tenses as written in 1977, and we have added a substitute selection of good-quality photos made from the spare prints.**

Number 301 Brick Lane<sup>1</sup> is one of a terrace of ten similar premises of circa 1884 at the north end of Brick Lane, in a part of Bethnal Green, bordering upon Shoreditch, which was until recently occupied by furniture makers and upholsterers almost to the exclusion of other trades.

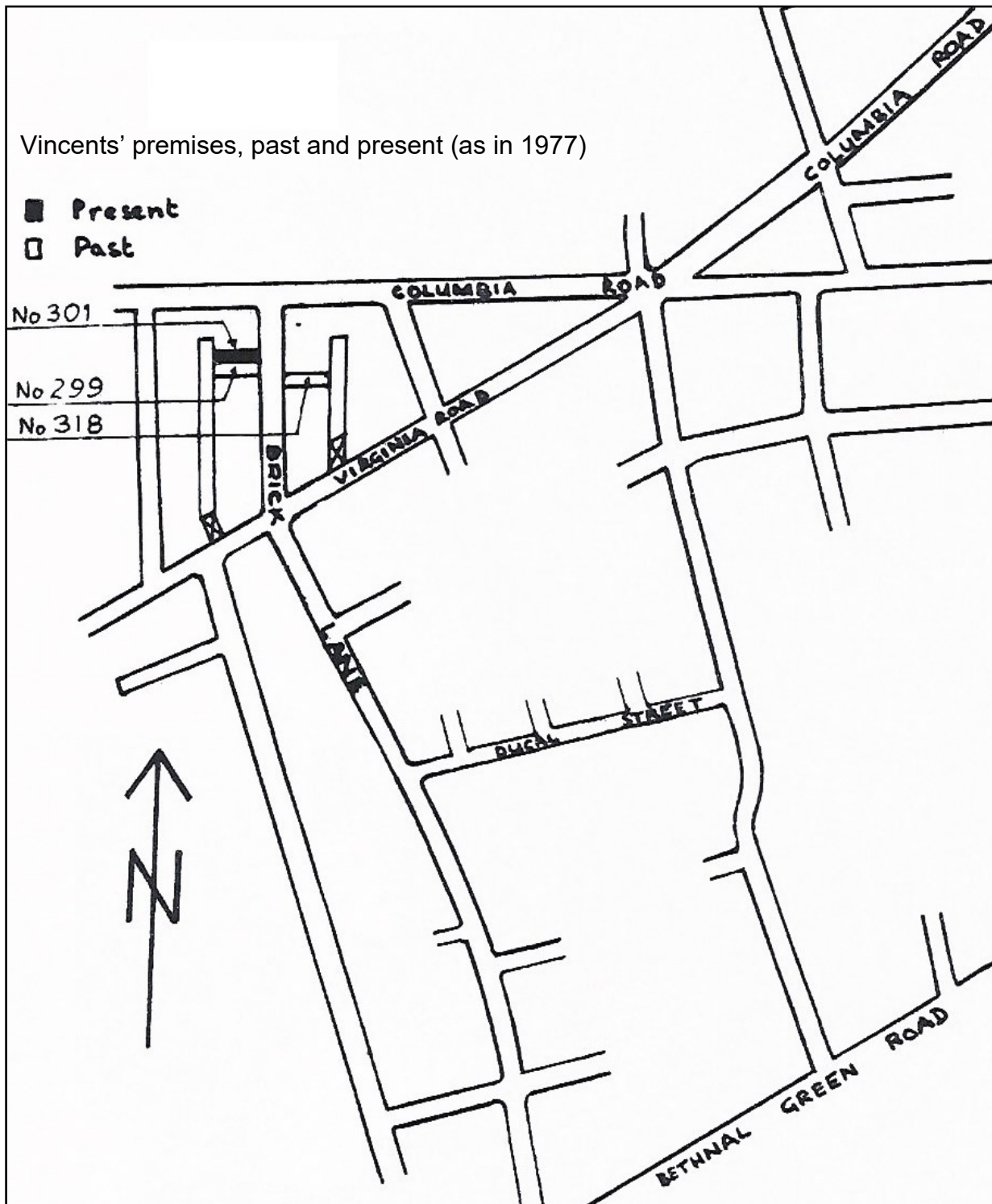
By 1975, most premises in the vicinity had closed down in preparation for a comprehensive redevelopment by the Greater London Council. Vincent and Son, one of the few remaining furniture makers, was selected for study by the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society.

The London market has always been of sufficient size to support a flourishing furniture trade. Having been established earlier in Shoreditch, the industry expanded rapidly during the later nineteenth century in the adjacent areas of Bethnal Green and Whitechapel, taking advantage of cheap immigrant labour and relatively low land values. Manufacturing units were small, with considerable division of labour between different firms.<sup>2</sup>

Early in the twentieth century, furniture factories began to be established on green-field sites in the Lea Valley, around Tottenham and Edmonton for instance. These had an economic advantage through the use of mass production, so that whereas the East End was more noted for the cheaper sorts of furniture, it was a more specialist industry that remained there in the mid-twentieth century. War damage, the post-war preoccupation with housing rather than industrial accommodation, and workers' expectations of high wages and clean working conditions have contributed to a further sharp decline in traditional furniture making in Bethnal Green, which nevertheless struggles on in a variety of small workshops.

## History

Kelly's London Post Office Directory indicates that numbers 283-303 Brick Lane were first occupied in 1884.<sup>3</sup> They were one of several blocks in a similar style and part of a general redevelopment of an area previously of

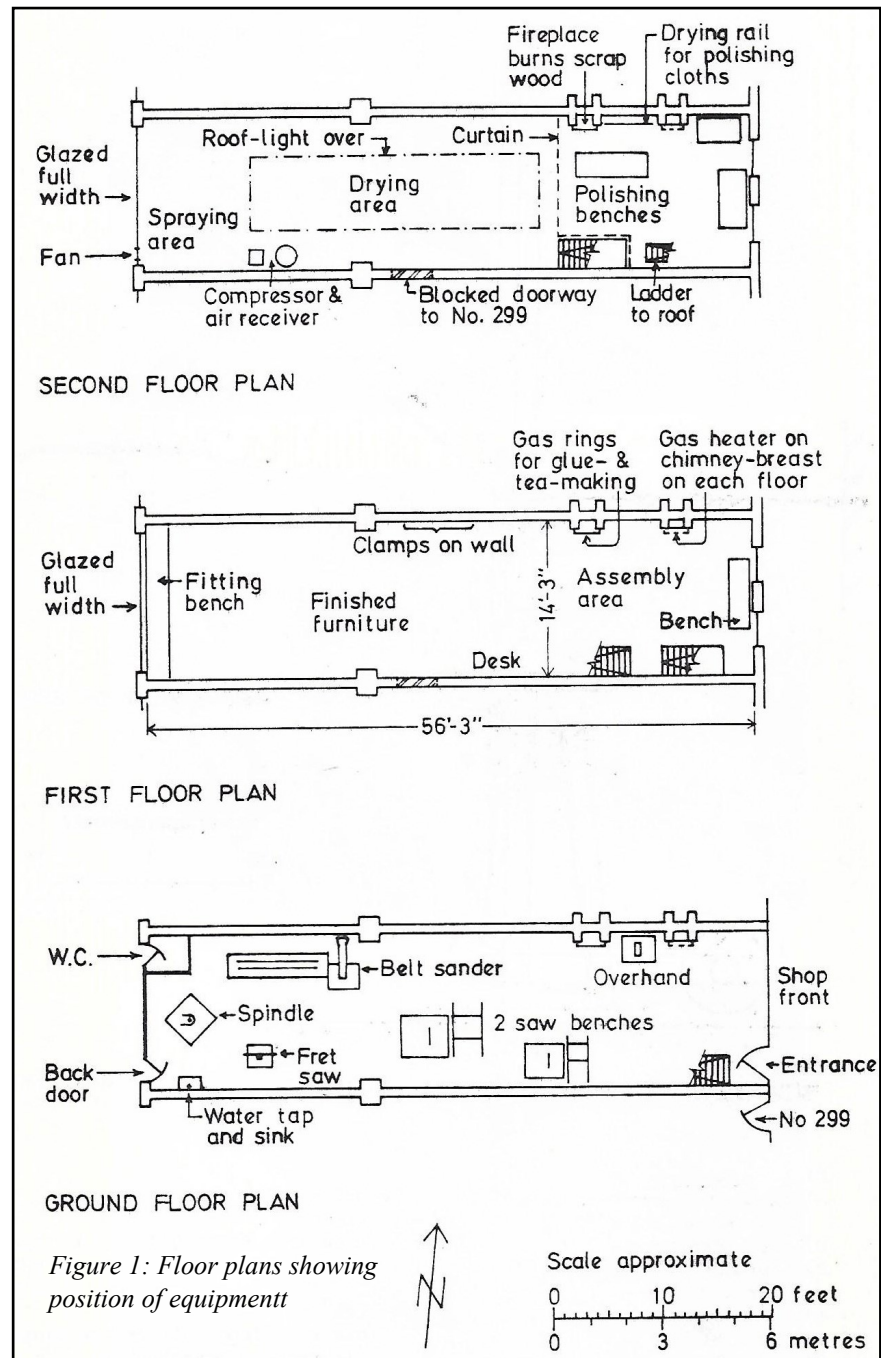


an early nineteenth century domestic character.<sup>4</sup> A high proportion of the new occupiers were in the furniture business, for which these premises appear to have been purposely designed.

Number 301 was occupied temporarily by a hairdresser and after two years was taken by Maurice Klein, an upholsterer. He was followed around 1909 by Barnett Cohen, a cabinet maker (described in some later directories as an artistic furniture manufacturer) and his firm remained until 1957. At No 299, next door, Messrs Vincent & Schwalb established a trade sawmill in 1908 or 1909. This was not a timber yard, but where other furniture makers had pieces cut to size. Earlier, No 299 had been used in succession by J & H Coles, fret cutters, Julius Levy, cabinet maker, and Abraham Berzim, cabinet maker. The firm's present proprietor, Mr Vincent, was born in 1910 in the living accommodation in the front of his father's workshop at No 299. Vincent & Schwalb became Vincent & Son in 1945. In that year, they took over additional premises across the road at No 318, which had been in use ever since 1884 under the name of William Grubb, dining table maker. Making furniture from

start to finish was now the major part of Vincent's work, and sawmilling for other firms became progressively less important.

In 1957, when Mr Cohen at No 301 retired and closed down, Vincent's were able to move from No 318 to No 301 so that their two premises were together. Interconnecting doors were made in the party wall. At this time, the firm became a limited company. About ten years later, however, the tenancy agreement for No 299 expired. Faced with a 100 per cent increase in rent, Mr Vincent decided, reluctantly, to halve his work force and concentrate his activities in No 301, an indication perhaps of the declining state of the trade. Then came the threat of re-development for housing. No 301 was compulsorily acquired from the private landlords by the GLC in January 1975. Rapidly, many furniture businesses closed down, and soon bulldozers moved in on adjacent blocks. However, in May 1977 there is no indication of a start on re-development, and in the meantime, Vincent's and three other firms in the same street are carrying on from month to month, their windows boarded against the vandals that are so readily attracted to such an area.

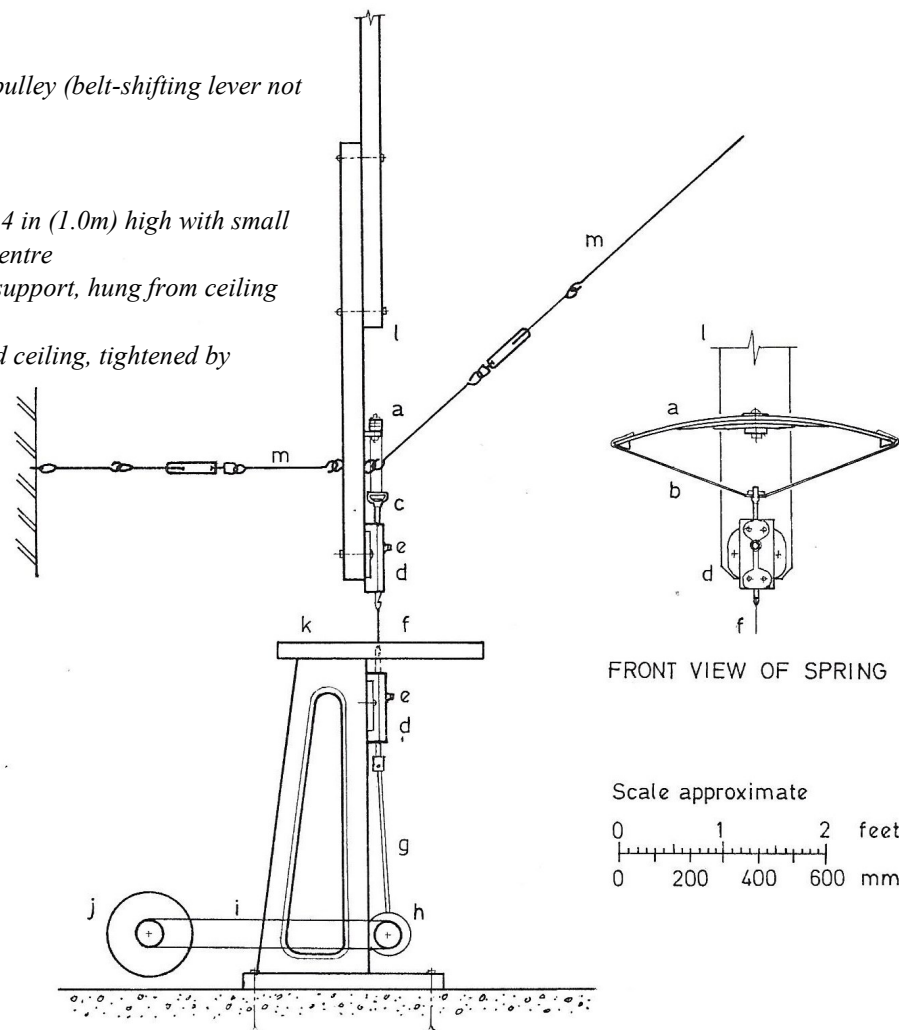


## Economics

By the time of our visit in 1975, the firm was specialising in a single line of reproduction-style chests of drawers, which are sold direct to stores both in the West End and the provinces, and even exported abroad. Production was at the rate of 15 to 20 units per week. Retailers in the West End have always been a major outlet for the trade. Five people were employed, including the proprietor, Mr Vincent, there being no scope for a larger number of workers in the present premises. Mr Vincent said it was difficult to get new staff as it was a dusty, dirty trade. Apprentices would not stay. Craftsmen skilled in carving and shaping wood were, in consequence, all older men. There was a continuing demand for quality products, and quite good wages were earned. But the large factories had an economic advantage and the prices the retailers would pay left no margin to set aside for building new premises. Mr Vincent, son of the founder of the firm, has reached retiring age and will close down, with a small compensation from the Greater London Council, when re-development eventually commences.

Figure 2: Fret saw

- a) spring of beechwood, 3 leaves, 2 in  $\times$  ½ in
- b) leather strap
- c) bronze stirrup
- d) bronze guides
- e) grease nipples
- f) saw blade
- g) connecting rod
- h) eccentric and idler pulley (belt-shifting lever not shown)
- i) drive belt
- j) electric motor
- k) cast iron bench, 3 ft 4 in (1.0m) high with small hole for saw blade in centre
- l) 2½ in  $\times$  8 in timber support, hung from ceiling beam
- m) tie rods for wall and ceiling, tightened by turnbuckles



### Premises

The premises are one of a terrace, of three storeys, in pale grey brick<sup>5</sup> with concrete lintels. The street's facade, a plain domestic style, with minimal stucco embellishment, was typical of the more workaday parts of London of the period. The appearance is of a shop with living accommodation over, which indeed there was until after 1910, occupying the front quarter of the building. Behind, workshops formerly occupied two storeys only, beneath a flat roof, and most adjacent premises still retain this form. Numbers 297, 299, 301, 303 and two other buildings in the street were, however, modified around the time of the First World War<sup>6</sup> to provide more workshop space, the walls dividing off the domestic quarters being removed and the second floor extended for the full depth of each building. There are therefore three clear floors measuring 56ft 3in from front to back and 14ft 3in from side to side, between party walls. Floor-to-ceiling heights are about 10 feet. Walls are whitewashed and un-plastered, except at the front, and the wooden floors on exposed rolled-steel joists, are unsealed. Steep stairs with open wooden treads were installed at the time of reconstruction. Access from the street is through a normal shop doorway and there is a doorway of similar size on to a narrow vehicular yard at the rear. There are no hoists and all items have to be manhandled up and down the stairs, sliding on planks. At the front there are two large sash windows on each upper floor and a shop window below, while the rear wall, facing west, has been glazed for the full width since the time of the reconstruction.

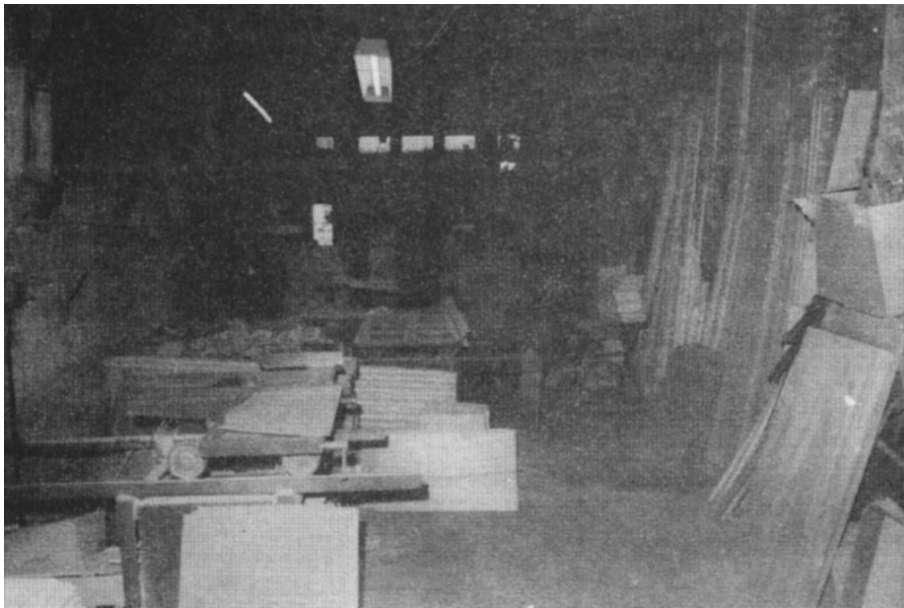
The top floor has a large lantern roof light. Heating was once by two open fireplaces on each floor, concentrated towards the front of the building. Scrap wood is occasionally burned in one of the fireplaces, which are specially designed for the purpose with a sliding hood. Otherwise, heating is now by wall-mounted gas heaters, heating the



*Figure 3, top left: General view of 283-303 Brick Lane from the north*

*Figure 4, above: Rear view of numbers 299, 301 and 303 in July 1975*

*Figure 5: left: Shop front of number 301*



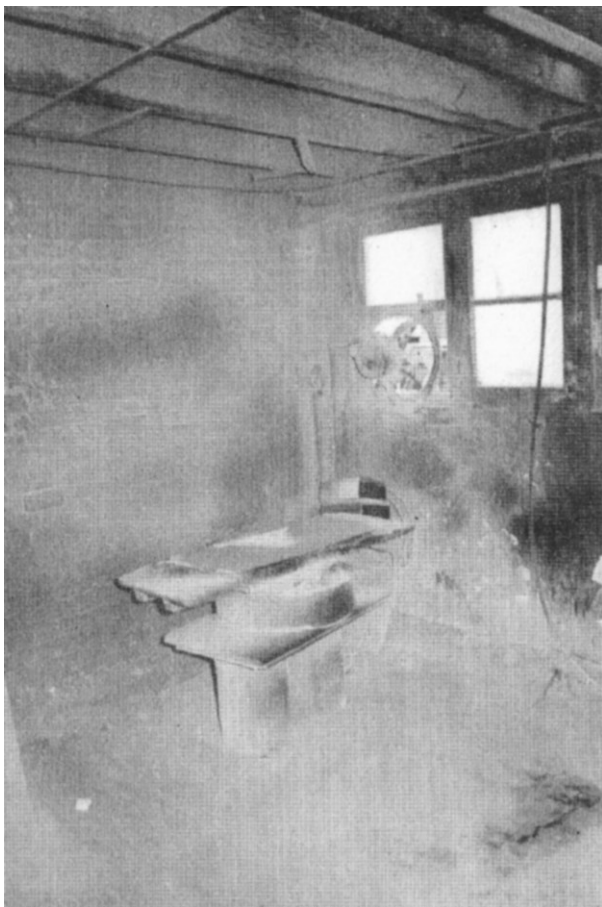
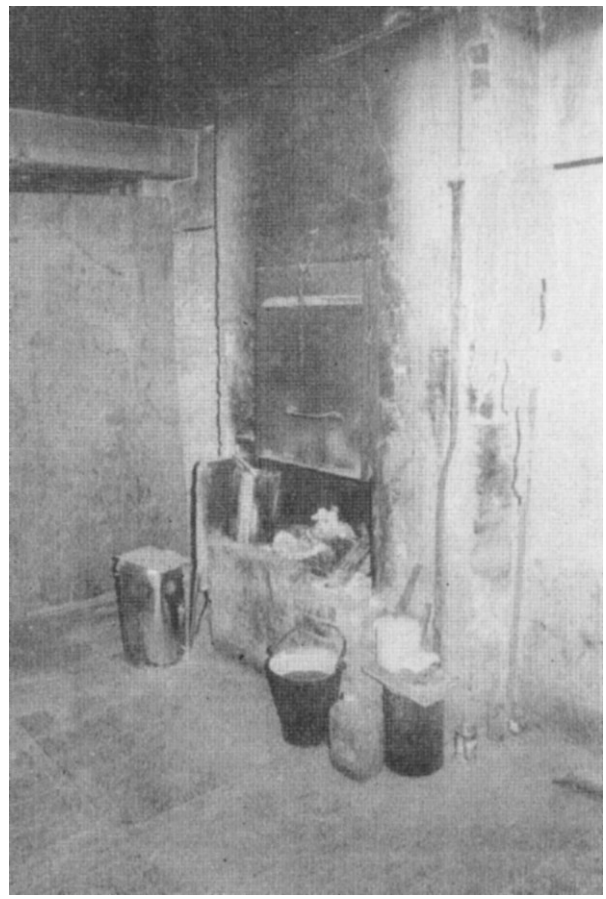
*Figure 6: Ground floor view west. Saw benches on the left*



*Figure 7: First floor view west. Clamps hang on the righthand side. Bench for fitting handles at the rear*



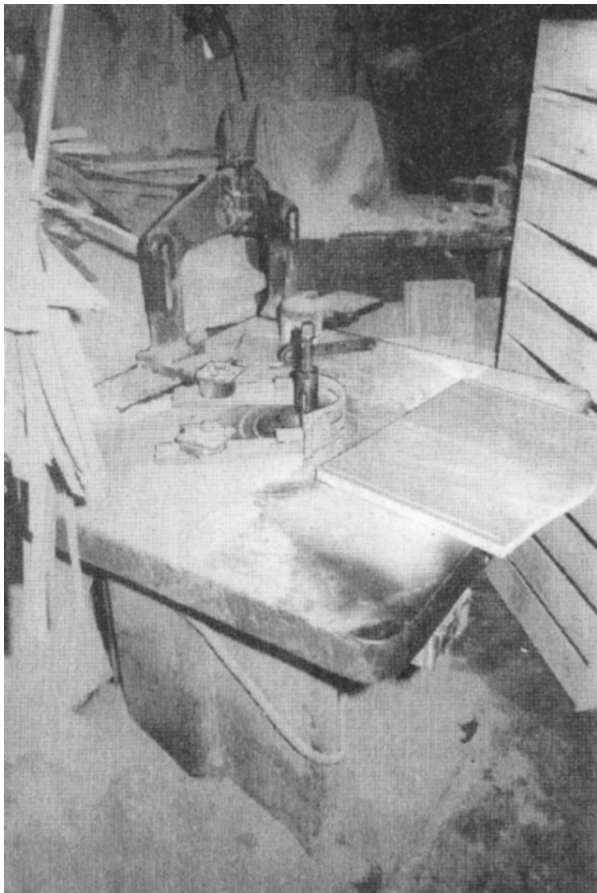
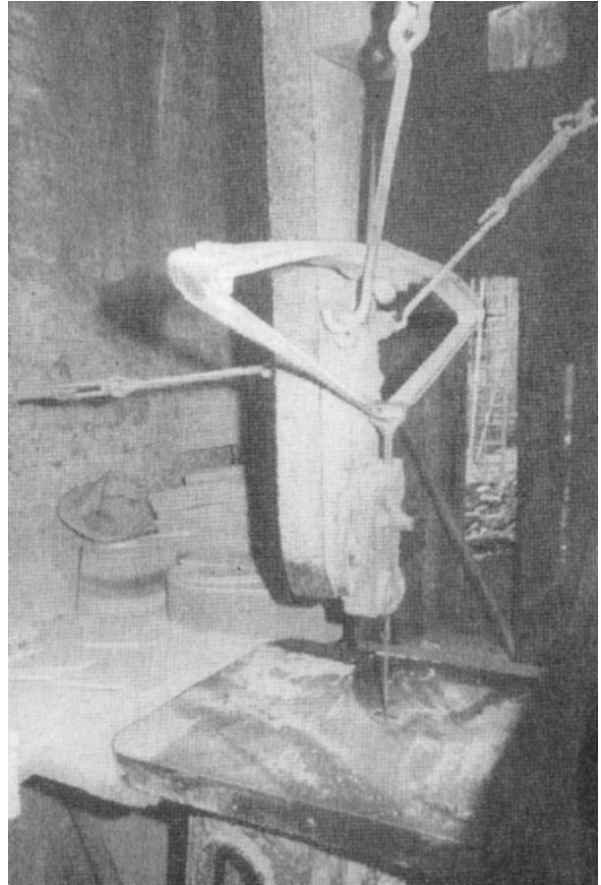
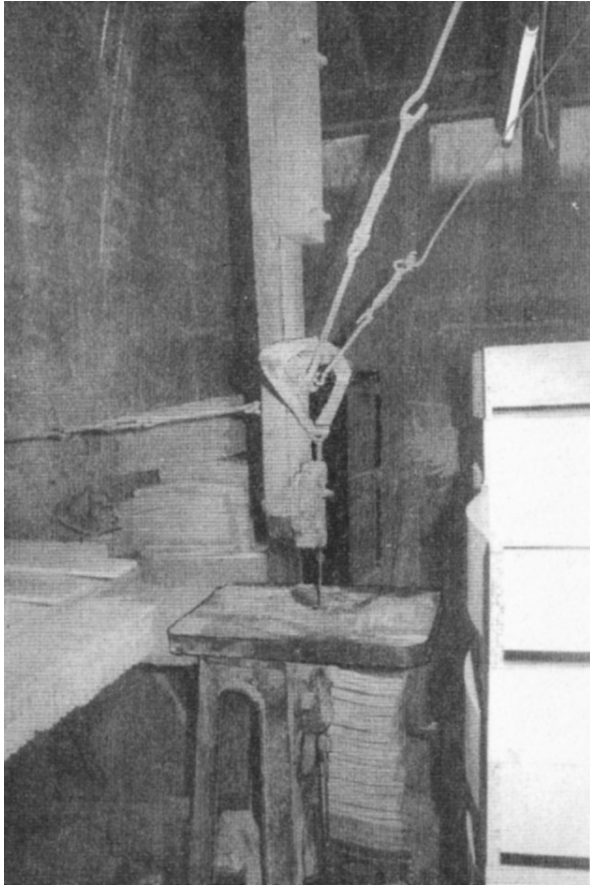
*Figure 8: Finished chests of drawers*



*Figure 9, top left: Staircases*

*Figure 10, above: Fireplace for burning wood<sup>5</sup>*

*Figure 11: left: Spraying area*



*Figure 12, top left: The fret saw, and dovetailed drawer fronts stacked around it*

*Figure 13, above: Closer view of the fret saw. The leaf spring is of beechwood, with a leather strap*

*Figure 14: left: The spindle, and the bottom of a drawer that has been morticed on it*

top floor, with its large top light, appears to have been a problem and there is a dividing curtain to reduce draughts. There is a single cold tap on the ground floor, and an outside WC.

### Equipment and methods

The individual components for pieces of furniture are made on the ground floor, although the curved fronts for drawers, of steamed laminated construction, are bought in from a larger manufacturer. The woodworking machinery is generally modern, but includes a 70-year-old fret or "jig" saw, for which the blades are made by hand by Mr Vincent. There are two circular saws, an "overhand" smoothing plane, a "spindle" shaping machine and a belt sander. Beside each circular saw is a trolley on guide rails, to which pieces "re clamped and guided with precision past the saw blade. In the "overhand", cutting blades are fixed on a fast-rotating roller, mounted horizontally, and the piece to be planed be moved by hand across its upper surface. In the "spindle", inter-changeable cutting tools of specially hard steel, formed to the required shape, rotate at very high speed on a vertical spindle and can form mouldings, rebates, etc. The belt sander comprises an endless belt of sand paper, of quite considerable length. Dust from the machine is fed into a sack.

All available space between the machines is used for stacking materials. The favourite woods used for cabinet making are mahogany and other African hardwoods and, less often, yew. Solid wood is used where appropriate, but considerable use is made of plywood and even veneered chipboard for certain components. Joints are of traditional types, dovetails for the corners of drawers being cut with a fret saw and mortices, with the spindle.

Assembly into furniture is performed on the first floor and finished chests of drawers are stacked there under dust sheets. Large clamps, for securing pieces during glueing, hang on the wall. The fitting; of handles, at a special bench, is the last stage of manufacture.

On the top floor, the polished surface is applied. In one corner, next to an extractor fan, is a spraying gun, for which the pressure is supplied by a small air compressor. At the opposite end are the polishing benches. The intervening space is used for drying.

There are seven stages in modern good quality "French" polishing.

- The grain is filled and a base made for subsequent work, with a filler. This is like a wood cement. There are different fillers for different woods.
- A sealer is applied by gun.
- The surface is sandpapered down.
- A "hard" cellulose lacquer is applied by gun. This is somewhat viscous and sets hard, building up a positive thickness of material.
- A "colour" is applied to simulate the darkening around the edges which an old piece of furniture acquires with wear. This gives a pleasant appearance. At one time, it was fashionable to imitate the effects of age by deliberately denting the surface and applying occasional cigarette burns – what was known as a "distressed" surface.
- The lacquer is rubbed over by hand and smoothed out, using a "rubber", ie, a wad of cotton wool wrapped in a cotton rag and soaked in a solvent called a "pullover", to produce a very smooth, reflective surface. This is omitted by cheaper manufacturers.
- A thin cellulose lacquer is applied by gun.

The various materials are obtained ready prepared in two-gallon tins, many of them being manufactured by Marable & Co Ltd of Cheshunt. In the old days, they had to be mixed by the craftsman.

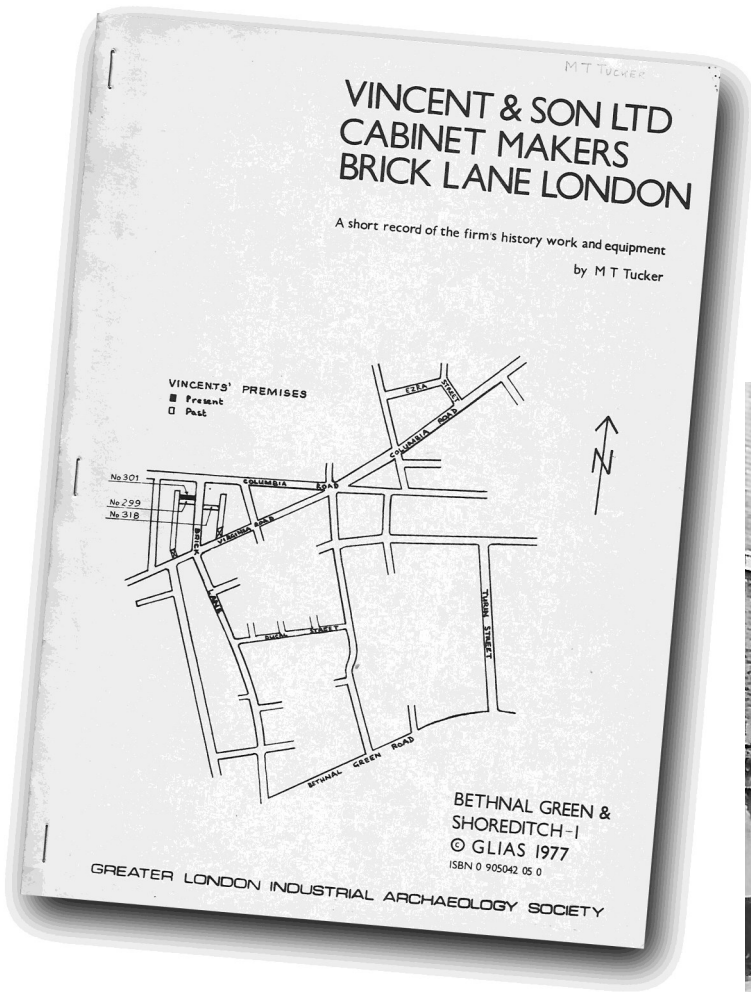
The spraying gun eliminates the highly skilled and time-consuming application by hand of traditional shellac varnish, and was introduced by the firm ten or 15 years ago.

In their adaption of modern equipment, materials and methods where the basic soundness of the product would not be impaired, and in concentrating on a long run of a single design, the firm stands midway between the craft workshop and the modern factory. In the best spirit of craftsmanship,

Mr Vincent takes some pride in the good finish of his furniture, although he could produce to still higher standards if economics allowed.

*GILAS wishes to thank Mr Vincent for allowing than to visit his premises and for giving his time to explain the*

VINCENT CABINET MAKERS



*Left: The original cover, on yellow card, of the 1977 GLIAS report*

*Below: Street frontage with No 301, from the south-east*

*Bottom: Finished chests of drawers*



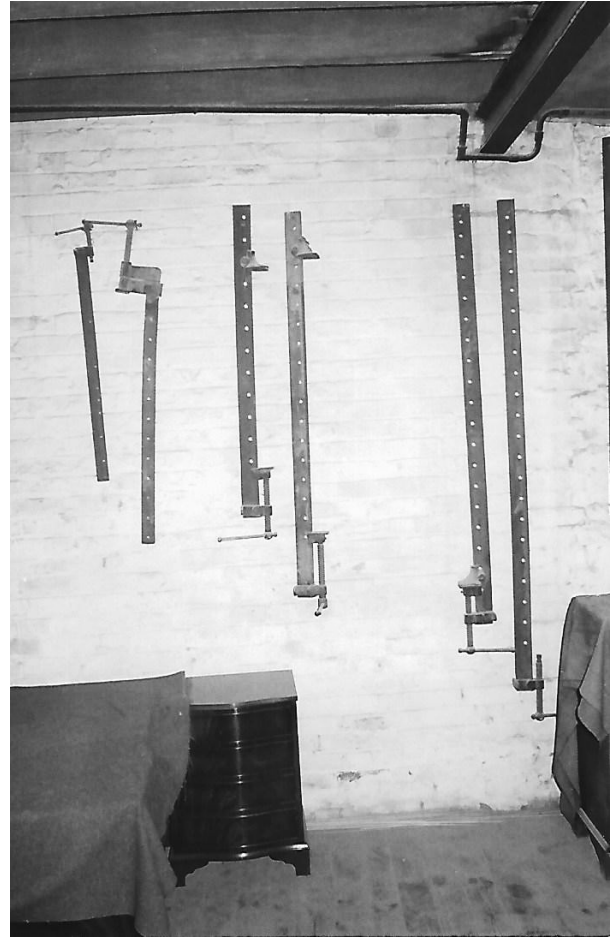
*Below left: The spindle, and the bottom of a drawer that has been morticed on it*

*Below right: Close view of the fret saw. Leaf spring of beech wood with a leather strap*

*Bottom: Ground floor view, west. Saw benches on left*



VINCENT CABINET MAKERS



*Opposite page, top left: Descending the steep steps from the top floor*

*Opposite page, top right: Clamps hung on north wall, first floor*

*Opposite page, bottom left, Jig saw seen from rear, with drawer fronts awaiting fitting and stacks of newly made drawers*

*Opposite page, bottom right: Disused fireplace on first floor, with gas rings*

*This page, below: Top floor, view east towards polishing area*

*This page, bottom: First floor, view east towards front windows*

